Students Seek Stronger Connections With Professors but Rarely Take the Lead

> Professors could be better about building relationships with students, many of whom hope for assistance with career planning and networking. But students may not realize their role in connecting.

By Melissa Ezarik (/users/melissa-ezarik) // May 20, 2022

Accounting professor Joe Hoyle's first experience with faculty office hours, as a student in the late 1960s, is a moment he wishes he could forget but that has shaped his own approach. "I walk in and can tell in one second that he does not want me there," recalls Hoyle, who guessed the professor was in the middle of dealing with some sort of problem. "Do you think I ever went back for office hours? No. And I can still see his face when I walked in that room."

Hoyle, who has been blogging about teaching (http://joehoyle-teaching.blogspot.com/) since 2010, posts six or seven formal office hours and is available up to about 25 hours each week for his students at the University of Richmond. "Please come by and say hello and ask me questions," he will communicate via email, listing times but adding that anytime the door is open it's also OK. Students tend to pop by when they're stuck on assignments, which makes office hours most relevant to fields like math and the sciences, in Hoyle's experience. Office hour requirements vary institution to institution and dean to dean, with professors in his department generally making their own decisions about needed offerings.

According to the latest Student Voice survey (https://reports.collegepulse.com/student-views-on-faculty) , conducted by *Inside Higher Ed* and College Pulse with support from Kaplan, taking advantage of office hours isn't common. Of the 2,000 undergraduates surveyed in mid-April, 28 percent say they never visit with professors during office hours, and among those who have done so, 55 percent say they visit just once or twice a semester. Students who want professors to help them find a job or make connections in their field are no more likely than others to be visiting with professors outside class.

"I'm in favor of doing anything that gets a conversation going between a faculty member and a student," Hoyle says, adding that his office space will do that. "I have at least 2,000 things taped to my walls." The collection of

postcards and other images, many from students, gets students in and gets them talking.

Some professors will tell students they're in dining hall at the same time each week and would be free to meet. Others schedule review sessions before an exam in a classroom. Still others want to help but are reluctant to offer "one-on-one" teaching because of other commitments. "Some students will simply follow you back to your office after class and want you to re-explain everything you just went over," says Hoyle. "I have a friend who called it wanting a personal trainer."

Student Voice respondents are less likely to see their professors as connecting on a personal level than they are to see them as effective educators. When asked to rate their professors over all in six areas—academic rigor, communicating course expectations, choice of instructional materials, engaging lectures and assignments, use of technology, and building relationships with students—students were less likely to assess relationship-building as excellent and more likely to assess it as poor compared to all other areas. Other survey highlights include that:

- Students see signs that professors are struggling, with nearly one-third having at least one current professor who appears disorganized and stressed about managing the job.
- Many students want more from professors than course content knowledge. Over half want introductions to people working in fields of interest or advice on choosing a career direction, while nearly half want help landing an internship or first job or for instructors to listen to them about personal issues.
- A significant percentage of students think strong faculty governance is a good idea. Nineteen percent believe faculty members have a great deal of influence, but 32 percent believe they *should* have a great deal of influence over institutional policy and decisions.

Read on for more survey results and insights about connections between students and faculty.

COVID Stress as Connection Builder?

Some Student Voice respondents agree with statements that indicate at least one of their professors this semester felt stress.

Even after faculty got over the initial hump of learning to teach virtually early in COVID, the demands remained and, some would argue, got worse with each semester's new uncertainties. In fact, 15 percent of Student Voice respondents know of at least one professor who resigned from their institution during the pandemic.

"Faculty became the first line of defense with the students," says Sanjay Rai, senior vice president for academic affairs at Montgomery College, in Maryland. "They became mental health counselors. They became witness to homelessness and hunger. They were trying to help but were constrained. Imagine the emotional trauma. Then they were facing their own COVID-related issues."

Rai sees the most faculty stress at his community college at the present time, as about two-thirds of classes are meeting in person but instructors must continually switch teaching modalities.

Bonni Stachowiak, host of the *Teaching in Higher Ed* podcast (https://teachinginhighered.com/episodes/), can tell how stressed faculty continue to be from the thanks she's been getting for some recent episodes. The topics? Faculty burnout, grief and pushback on faculty resilience expectations.

At Fordham University's Bronx campus, meanwhile, Rachel A. Annunziato has noticed a positive side to professors being honest about difficulties—open dialogue.

"It's been therapeutic for students and faculty to share how stressful it's been," says Annunziato, associate dean for strategic initiatives and a professor of psychology. "Students are attuned to it, too. They genuinely care. A lot of classes now start with, 'How's everybody doing? What can we do for each other?'"

Lucia Reynolds, a sophomore at Texas Christian University majoring in communications, had one professor make a video near the end of a semester, explaining to students about a close elderly relative being hospitalized and very ill. "My heart opened up to her. When we have that kind of reality check and that honesty with each other, I think it's better for both parties."

That's the kind of caring Alexis Petri of the University of Missouri at Kansas City saw from her students recently after food poisoning made her violently ill and she had to run from the classroom midsentence. As co-director of UMKC's Center for Advancing Faculty Excellence and senior director of faculty support in the university's provost's office, Petri has seen faculty members having to "become a lot more real in the classroom. That's a good thing, but many faculty members … want students to be able to focus on their learning. They don't want it to be about them," she says, adding that "students need to know faculty are humans and everybody has good days and bad days. That is just life."

Race can have a negative impact on how well students say professors are connecting with them, the Student Voice survey found. Black students are more likely than those in other racial groups to rate professors as fair or poor in building relationships with students—48 percent compared to 38 percent of Hispanic students and 37 percent of white students.

> "Faculty need to push past general student success to think directly about students who are not feeling like they are embraced." —Adrianna Kezar, director of the University of Southern California Pullias Center for Higher Education and director of the Delphi Project on Changing Faculty and Student Success

As a Black woman at a predominantly white institution, Reynolds says she has felt it easier to make connections with TCU professors of color. (A graduate of a private high school with a lack of diversity, Reynolds adds that she is comfortable forming connections with all people to make her educational experience better.)

But the data point concerns Adrianna Kezar, director of the University of Southern California's Pullias Center for Higher Education and director of the Delphi Project on Changing Faculty and Student Success

(http://pullias.usc.edu/delphi/) . “Faculty need to push past general student success to think directly about students who are not feeling like they are embraced.”

That work involves recognizing how seemingly innocuous language can be hurtful to students of color, says Petri. “We all do it, and we have to try to learn how to check our implicit bias as white people of European descent—the majority of faculty.”

Professors usually want to build relationships with all students, Petri adds. “They want change. I think at the same time, nobody would think, ‘Oh, I need to go to a workshop on implicit bias.’” She would like to see a more private way for professors to get feedback on things they might be saying or doing accidentally that are off-putting.

Open Doors, but Often Empty

Podcast host Stachowiak, also a professor and the dean of teaching and learning at Vanguard University in California, recalls the discomfort of students as they dropped by during her office hours, back when she had a full courseload. “One student said, ‘I had to do this for an assignment—visit a professor. You were the least worst.’”

Stachowiak would often suggest talking while taking a walk around campus. “The conversations that would emerge were so much better,” she says. Stachowiak suggests that professors be available to meet with students individually or in groups in the student union or at the library—but she wishes administrators requiring office hours would see less traditional meet-ups as official time. She knows of one professor who would “have dinner with students but get in trouble for not being in the office on Friday.”

Perhaps more options would increase participation. Just 13 percent of Student Voice survey respondents estimate utilizing office hours five or more times in a semester. This doesn’t surprise Kezar. “The whole notion of office hours is based on the idea that students have a block of time they can be available when professors are,” she says. “It’s still done, but I don’t think they make any sense.” Plus, in person isn’t a current student’s typical mode of interacting with anyone.

It wasn't until starting grad school at Boston College in 2021 that Erick DuShane began regularly interacting with professors during office hours. "I was a first-generation student, and there are so many ins and outs of

academia," he explains. "Is it OK to just say hello? What do you go to office hours *for*? I went into school for undergrad thinking that office hours were just there for extra help on assignments."

DuShane really felt seen by a professor this fall who introduced herself as having been a first-generation college student and then said, "I want to applaud every student here who's BIPOC, queer, first gen. I am here for you as a resource, or if you just want to chat or talk about the course material."

"I'm not just another student on her class roster," says DuShane, who has taken a second course with that professor. "I feel humanized as a student."

At Fordham, Annunziato has noticed students who make appointments with her are generally seeking professional dialogue. "They're thinking about life after college and different applications of psychology and trying to narrow it down," she says.

(https://www.insidehighered.com/student-voice/survey-data?utm_medium=article&utm_source=i%5B%E2%80%A6%5Dpaign=all_surveys_in_article&utm_content=data&utm,

To encourage postcollege conversation, teaching professor Jenny Amos in the Grainger College of Engineering at the University of Illinois recently hosted an office hour the week after an exam for students to pop in for a discussion on career options. "Students really liked that there was a space for that," she says.

While the 445 Student Voice respondents who say they have a learning disability or other condition that makes learning more difficult are not more likely to be taking advantage of office hours, some professors have seen more representation from that group. "A lot of my students who ask for accommodations also come to office hours," says Amos, whose research includes how students with disabilities interact with instructional materials. Many of these students have learned to check in with educators to ensure they're on track. "They worry they might be missing something," Amos explains.

As Petri from the University of Missouri at Kansas City puts it, these students "learn to tell their story, to ask for what they need. It's the only way they can make it. They have to get comfortable with it." That leaves students without learning differences at a disadvantage. "When something blows up their world, they don't know what to do and how to build their own resilience," Petri says. "I've written college programs for students with disabilities over the years, and I would require and incentivize going to office hours." Then she'd hear faculty members remark that they tended to have the strongest relationships with students with disabilities.

Professor Connection Wish List

Hoyle used to ask his third-year students to reflect on the best educator they'd had so far at the University of Richmond as a way to practice evaluating others' work. "They often wrote in glowing terms about one of their teachers, and from my experience, about half of the selected teachers were adjuncts or not tenured or tenure-track professors," he says.

That's one reason he suspects responses to Student Voice survey questions about the job title of respondents' favorite and least favorite professor—in which "professor" emerged as the top response for both—may not be valid. While students were given the option of responding "not sure," respondents may have assumed that anyone they address as "professor" actually holds that title.

Just 3 percent selected "adjunct" as their favorite professor's title. In Hoyle's experience, however, good adjuncts brought in to teach have more time for making student connections because they don't have research and service requirements.

As far as full professors getting top billing (as the favorite instructor title for 52 percent of students surveyed), one explanation could be that "students still feel a faculty member is someone that should have a full-time, secure role," says USC's Kezar.

The survey reveals that students want various types of assistance—particularly help in launching a good-fit career—from professors in addition to providing content knowledge. And since faculty offices are apparently not the natural place to get that extra guidance, some experts argue that the classroom is. In Kezar's work on first-generation, low-income, marginalized students' needs, she has looked at the linkage between studies and a career as a major driver toward success. Yet academic department meeting agendas don't include internship programs, and people aren't calling for career-related FAQ content on academic program pages.

"Where is the leadership around the connection between education and career? Career centers had better not be the only ones talking about it," says Kezar. "I think it would have to be more integrated into the class."

Besides career-planning help, students are often seeking assistance landing an internship or first job as well as help in getting through college, both academically and personally.

The most powerful professors are those who build relationships with students using the course content as medium, says Rai from Montgomery College. “Faculty are trained in the subject matter, but not in teaching.” If he had had more professional development opportunities early in his teaching career, Rai believes he would have used content to connect to students earlier and more easily.

“We don’t assume that professors are going to care about our personal lives, and we’re not going to assume they’re going to help us network,” says DuShane, who completed his undergraduate years at the University of Rochester in 2020. “We’re taught the professors are there to teach the material, and your job [as a student] is to learn it and get a good grade on it. Anything else a professor does is just icing on the cake.”

Faculty Power Impressions

As noted, about one in five Student Voice respondents thinks faculty have a lot of influence over policies and decision making at their college or university, while many more—one in three—think professors *should* have a lot of influence. By political leaning, Democrats are just slightly more likely than Republicans or Independents to want professors to have that power—35 percent compared to 31 percent each. Black students were the most likely racial group to desire a lot of faculty influence, at 38 percent.

What experiences are shaping students’ opinion? One piece is likely professors sharing how they don’t agree with policies officials have made and students relating to the feeling of having to comply with something they had no input on.

“I’ve had professors who have been very candid in saying, ‘I’m sorry, the school just won’t let me,’” and citing one policy or another, says DuShane. Reynolds at Texas Christian says it seems as if “higher-ups who don’t have a teaching background are making policies … not based on the actual experience. I would tell them to take the time to really understand what a day-to-day experience looks like as a professor.”

Petri from UMKC notes that students may feel the "tug between administration and faculty" through student newspaper coverage of their conflicts. Also, "typically the Faculty Senate and student government will hang together on campus and support each other, and when things get divided between administration and faculty, students will often side with faculty, because that's the group they know."

Rai of Montgomery College believes students are generally not aware of the concept of faculty governance, but when surveyed about whether faculty should have more control, they would agree "because they like their faculty—they're smart, do a good job, have good ideas."

One way Montgomery College has strengthened faculty governance—in a way that students who have loved part-time faculty members would likely approve—has been to allow all instructors, including adjuncts, representation. "They should be at the table, and your table should be large enough to include people who are teaching 40 percent of your classes," says Rai, naming department-chair and textbook selection processes as a few areas where adjuncts (who are sometimes compensated by Montgomery for their extra work) can assist. "Adjuncts are willing to get involved. If you create a platform, they will engage."

(https://reports.collegepulse.com/student-views-on-faculty?utm_medium=article&utm_source=ihe&utm_campaign=student_views_faculty&utm_content=data&utm_term=e

At Fordham, Annunziato has helped select students for committee work, which certainly aids in individuals' understanding of and connections to both faculty and administrators. One example is the academic integrity committee. "I'm often in contact with students who serve there. We value so much having their input, and they get to see what happens administratively, who's making the final decisions," she says, adding that students are often interested in a debrief afterward about the inner workings of institutional process.

"So *that*'s what happens when you're all in a room together," they will remark.

What happens when students and professors are in the classroom together, of course, doesn't have that same kind of mystery, because it's an everyday occurrence. But those deeper connections that go beyond learning course content can make the ordinary extraordinary.

As a Student Voice respondent at an Ivy League institution shared, one professor during virtual learning hosted one-on-one sessions via Zoom just to get to know the students better. Another student, an upperclassman at a private college in Michigan, feels that all the professors in the department of her major have fostered connections and adapted to her needs. One professor, she wrote, "has been incredibly sympathetic" about a recent difficult experience and is always willing to talk. "She truly holds a special place in my heart for all that she has done for me."

Next week, check back for the release of part two of results from the Student Voice survey on student perceptions of faculty (https://www.insidehighered.com/student-voice), focused on teaching, grading and tenure.

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