

Getting Apples to Converse with Oranges: Facilitating Successful Student-Faculty Communication

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Abstract

Have you ever been in a situation where you don't speak the language and you have no idea what people are talking about? College freshmen often face communication culture shock when they step onto campus for the first time: colleges and universities have a language all their own and it can be discouraging to students who haven't been exposed to a university culture. For young women in male-dominated classrooms and research labs on campus, the chasm between them and their faculty members can seem especially daunting. At Kansas State University, many of our students enter our orbit having no prior experience with faculty members. One of the challenges of working with freshman students is getting them acclimated to the academic culture. A student who feels comfortable interacting with professors and administrators will be more likely to persist in their major.

This discussion session will be based in student development theory and how student affairs professionals can help STEM students become more comfortable and communicate effectively in their collegiate careers. Special emphasis will be paid to the creation of campus environments that emphasize student learning and open communication. As a group, we will discuss best practices for increasing effective student-faculty communication. Topics to be discussed include: appropriate communication; helping students understand the hierarchy of universities—where to direct their questions; writing an effective email; time management, keeping commitments, and RSVP etiquette; keeping faculty members informed of students' mindsets; and helping students make transition to communicating with industry partners.

Participants will leave the session with a better understanding of the student-faculty communication divide and an appreciation for the creation of a supportive communication culture to help students "speak the language" of college.

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College freshmen often face communication culture shock when they step onto campus for the first time: colleges and universities have a language all their own and it can be discouraging to students who have not previously been exposed to a university culture. For young women in male-dominated classrooms and research labs on campus, the perceived chasm between them and their faculty members can seem especially daunting. Successful student-faculty interactions

are crucial for student retention; a student who feels comfortable in their particular university setting will be more likely to persist in their major.

Over the course of this paper, and the corresponding WEPAN discussion session, we will examine the different aspects of student development theory and campus culture that serve to explain the different communication styles of students and faculty members. Additionally, we will address the unique cultural indicators that define American colleges and universities, and how those aspects shape students' ways of knowing in and out of the classroom. We will also discuss the current generational shift in students attending college and what that means for continued student-faculty dialogue. The paper will close with a discussion of the implications for practicing professionals and their role in serving as the link between student and academic affairs.

Student development theory

Arthur Chickering and Linda Reissor's theory of student identity development (1993) states that "experiences with relationships contribute significantly to the development of a [student's] sense of self" (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 39). Students need to form interpersonal relationships during the college years in order to confront and validate their ways of knowing. The disconnect that occurs when students' biological and psychological changes interact with environmental demands leads to growth and development within the student (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Students don't develop based on the stages they are in; students experience growth in the gray areas of cognitive dissonance between the stages of development.

Faculty-student mentoring relationships can be a source of intense satisfaction for both parties involved. For example, science students who are treated as collaborators with professors and have an abundance of role models have a better chance of collegiate success than students who simply attend labs and lectures (Wilson, 2006). However, just pairing an ambitious student with a well-meaning professor won't automatically spell success for either partner. Recent research has found "that undergraduates learn and grow significantly from their research experiences, but require a strong mentor relationship to do so" (Guterman, 2007, p. A12). Communication is an essential part of forming and maintaining a mentor relationship.

Culture and campus environments

Campus environments can also send subtle messages to students and affect students' intention to persist in their majors. Students glean information from physical, human, organizational, and constructed environments found on college campuses (Strange & Banning, 1998). While some of these factors convey overt messages to their patrons, many aspects of campus culture are inferred by students and faculty over a matter of days and weeks spent in the environment.

One aspect of a campus environment is the aggregate, or human, characteristics constantly sending messages to its people. An environment's "human characteristics influence the degree to which people are attracted to, satisfied within, and retained by those environments" (Strange & Banning, 1998, p. 35). Students need to connect with other people on their campus in order to feel welcome and supported. A student's support system should consist of their peers, student affairs professionals, and faculty members. Culture shapes a person's outlook, as well as their

own perceptions of self within the larger environment. Further, Strange and Banning (1998) stated:

“Individuals who share much in common with an environment are presumed to be most attracted to that environment. Once inside, the person is likely to be encouraged for exactly those behaviors, values, attitudes, and expectations that attracted him or her to that environment in the first place, that reinforcing person-environment similarities. Consequently, the likelihood of remaining in that environment is quite high...since person-environment congruence is hypothesized to contribute to satisfaction and stability through selective reinforcement, by implication, lack of congruence must lead to dissatisfaction and instability” (pp. 52-53).

Faculty make up a huge proportion of a campus's aggregate environment. Faculty are seen by students as the keepers of the knowledge, and the hurdle the students have to get over (or through) to graduate. Often for freshman students, the onus for educating is solely on the professor standing at the front of the large lecture hall. Students need to become responsible learners and communicate effectively with faculty members in order to take charge of their own learning.

Unique challenges for working with Millennial students

The student-faculty communication conundrum can also be seen through a generational lens. The Millennial generation, which began attending college in 2000, has specific characteristics which can predict the highs and lows of their communication with their largely Boomer generation faculty. Typically, Millennial students have led structured, team-oriented, confident lives. Millennial students are high achieving and feel pressure to maintain that level of achievement in college. Millennial students place importance in authority figures, often citing virtuous community members as heroes (DeBard, 2004).

Millennials have come both to trust and count on authority, and in their campus lives, the authority rests with professors (DeBard, 2004). Millennial students are often eager to embrace faculty members as heroes and potential mentors, but ineffective initial communication can damage the relationship before it gets off the ground. One characteristic that arguably creates the most damage is the reliance of Millennial students to be told what the best decision in a particular instance would be (Howe & Strauss, 2000); faculty want the student to know what the student wants to pursue, whereas the student waits to be delegated the decision. Often, after having met with a faculty advisor, students show dissatisfaction over their interaction. The student dissatisfaction stems from their inability to confer with parents on course decisions and not being clearly told what to do, ultimate testaments to the fact that their preferred decision-making structure (i.e., their family members) is no longer central to them when they reach college.

Further, Millennial students “have come to expect high grades as a reward for compliance to academic standards” (DeBard, 2004, p. 38). Millennial students are members of a sheltered generation who've grown accustomed to being praised for their efforts. Boomer faculty members' “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” mentality may conflict with the Millennial need to receive positive affirmation. “Millennial students have come to expect high grades as a way of validating their achievement; on the other hand, they will only do what is expected of them to achieve these outcomes” (DeBard, 2004, p. 41). Often Millennial students' self-confidence

borders on being self-destructive. Students may be overconfident in their abilities, and faced with disappointment or a less than favorable GPA, may become discouraged and less likely to persist in a difficult curriculum. Faculty members may be expecting extra effort or different behavior from Millennial students' original standards. This issue also lends itself to team building and sharing—two pillars of a Millennial students self-portrait. Helene Marcoux's work on academic honesty at Kansas State University shows that faculty that work primarily with undergraduates struggle when faced with what to consider unlawful collaborations. She notes that faculty participants in her study were "not able to achieve a consensus when it came to the issue of collaborations" (Marcoux, 2003, p.129) because faculty are realizing that collaboration means different things to students and themselves.

Additionally, "Millennial students' study habits do not on average keep pace with their ambitions [while] Boomer faculty...believe that an assignment is an obligation" (DeBard, 2004, p. 42). This disconnect between what Millennials believe they can achieve and what they need to do to achieve can negatively affect their interactions with faculty members. Students unfamiliar with college culture may not know how much work is required to achieve a certain level of success. Each major or study or academic department values defines success differently. This issue is further compounded with the Millennials placing higher value the ease of attainability over accuracy (Hoover, 2008). Finally, Millennial students are used to communicating differently than other generations. Millennial students live in the "now," and communication is instant. "Millennials are used to being connected, by email, instant messaging (IMing), cell phones, or online chat, to their friends and families at all times" (Reith, 2005, p. 323). Millennial students jump from text messaging to Facebooking to rapid-fire email to communicate with their friends, families, and campus contacts. Students expect a simultaneous response from faculty, who may be preoccupied with a deluge of email, daily teaching and research obligations, meetings, and other facets of the faculty life. Students often don't understand why faculty may not immediately respond to their electronic missives. "The extreme usage of electronic communication has brought up concerns regarding the long-term effects on the development of interpersonal communication skills within this generation" (Reith, 2005, p. 323). While students need to understand their faculty members' modes of communication, faculty members could also take a page from their students. Jodi Koslow Martin, assistant to the provost at Aurora University, writes, "I find that the easiest way to establish trust with students is to speak their language: instant messaging" (Martin, 2006, p. 24).

Regardless of a new generation on campus presenting new challenges, Millennials are high achieving students eager to perform well in college. Proper communication can help new students understand, achieve, and exceed their faculty members' specific expectations.

Features of effective communication

An academic partnership between students and faculty based in proper communication will have certain features. Firstly, any student-faculty contact needs to be based on prompt and articulated feedback. Prompt feedback informs both parties that the other is interested in the direction the communication is heading and motivates them to make efforts on their behalf to keep the good rapport flowing. Secondly, the team orientation spirit that defines Millennials can mean that students prefer group and team projects over individual ones. By challenging and supporting

students during group projects, faculty can ensure success not only at educating them, but also strengthening their individual sense of confidence and ability to persist in college. Similarly, first-year Millennial often prefer being delegated a decision rather than approaching it themselves. All is not lost, as DeBard (2004, p. 33) states that, “they [students] are confident of their ability to match the effort required to meet the expectations others place upon them and are motivated to do so as long as their own expectations of beneficial outcomes are met.” Faculty and students need to be clear as to what those beneficial outcomes actually look like to both parties. And finally, the overabundance of activities in a Millennial’s life means that faculty needs to be crystal clear about their expectations from their students. This could translate into class notes and syllabi with fine print but in actuality it means that the broader ideas need to be clear, such as students know exactly when an assignment is due, the availability of the professor as well as the teaching assistant, and what level of work is expected from them.

Conclusion

No matter their major or college/university, it is important for students to feel accepted in their particular campus environment in order for them to persist. Good communication with faculty members can contribute to students’ positive sense of self and positive interpersonal development. Having access to possible mentors will make students feel welcomed and connected to their academic discipline.

Colleges and universities have specific cultures, and students need to know the language in order to thrive in those cultures. Student and academic affairs professionals need to continually educate students (Millennial and otherwise) how to navigate the educational waters in academic department, colleges, and universities. Students must understand the nature of campus communication in order to fit in to the environment. Similarly, faculty members need to know about students’ changing ways of communicating. It is essential for faculty to continue to learn about their “audience” in order to remain effective educators. Both parties need to adapt to the changing landscape of campus communication. During the corresponding WEPAN discussion session, we hope to tease out college’ and universities’ best practices for encouraging student-faculty communication and collaboration. Student-faculty collaboration is rife with benefits for all involved; they simply need to know how to talk to each other.

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