Implications of Out-of-Class Engagement: Exploring the Experience of OBU Students

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In addition to learning, the college experience involves building relationships with peers and university faculty. For many students, interactions with faculty take place only in the classroom. For students at small liberal arts colleges, though, students and faculty often meet serendipitously both on and off campus. This study focuses on the unplanned interactions that occur between students and faculty. Data obtained from an interview, a focus group, and a campus-wide survey indicate that students who interact with their professors out-of-class (OOC) gain more value from their college experience and enjoy greater academic success than students who meet their professors in only the traditional academic settings. This study highlights the value of informal student-faculty interactions and suggests that university administrations would do well to foster these types of OOC relationships on their campuses.

Keywords: Out-of-class, student-faculty, affective learning, interactions, administrative influence, retention

A young man arrived at Oklahoma Baptist University (OBU). Few of his former friends were attending the school. He was the first member of his family to enroll in college, and he did not have the expectation of his family to perform academically at a high level. After a year and a half, he dropped out and spent three years doubting whether he should continue his education. After his three-year absence, he reenrolled at OBU and found ways to connect with students and faculty members. When asked about his newfound relationships with faculty members, he acknowledged, "The interaction I had with [my professors] was the make-or-break element of whether I would succeed in college" (personal communication, October 12, 2011). This individual noted that, although he did not have support structures at home, he was able to go to professors with both academic and personal issues and seek their guidance. After graduating from OBU, he attained a Master's degree in Higher Education and is now employed within an academic institution in the Midwest, working closely with students and helping them navigate their college experiences.

Chickering and Gamson (1987) argued that how professors teach is equally, if not more, important than what is taught. Moreover, Palmer (1998) argued that "good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher" (p. 13). In other words, *who* the professor is, is more important than the how or what because, as Palmer stated, great teachers will fuse the subject and students with their own passion in a community of education. Palmer's claim is seen to be correct: good faculty members have integrity, a strong sense of self-identity, and passion for their subject matter.

University administrators continually seek ways to boost student retention through campus life, whether through intramural sports, Greek organizations, or honor societies; other experiences can also increase retention rates. Student life activities and organizations support student development, as does classroom learning. Beyond the classroom, the faculty-student connections can be easily overlooked. Nevertheless, such connections play a significant role in the overall development of students. The classroom setting is the place where most intellectual growth occurs, but outside-of-class (OOC) interaction with a professor can create in a student a stronger desire to learn and increased commitment to the university.

Though much has been written regarding student-faculty relationships in the university context, little information indicates what makes those encounters especially meaningful. The research effort described in this article sought to respond to the faculty-student context of interpersonal communication that emerges OOC. Specifically, the follow-

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ing question was addressed: to what extent do OOC student-faculty connections at small, liberal arts universities (such as Oklahoma Baptist University) affect students' overall college experiences?

LITERATURE REVIEW

From direct feedback with class work to nonverbal cues in the center of campus, every communication act between faculty members and students is important. The literature review describes healthy development strategies of a good undergraduate education, beneficial faculty-student interactions, and students' responses to out-of-class (OOC) learning activities. Pointing to the value of personal interaction, Anstine and Skidmore (2005) studied the effects of online verses traditional learning, and found that traditional students received higher scores. In general, the literature consistently indicated that online programs are incapable of inspiring the same level of student commitment as traditional institutions. The most significant difference is that face-to-face OOC interactions are essentially nonexistent in an online venue.

Chickering and Gamson (1987) researched for two years and found criticism of undergraduate educational practices at every turn. In light of their findings, Chickering and Gamson created seven principles that could improve higher education: encouraging contact between students and faculty; developing reciprocity and cooperation among students; using active learning techniques; giving prompt feedback; emphasizing time on task; communicating high expectations; and respecting diverse talents and ways of learning. Chickering and Gamson argued that when these principles are used simultaneously, "they employ six powerful forces in education: activity, expectations, cooperation, interaction, diversity, and responsibility" (p. 3). These forces, or characteristics, have been shown to influence students of all races, genders and economic classes, and rest upon 50 years of research. The authors found that "how" a professor taught is as important, if not more, than "what" is taught; therefore, the researchers focused on the former.

Chickering and Gamson (1987) expanded on and provided examples for each of the identified principles. However, it should be noted that the first and most important principle, according to the authors, was student-faculty relationships in and out of the classroom. The authors argued that "knowing a few faculty members well enhances students' intellectual commitment and encourages them to think about their own values" (p. 5). Yet, all of their principles were realized only when an atmosphere of collaborative learning between students, faculty and administrators was the aim.

Koljatic and Kuh (2001) assessed three of the educational principles of good practices found by Chickering and Gamson (1987): faculty-student interaction; cooperation among students; and active learning. The authors believed that before Chickering and Gamson published their work, universities' "excellence was primarily determined by institutional resources and reputation" (p. 351). Koljatic and Kuh sought to discover if university students engaged in these three principles and if there were other variables that led to student engagement.

Seventy-three thousand and fifty undergraduate students from 283 universities were given the College Student Experience Questionnaire (CSEQ), one survey group from 1984 to 1989 took the CSEQ 2nd edition and another from 1990 to 1997 took the CSEQ 3rd edition. Koljatic and Kuh (2001) used the results from these surveys as data for their research to determine if a change in these three "good practices" occurred within universities nation-wide. The authors used roughly 50% of the cases; the same sample of the population was used throughout all the analyses. Each student survey was separated by university into one of three categories for analysis: doctoral-granting universities, comprehensive universities, or liberal arts universities.

Results revealed that the three principles under examination had not increased by any statistical significance over the fifteen years since Chickering and Gamson's (1987) work. Koljatic and Kuh (2001) stated that the results may have occurred because habits (especially institutional ones) are hard to break or that the faculty and students were not embracing the philosophy of the seven principles that emphasize student learning. However, the researchers did comment that grouping institutions into three categories to measure faculty-student interaction, cooperation among students, and active learning might have been the reason for the lack of change because good practices would be different at each individual institution. Ultimately, Koljatic and Kuh recommended that institutions use the seven principles as a context for improving student learning and student development, because "These good practices [seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education by Chickering and Gamson (1987)] are as-

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sumed to be valid and appropriate for promoting learning and personal development for all students at all types of institutions" (p. 352).

In agreement with Chickering and Gamson's (1987) first principle, McKinney, Saxe and Cobb (1998) stated that the undergraduate experience is greatly benefited by OOC experiences with professors. The authors encouraged professors to find means of promoting OOC encounters as a way of advancing student success, explaining that OOC encounters "Are authentic, fit the learning mode of knowledge as constructed, involve active rather than passive learning, and can be collaborative" (p. 3). The experiences students receive from professors in less formal, often serendipitous situations served to develop undergraduates' *professional socialization*.

McKinney, et al. (1998) distributed a survey to 100 students at Illinois State (ISU) in order to research their perceptions of the idea of professional socialization. Most students defined professional socialization as expectations or normal behaviors in their field, but 41% did not list any ways in which they were involved in the process. In a survey of ISU faculty, many thought the degree of professional socialization was lacking in their department. The researchers previewed 217 college homepages on the web, and only 35% had any mention of OOC interaction with faculty. Throughout the concluding paragraphs of their research, McKinney, et al. (1998) urged institutions to "periodically assess the impact of the OOC environment on students [and] the need to develop a common view of 'what matters' in undergraduate education" (p. 8). The authors also addressed the lasting impact that students receive from interpersonal relationships with faculty, and encouraged professors to seek more OOC contact with students.

Like McKinney, et al. (1998), Pascarella (1980) was interested in exploring how students grow socially, mentally and behaviorally. The author described a student's interpersonal environment as "The sum of the content… with socializing agents, the frequency of the contacts, and the extent of attractiveness of the source of contact" (p. 546). Pascarella measured evidence of this theory and found that professors are a major factor in students' interpersonal environment; the more OOC contact with teachers, the more students will absorb the attractive traits of the faculty. Pascarella also noted, however, that other factors, such as students' background, institutional factors, and other college experiences also influenced students' undergraduate experience.

Pascarella (1980) stated that career plans were definite for nearly half of the students who had high connections with faculty. However, only about one third of the students who rarely interacted with professors were certain of their career choice. Pascarella also found that there was a positive correlation between the amount of OOC interaction with faculty and general satisfaction with the university. He discussed the fact that high informal interactions with faculty produced students with a higher assembly of academic skills and achievement and an advanced intellectual disposition. Furthermore, Pascarella suggested that students who were associated with the university were more likely to continue and finish their degrees. He ultimately argued that faculty interaction assimilated students to university life and helped with college persistence, academic growth, college satisfaction and certainty of career choice.

In light of the amount of literature focused on pursuing faculty interaction, Cotton and Wilson (2006) carried out a qualitative study that sought to shed light on the experiences of students when interacting with faculty in a university setting. Nine focus groups were conducted at a mid-sized public research college whose undergraduate student program was very competitive. During the focus group discussions, the moderator ensured that everyone was included in the conversation, guaranteeing that each focus group had equal contribution by all 49 students who participated in the research.

As the results were assessed, Cotton and Wilson (2006) found that most students did not have quality or quantity time with faculty, but more often contacted teacher assistants. Some students indicated that they found no reason to go talk to professors unless there was a grade issue. Moreover, they found that many focus group participants felt awkward talking to professors about interests and life pursuits. Although most students rarely interacted with faculty members, the view was that engagement would lead to some type of academic benefit (i.e. higher grade, internship, et cetera).

Cotton and Wilson's (2006) focus groups provided some insight on the "cost" of having a relationship with a professor (p. 500). Specifically, they stated, "Once you've established a relationship, you can't slack off; you've got to maintain performance" (p. 500). Some students would rather avoid faculty in order to avoid a heightened sense of obligation to classroom performance. The focus groups were then guided to discuss factors that hindered and helped teacher

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communication. The focus group participants indicated the following as examples of impediments: time constraints, social pressure, indifferent professors, and lack of understanding regarding the faculty's role. Students from the focus group indicated that students wanted to find common interests with faculty so that conversation could be more natural, and students were more drawn to faculty members who showed extroverted personality in the classroom.

Institutional factors played a major role in the discussion of student-professor interaction. Class size was a recurring theme that disrupted quality and quantity conversation with faculty members. Another impeding factor was the university campus lay-out. Students said there were few places where undergraduates and professors both congregate, which made OOC interaction difficult. When classrooms and offices were in the department buildings, lingering conversation was more likely to occur. Cotton and Wilson (2006) concluded by reviewing the results found in their qualitative research: limited student-faculty interactions, the influence of social as opposed to academic interaction on students, and little student understanding of the faculty environment. The data emphasized that faculty can be a significant resource, but for various reasons students did not pursue faculty interactions. Findings revealed that when interacting with professors in their department, students find social interaction more important than academic interaction. Lastly, the authors suggested that if students understood the role and duty of faculty, they would be more likely to approach their professors.

The OOC experiences of undergraduate students served as foundational data in Kuh's (1993) research, which was supported by Cotton and Wilson's (2006) claim that social time with professors was more influential in some cases than academic time. Kuh's intention was to collect data from undergraduates in order to assess how seniors had changed since their freshman year, as well as what students learned from OOC experiences. In order to assure diverse opinions, senior students from 12 universities with OOC development opportunities were interviewed regarding their experience at their universities. All of the 149 student interviews were evaluated individually by research assistants and then compiled for review by the author. Kuh (1993) divided student responses into five main categories, including *practical competence* (a combination of self-awareness, autonomy and confidence) and *cognitive complexity* (the ability to apply reason and theory to other areas of life). Three other categories that Kuh listed as response categories were *knowledge and skill* (obtained in or outside of the classroom), *personal competence* (the ability to be self-sufficient and responsible), and *altruism and estheticism* (empathizing and working well with others). The two most frequently mentioned categories by students were practical competence and personal competence.

In the discussion section, Kuh (1993) explained the significance of OOC experiences on the categories of personal and practical competence, which included responsibility, autonomy and self-awareness traits. However, he emphasized that the students' awareness of the topic before the study took place could have led them toward responding with personal-developmental traits and away from responding with categories such as knowledge and skill acquisition. According to Kuh, one distinguishing factor of reviewing students' interviews about OOC development was that some suggested "the boundaries between learning in and out of the classroom…were blurred so as to be indistinguishable to students" (p. 298).

The main discrepancy in results emerged as a consequence of assessing responses from small liberal arts schools versus the larger universities. Students from small, mission driven universities were more likely to report development in cognitive complexity, knowledge and academic skills, and altruism and estheticism, because those students had been engaged by a higher obligation to engage in the community activities, such as study groups, dorm events and professor interactions. Although students are shaped by the knowledge gained in the classroom, Kuh argued that "life outside the classroom provided ample opportunities to test the value and worth of these ideas and skills" (p. 301).

The reviewed literature consistently suggests that faculty interaction is crucial for student involvement, and development (both personal and academic). Cotton and Wilson (2006) also argued that although faculty members have an opportunity to influence, there is some hindrance to student communication that needs to be remedied. Chickering and Gamson (1987) worked out seven principles that should be followed for good undergraduate education, five of which are aimed toward faculty involvement. Lastly, both Kuh (1993) and McKinney, et al. (1998) expressed that, for most students, the process of learning co-exists inside and outside of the classroom.

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METHOD

Interview

A graduate from Oklahoma Baptist University (OBU class of 2007) was interviewed on October 12, 2011. The interviewee will be referred to as John Smith. He served as a residential assistant at one of the OBU male dorms, then as residential director, and went on to graduate with a Master of Education in Adult and Higher Education from Oklahoma University (OU). Smith was chosen to be a part of this study because there were few other people who had a background both at OBU and in student affairs; moreover, the alumnus had left OBU several years previous to the interview, giving him time to reflect on his development as an undergraduate. He was asked questions about his personal experience with professors. He spoke on topics such as professors' attributes that made student-professor relationships successful, the initiation of out-of-class (OOC) communication, and the extent to which he felt professors personally invested in his life.

Focus Group

A focus group discussion was utilized in order to gain a better understanding of OBU students' experiences. An email was sent to members of four campus organizations: Campus Activities Board, Student Government, Steering Committee, and the Success Center Leadership team. Representatives from these organizations were targeted because they have built in opportunities to interact with the student body. The organizations were chosen either because they have the largest student membership or involve the most campus participation. The first person from each of the six colleges (Theology and Ministry, Business, Nursing, Humanities and Social Sciences, Fine Arts, and Science and Mathematics) to respond to the email was invited to serve as a focus group participant. A range of classifications were represented, including a sophomore, junior, and four seniors. Each participant is labeled in the following data section (A through F) according to the order in which they entered the discussion. The subjects discussed included important aspects of *student's college experience, professor attributes*, and the *life influence of professors.*

Student Survey

A survey was created to assess the quantitative aspects of student-faculty interaction. The OBU student body received an email inviting them to participate in the survey and explaining the topic with a link to the QuestionPro website. The participants had two weeks to complete the survey. Every person with an OBU student account, including the 69 members of the OBU graduate school, received the invitation. Each member of the population had an equal opportunity to participate in the study. Questions ranged from the *amount of professor interaction* to the level of *comfort when discussing personal issues with professors*. There were also two open-ended questions, soliciting a descriptive word or phrase regarding the topics of discussion when OCC occurred with faculty members. The first two questions regarding "classification" and "college of study" were analyzed by Goodness-of-Fit to ensure that the percentage of survey respondents by class and college were similar to the actual population of OBU. Questions 3 through 8 were assessed with proportion hypothesis testing in order to find if the claims were founded by the data. Questions 9 and 10 were open-ended.

DATA

Part One: Interview

J. Smith was an Oklahoma Baptist University (OBU) alumnus (2007), OBU men's residential director, and received a Master's degree in Education. After a few introductory words about the topic of student-faculty interaction, he was asked if there were any professors that he had found particularly engaging during his time at OBU. Smith mentioned some of the professors in his department (religion) that were particularly engaging and, specifically, his advisor.

When asked how he became aware of the interpersonal connection with his advisor, Smith explained that whether professors were intentional in the classroom or sought him out informally, he felt comfortable because the faculty made themselves approachable. Smith summarized the attributes of the professors he discussed:

> One of the main things is that they listened. They were able to help me think my opinion was valid. Whether

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> it was right or wrong wasn't the issue; it was about knowing it was worth listening to. For someone who was in their position of power or privilege to acknowledge me and to be willing to listen… was an attribute that all of them showed. (personal communication, October 12, 2011)

Smith argued that the professors he was closest to were good at communicating, and giving feedback both formally and informally. The indication of which professors were safe to engage with was their willingness to dialogue openly. After Smith explained the lengths that his professors went to in order to connect, he was asked, "At what point, and to what extent did you feel comfortable initiating conversation?" He responded that initially he would only bring up course material with a professor. However, as time went on, Smith explained, friendships were developed through dialogue in class, after which joking with professors felt more comfortable and stopping for casual conversation was easy. "It started with task oriented things revolved around coursework" (J. Smith, personal communication, October 12, 2011).

Smith spent some time describing his college timeline. After a year and a half at OBU, he took three years off before returning to finish his degree. During his junior year, he began more consistently engaging his professors.

The next question asked was, "To what extent did those professors invest in you personally, course work aside, just in your life?" Smith noted that his advisor would ask him to babysit on occasions, which Smith said "communicated volumes; he trusted me" (personal communication, October 12, 2011). Smith continued by illustrating a scenario wherein he was struggling through a question about some personal beliefs and went to his advisor, who would invite him in, put down whatever he was grading, and talk openly. Smith emphasized that those types of experiences inspired him personally. Another example of professor investment outside of class was his experience with a younger professor who was involved in recreational sports:

> We were on the same intramural basketball team, and so there was personal engagement there. The fact that he would come over to say, "John, when you post up you need to pivot on your left foot not your right." And even though it was about basketball things, it showed that he knew who I was, which communicated volumes. (J. Smith, personal communication, October 12, 2011)

Smith described the impact of academic and personal communication on his level of trust with faculty members. With that in mind, he was asked to assess those communication acts in regard to his college experience on the whole.

Smith summarized the question in one statement: "The interaction I had with them was the make-or-break element to whether I would succeed in college" (personal communication, October 12, 2011). The confidence gained from the support structures of the professors around Smith gave him the ability to persevere through his undergraduate work.

After his undergraduate experience, Smith came back to OBU as a Resident Director (RD) of the prominent male dormitory on campus. Because of his history at OBU, he was asked if he found his experience with professors to be typical of OBU students. He explained that there are many students who could say that their experience paralleled his. Smith used "common" as a word that could describe the likelihood of students feeling a personal connection to their professors. However, he qualified his statement by revealing that though his experience was not unique, many students go through their years at OBU without a connection to faculty members on a personal level.

Lastly, Smith was asked, "What is the most beneficial feature/element that can be gained from professor interaction?" Smith responded by referring to the research of G. Kuh, who spoke at a conference Smith attended, and argued that students with higher faculty interaction are more likely to learn, stay at that university, and have positive overall college experiences. Further, Smith summarized Kuh's recent research by stating, "Students being around their professors help retention, success, learning, and overall positive experience" (personal communication, October 12, 2011). Moreover, Smith noted that communication between students and professors naturally starts in the classroom, which can "put a lot of weight on the professor to have a learning environment that is inviting, welcoming and lets the student know that they are approachable" (personal communication, October 12, 2011).

Part Two: Focus Group

The six students who participated in the focus group included one member of each college at Oklahoma Baptist University (OBU), and each person was involved in on-campus activities. The first area of the undergraduate experience

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that the participants characterized was *the most exciting or memorable aspect of their time at college thus far*.

Participant A argued that describing one area as the most memorable was difficult, because peer friendships are very important; acquiring education and the ability to think clearly are also critical. She went on to say, "I have relationships with faculty members that have been so influential I can't even begin to describe" (personal communication, November 9, 2011).

Although participant A said her comment could be cliché, participant B noted, "finding out who you are" is a major factor in the college experience. "Now is really the time you find out about yourself relationally, individually, and spiritually" (personal communication, November 9, 2011).

Participant C referred back to the idea of participant A that there are many aspects to the change of an individual during his/her time in school, including "the relationships you have with your peers and professors and the things you're learning in class. All of those have contributed to the shaping and modeling of me finding out who I am" (personal communication, November 9, 2011).

The last response came from participant D, who traveled 14 hours from home to attend OBU. He noted, "being away from home, on your own… you learn a lot [about yourself]" (personal communication, November 9, 2011). The independence that came from participant D living on his own gave him an avenue for the self-realization that the group had discussed earlier.

A summary of the participants' depiction of the most important student experience or memory was of a time when students can find their strengths, find themselves, and gain self-awareness. Participant A clarified that a more clear depiction of student experience is a time of understanding yourself. She stated, "Coming to an understanding of who you are, what you like to do, what's important to you" is really the foundation of what college students leave school having attained (personal communication, November 9, 2011). The group determined some avenues that students use to understand themselves: the classroom subject matter, relationships with peers and faculty, and being away from home.

A foundation of what students find central to their period in college was established and the conversation proceeded to discuss some specific OBU experiences with professors. Each member of the group mentioned a few professors with whom they felt a connection: some were advisors and some did not even teach in the student's field of study. Participant E mentioned three separate professors that were not involved in her college, but she felt they were very influential. Once each participant had identified the professors with whom they felt engaged, they were asked to *describe the attributes the professors possessed that made them so engaging*.

Participant B pointed out that her professors wanted her to succeed in their classes, but more than that, they were concerned for her personally. Participant C agreed by illustrating her first semester experience with a professor with whom she now has a close relationship.

> I had a pretty rough transition [into college]; a lot of things happened outside of school. I went to [her professor's] office to talk about assignments and she would ask 'Are you okay?' and I told her I was fine, then she said, 'No really, are you okay?' and I ended up crying in her office. She had a willingness to talk about me, not just my assignments, and willingness to talk about what was on my mind. (personal communication, November 9, 2011)

Participant E indicated that her freshman English professor had a strong desire to promote students' growth. During the time spent in her professor's office, the topics were typically life situations. The English professor did not have participant E in any other classes, but would ask about her life when they saw each other on campus and once even invited her to go to coffee. As participant E noted, "She poured into me and encouraged me and just really wanted to see the evolution of my person" (personal communication, November 9, 2011).

Responding similarly, participant A recalled her freshman religion class, where she sat in the back and never spoke a word, but even after she was out of the class, when she saw that professor, he would say hello and could call her by name. Participant A revealed feeling that "This man knows me and he cares about me" (personal communication, November 9, 2011). Participant D mentioned feeling astonished when he saw professors out-of-class (OOC) freshman

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year because they would engage with him in conversations about more than classroom subject matters.

The group was questioned about the experiences OOC with professors, as participant D mentioned, and what type of conversations, if any, occurred. The group established that professor sightings were frequent and, more likely than not, there was some type of interaction. Participant F referenced a time when she saw a professor in Wal-Mart that she had never had in class, but he had seen her on campus and stopped to talk for about ten minutes. Participant B stated that a professor she saw at church introduced his wife to her and now the wife will ask participant B how school and life are going.

A friend of participant C was close to a professor's entire family, and when the student was having some life trouble, the professor's wife took her out for coffee to discuss the issues. The group argued that although it is rare to not exchange some type of interaction with professors, even in passing, students involved in the larger (town) community are more likely to know faculty members. Whether experiences were similar to participant D's, in that there had been few serious conversations, or more parallel to participant E's, in which her professor was offering relationship advice, all members had ample contact OOC with faculty members.

In order to pursue more information about the interaction between students and professors, the participants were asked which party (student or professor) initiated OOC communication. Participants B and D voiced the need for mutual expressed interest in conversation. Participant B stated, "It might start with a smile, or then a hello" and then the conversation has room to develop. Then participant B explained that after a few conversations or "chats," the comfort level in the relationship increases. Participant A recounted a time with her advisor when she cried in his office for the first time. That vulnerability shown by the student communicated that she trusted him, which opened more communication opportunities. That was not the experience of participant F, however, when she cried in front of her science professors. The humanities majors (i.e. English, Art, Biblical Languages) confessed their belief that the people who are involved in those disciplines might be more prone to more emotional dialogue.

In a review of the data, it may be noted that although the science majors had encountered similar experiences with professors as the other participants, the closeness of their relationships seemed slightly different. The humanities students entered into friendships with their professors, while the science students typically had more professional relationships. The next question, "What type of information is shared when you talk with professors?" was directed to participants E and F, who represented science majors in an effort to flesh out the differences between the student experiences.

Participant F conveyed that many times she was distressed about future schooling and even cried in her professor's office about the notion of applying for graduate schools; however, her teacher did not console her, but pointed out the areas in which she had to improve. Participant E pointed to a difference in interest, because her professors had academic success in mind, and she is more relational: "There were just conflicting personalities" (personal communication, November 9, 2011). She then added that her professors had very high expectations and wanted the students to be focused on schoolwork, but the secretary of the college, who was more relational, was there for students who were about to panic.

As a follow-up to participants E and F's experiences, they were asked, "Who initiates the conversations you have with your professors outside of class?" Typically the students initiated the OOC communication, and participant F mentioned that interactions were awkward and the subject matter was usually science-based. On the other hand, participant A was invited along with other philosophy students to a professor's house to eat, where discussion was about personal life. Participant C also had an invitation from a professor to come by his office anytime for tea and conversation. Participant D stated that his relationships with the business professors were somewhere between the experiences of the artistic disciplines and the sciences. He explained, "I'm close enough to most of the business professors that [interaction] isn't just "hi" anymore. We'll stop and have a conversation, but it's mostly about random [topics]" (personal communication, November 9, 2011). He mentioned that through taking classes from different professors, he was able to gain familiarity with them and it became "more comfortable talking about stuff, when you know each other and know a subject that you have in common" (personal communication, November 9, 2011).

Once the discussion about the group's interactions with their professors concluded, they were asked to expound on some of the *areas of life, if any, in which their professors had been influential*. A category in which participant C's profes-

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sor had major influence on her was faith. The classes she took helped her understand, more clearly, the aspects and struggles of her faith: "I don't think that's an experience unique to me at all" (personal communication, November 9, 2011). She would talk to an English professor about her class work, which led to discussion about faith. Discussion ranged from "Faith and her own struggles of faith at different times to my struggles and questions" (personal communication, November 9, 2011). They were able to have "solid conversations" that encouraged participant C and strengthened her faith.

Participant B observed that conversations where professors shared their life experiences opened the door for the relationship to mature and the connection became more relevant. As participant D stated,

> [Professors] are influential in academics, too; having a relationship with them makes me want to work a little harder. You know them and, part of it is just me wanting to be liked; and it wouldn't be the same if you didn't have a relationship. (personal communication, November 9, 2011)

Participant A agreed, recounting when her professor told her, "You shouldn't be making B's on my tests," which made her work even harder to accomplish the standard upon which her professor insisted. She admitted, "It's true, I wanted him to like me because I was smart," which echoed the explanation given by participant D.

Again, participant F had a different experience in her field of study. She explained the way her professors helped motivate students:

> I think in [the science] department you have to impress them, because it's so much dependent on what you're doing after college. We all have that expectation with any professor we have. It's not necessarily the professor that instills the desire to succeed, but at the same time [the professors] know how to [drive us]. (personal communication, November 9, 2011)

Participant E qualified the explanation by sharing that the faculty members set a standard and the students are called to meet it, but if they do reach the standard, faculty members take special note of their hard work. She clarified that others might relate a different experience. However, "I have a hard time connecting with science professors, because their personalities are so different. We are so dependent on what we do after school that [science related topics] take up a lot of [discussion] time" (personal communication, November 9, 2011).

Participant D spoke about a professor who essentially told him that the grades you make might not necessarily be what you remember from college, but all the relationships and extra-curriculars are what you will recall. His professors encouraged many different activities, including faith-based events, campus involvement. Participant A's professor even suggested some dating options for her.

After discussing typical interpersonal discussions the group of students had with their professors, they were invited to respond regarding the *most significant gain from student-professor interactions.*

Participant A articulated that faculty members were her examples for life. She saw characteristics in her professors that were appealing and looked to them so she could "become the kind of person [she] wanted to be" (personal communication, November 9, 2011). Participant E continued with a similar thought, that faculty members were once students and can relate to her situation, which provided her with hope for life beyond school. However, as participant B noted, there is a realm of diversity between students and professors, which gave her varying viewpoints of academics, faith, and other areas of life that would never have arisen without differing opinions.

When the group considered all their extra-curricular activities, academic work, dorm-life, and peer relationships, they ranked the relationships with faculty members as some of the most influential experiences of college. Participants A, B and C stated that the professor relationships were as important to their time at OBU as the peer relationships that they have developed. Participant A summarized by saying, "Relationships are going to be something that are much more influential than activities. They last longer than an intramural championship or a really good textbook" (personal communication, November 9, 2011). Participant E specified that because OBU has provided a community of learning and living, peer and professor relationships became molded together into learning about each other's beliefs and thoughts. Again, participant A summarized, "The idea of community is right because it's not this hierarchy of faculty and staff then students. We're all people here, learning from each other" (personal communication, Novem-

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ber 9, 2011).

Although participant F discussed not having very strong relationships with her professors, she did feel that her professors had influenced her thought processes and motivated and prepared her to take the next step toward veterinary school. Participant D believed that the relationships with his athletic teammates had shaped him most significantly. However, he expressed, "When I think about it hard, they become even more important; when I realize what I've learned in class and just how all these different ideas make me think about the world" (personal communication, November 9, 2011).

When participant A thought about staff members she asserted,

> People on the staff have invested in me and I've learned so much about myself and about life just sitting in their offices and listening to them talk. [Some of the staff members] invest on a very wide potion of the student body… and [they're] not even one of the professors. (personal communication, November 9, 2011)

Overall, the four group participants indicated that faculty interaction was easily achieved and had the potential to develop quickly; some professors even sought out their students to follow up on personal issues that were encountered in conversation. Lastly, the participants observed that student-professor relationships were some of the most influential experiences they have had in their college life thus far.

Part Three: Survey

The student body of Oklahoma Baptist University (OBU) received a survey with questions pertaining to student-faculty interaction with a total of ten questions. The first two questions were assessed using a goodness-of-fit test to determine if those who responded matched the general OBU student population. The classifications of respondents generally reflects an accurate sample of the OBU population; the goodness-of-fit test (Table A1) failed to reject the null hypothesis of what we observed, matching what we expected with a 95% confidence. The second test (Table A2), however, did reject the null hypothesis with a 95% confidence; therefore, the number of respondents from each college is not necessarily an accurate representation of OBU's student population.

The last eight questions were analyzed with hypothesis testing of a sample with one proportion with a 95% confidence level. Out of 250 respondents, 169 answered that on most occasions they interact with their professors when the OOC opportunity arises. More than 62% of students at OBU communicate with faculty members on most OOC occasions (Table A3). Further, the data indicated that when students and faculty members see each other out of the classroom, it is as likely for a professor to engage a student as it is for the student to be the initiator of interaction (Table A4). Most of the students at OBU (more than 80%) were comfortable or very comfortable interacting with their professors and more than 30% were very comfortable when communicating with faculty members, with 95% confidence (Table A5).

When asked "How likely are you to discuss personal struggles with a professor?" students were more neutral in general than previous questions. Thirty-three percent answered "sometimes," while 37% replied "rarely." Only 3% "always" went to their professors for assistance with personal struggles and 11.5% never went to faculty members with personal issues (Table A6). The hypothesis test failed to reject the null hypothesis so no significant conclusion could be drawn.

The students were asked to consider one of their specific professors and rate their level of agreement with the statement, "My professor has been very influential to my OBU experience." More than 87% of students agreed with the statement in some respect and more than 69% of OBU students "agree" with the statement with 95% confidence (Table A7).

Again, the survey asked students to rate their level of agreement/ disagreement with the statement "I go out of my way to engage in conversation with a professor outside the classroom." About 50% of the responses were in some form of agreement; however, with 95% confidence more than 50% of students hold to one of the three neutral categories (somewhat agree, neutral, and somewhat disagree) (Table A8).

Questions 9 and 10 were open-ended questions that have been assessed quantitatively. The participants indicated a word or phrase, which described their interaction with professors, and those responses were evaluated by comparing

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positive, voluntary communicative statements to negative communicative statements. More than 69% of students at OBU would indicate positive interactions with their professors (Table A9). One student stated that "[professors] recognize and appreciate me for the individual that I am and they are always helpful and responsive to my needs and curiosities." Another student recognized that "[communication] changes outside of my department because they are 'one time only professors' and I have no interaction with them outside of that one semester." Although both students had positive comments about student-professor communication, the latter student emphasized that it does not include professors whose classes are not taken habitually.

Participants were asked to indicate the types of topics that emerge in OOC discussion with professors. The responses were evaluated by comparing academically related and non-academically related topics. Of 190 responses, almost 100 noted that both school and personal topics emerge in conversation. More than 60% of students discuss non-school related topics (either personal or current events) with their professors outside of the classroom (Table A10) and most students included some type of academic topic.

DISCUSSION

Throughout the literature review, conversation with J. Smith, the focus group, and the survey, it became evident that students at Oklahoma Baptist University (OBU) benefit from a learning environment in which professors are intentionally approachable outside the classroom. It stands to reason that the same would hold true for similar universities that focus on fostering an environment of communal learning. The following outcomes developed: 1) Out-of-class (OOC) interaction between faculty and students enhance academic motivation, professional success, and personal character; 2) OOC communication serves to generate relationships that are ultimately more fully developed and more influential; and 3) OOC interaction strengthens appreciation for and loyalty to the university.

The most important college experiences mentioned in the focus group were comprised of relationships (with peers and professors) and learning (academic material and self-awareness). Ultimately, students develop both academically and affectively through professor interaction. J. Smith, the focus group participants, and the literature all suggested that students who have a strong tie to a professor also have a stronger desire to achieve academic success. In addition, the connections to professors help students affectively identify with the learning environment in all aspects: socially, professionally and personally. Though results clarifying that academic and affective learning are not discrete categories in practice, they represent two significant areas of potential influence that supplement the undergraduate experience. Students who fully develop in both affective and academic areas will leave the university as more qualified candidates for employment and will have stronger ties to the university as alumni.

More than 79% of students ($p=.05$) discussed academic matters with their professors OOC, which creates an environment in which students can consider their school work more often (Table A10). If professors give cues in class that they are open to OOC communication, the students that do come will feel comfortable discussing school-related issues. J. Smith indicated that his relationships with faculty members started in classes and then developed as he took more of those professors' classes. Likewise, focus group participants claimed that interaction with professors began with simple communication acts, and then developed with quantity and quality interaction. More than 79% of OBU students feel comfortable interacting with their professors; however, if faculty members are having trouble encouraging those students who would not normally engage in class or in academic learning OOC, professors should continually promote OOC connections. Administrators should be on the front lines encouraging faculty members to facilitate more OOC interactions. For example, if faculty members are provided with biographical and historical data on individual students (pre-college), they would be more equipped to engage in a more personal way (Table A7).

Chickering and Gamson (1987) explained that the first principle that could improve higher education was promoting student-faculty contact, but they did not articulate specific reasons behind the principle. As participant D stated, "I know [my professors], and part of it is just me wanting to be liked, and it wouldn't be the same if [I] didn't have a relationship" (personal communication, November 9, 2011). This concept of a relationship driving students to succeed was common in both the interview and the focus group. Palmer (1998) argued that good faculty members integrate their students, subject, and passion; students can sense the passion of their teachers and some students try to mimic the enthusiasm. Cotton and Wilson (2006) also explained that once a student perceives an expectation from a faculty member, that individual would feel a need to maintain higher performance. If faculty members can create a relation-

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ship, it is likely that students will be more self-motivated in understanding material. Moreover, participant F recalled that her professors were not as personal and affectionate as some of the other participants' professors; however, her professors communicated a drive for success and she continued to pursue excellence, in part because of her professors' zeal. Administrators should search for professors who have a passion for their subject and an eagerness to intentionally engage their students.

The degrees to which student-professor OOC relationships are *intentional* affect more than students' effort in academics, but also students' connection to the university and overall academic experience. According to Pascarella (1980), general student satisfaction with the university will increase as more OOC interaction between students and professors occurs. J. Smith mentioned that student-faculty relationships could assist retention at a university because of the support structures that students receive.

Professors teach students a great deal more than their subject matter. As Kuh (1993) argued, "The boundaries between learning in and out of the classroom… were blurred so as to be indistinguishable to students" (p. 298). The connections between academic learning and affective learning (social, personal and professional) are impossible to differentiate. As emphasized by the results from the survey and focus group, conversations about academics quickly lead to discussion about personal and social issues (Table A10).

Participants of the focus group shared the idea that one of the most important characteristics of college life was the molding and sharpening of students' characters. As they continued to discuss personal areas that changed, they were unknowingly exploring characteristics Kuh described about *practical* competence (a combination of self-awareness, autonomy and confidence). Although J. Smith would go into his advisor's office to evaluate academic material, he communicated that the results were validation, and confidence in his own ideas and intellectual merit. The support professors give students in searching for self-awareness and independence contributes to students' futures.

The reason Chickering and Gamson's (1987) seven principles hold true in terms of improving higher education is because they were developed to "improve teaching and learning," but subsequently advance affective learning for students (p. 1). More than 79% of OBU students indicated they feel comfortable interacting with their professors; more than 60% of OBU students discuss affective topics with their professors outside of class; more than 69% of students report positive experiences with the faculty; and more than 87% of students feel that their professors have been positively influential in their overall OBU experience. The survey data revealed a correlation between comfort level, positive experiences, affective topics, and professor influence. Administrators should be creatively and actively searching for ways to promote more student-faculty OOC opportunities because retention rates and student success have lasting implications for a university's legacy.

CONCLUSION

Though much research has stressed the importance of student-faculty OOC contact, there has been minimal research explaining why and how it works to make one's university education more meaningful. More research on student-faculty OOC interactions could be a compelling factor in establishing a healthier academic institution. In universities similar to OBU, OOC communication should be discussed when recruiting students and faculty. Further, institution administrators should emphasize OOC communication at faculty meetings and highlight examples on university websites. At Oklahoma Baptist University (OBU), whether discussing favorite sports, poetry, or future graduate school, the more interaction students have with their professors, the more meaningful their experience. Ultimately, professors that are intentionally engaging will be likely to reach students on a deeper level than academic learning and can support social, emotional, and professional development. Although students often need a cue from professors in the classroom that they have the approval to interact outside the classroom, the charge still lies with administration to enlighten students that OOC interactions will be beneficial and provide professors with resources (training on advisement) and information (student background information) so the faculty have the means to be intentional. All parties involved, including students, faculty, and administrators, need to realize the potential benefits of such OOC interaction and, as McKinney, et al. (1998) argued, should assist in the provision of cooperation between academic and affective learning.

Finally, there is a question as to whether student-professor interaction may produce bias in the faculty member's

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academic evaluation of the most interactive students. Additional research could embark on a study to assess the academic evaluation of heavy OOC contact students versus low OOC contact students. Further studies should assess student-professor OOC interaction at larger college campuses. The value of relationships has been proven to be substantial among universities with similar characteristics to OBU; hence, duplicating this type of research at larger institutions could be especially beneficial.

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APPENDIX
OBU STUDENT SURVEY RESULTS BY QUESTION

Table A1
Respondents by Classification

Class	Survey	Survey (whole#)	OBU enrollment	OBU (whole#)
Senior	24.0300%	24%	21.7691%	22%
Junior	23.2500%	23%	18.9461%	19%
Sophomore	20.1600%	20%	20.4517%	20%
Freshman	32.5600%	33%	38.8331%	39%
Total	100.0000%	100%	100.0000%	100%

Table A2
Respondents by College

College	Survey	Survey (whole#)	OBU enrollment	OBU (whole#)
Business	8.7500%	9%	10.5000%	10%
Fine Arts	18.2500%	18%	12.1000%	12%
Humanities	28.5100%	29%	33.0000%	33%
Nursing	11.4100%	11%	12.9000%	13%
Science Math	17.4900%	18%	8.5000%	9%
Theology	10.2700%	10%	16.3000%	16%
Undecided	5.3200%	5%	6.7000%	7%
Total	100.0000%	100%	100.0000%	100%

Table A3
Regularity of Student-Professor Interaction

Answers	Count	Percent
Every time	54	21.60%
Most often	115	46.00%
Some time	77	30.80%
Never	4	1.60%
Totals	250	100.00%

Note. Students answered the question: How often is there interaction when you see professors outside of class?

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Table A4
Initiator of Interaction

Answers	Count	Percent
Student	107	42.97%
Professor	142	57.03%
Totals	249	100.00%

Note. Students answered the question: Who is more likely to initiate interaction?

Table A5
Comfort Level of Students with Professors

Answers	Count	Percent
Very Comfortable	90	36.59%
Comfortable	117	47.56%
Neutral	32	13.01%
Uncomfortable	6	2.44%
Very Uncomfortable	1	0.40%
Totals	246	100.00%

Note. Students answered the question: How likely are you to discuss personal struggles with a professor?

Table A6
Likelihood of Students Discussing Struggles

Answers	Count	Percent
Always	8	3.26%
Often	36	14.63%
Sometimes	81	32.93%
Rarely	93	37.80%
Never	28	11.38%
Totals	246	100.00%

Note. Students answered the question: How likely are you to discuss personal struggles with a professor?

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Table A7
Influence of OBU Professors

Answers	Count	Percent
Totally Agree	105	43.93%
Agree	72	30.13%
Somewhat Agree	40	16.74%
Neutral	12	5.02%
Somewhat Disagree	4	1.67%
Disagree	4	1.67%
Totally Disagree	2	0.84%
Totals	239	100.00%

Note. Students were asked to consider one of their major professors and rate their level of agreement/disagreement with the statement, "My professor has been very influential to my OBU experience."

Table A8
Unncessary Engagement with Professor

Answers	Count	Percent
Totally Agree	20	8.44%
Agree	46	19.40%
Somewhat Agree	56	23.63%
Neutral	55	23.21%
Somewhat Disagree	31	13.08%
Disagree	20	8.44%
Totally Disagree	9	3.80%
Totals	237	100.00%

Note. Students were asked to rate their level of agreement/disagreement with the statement, "I go out of my way to engage in conversation with a professor outside the classroom."

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Table A9

Description of Out-of-Class Interaction

Categories	Count	Percent
Positive Statements	139	75.14%
Negative Statements	46	24.86%
Total	185	100.00%

Note. Students answered an open-ended question asking to indicate a word or phrase that describes their interaction with their professors.

Table A10

Topics of Out-of-Class Conversation

Categories	Count	Percent
Academic Related	64	33.68%
Non-academic Related	29	15.26%
Both	97	51.06%
Total	190	100.00%

Note. Students answered an open-ended question asking what types of topics typically emerge when interacting with professors.

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