Developmental Relationships: An Examination into the Perceptions of Students on Their Relationships with Faculty Members

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Abstract. The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of students on the importance of developmental relationships related to teacher satisfaction and retention. It involved the use of a 20-question survey that was focused on perceptions of on-ground undergraduate students on components of The Developmental Relationship Framework from the Search Institute. Cronbach's Alpha, T-tests, and a Mann-Whitney U test were used to analyze the data. Independent T-tests and the Mann-Whitney U Item Analysis discovered no significant differences in mean scores of survey questions and the demographic variables. While the statistical results were not significant, areas for further research were identified.

The problem discussed in this study relates to issues in retention of students in small, liberal arts colleges and how qualities that instructors demonstrate in the classroom can aide in retention efforts. While many variables exist that can cause a student to leave a university setting, one area that can be focused in on is developing positive relationships in the classroom, making retention not just a semester to semester issue, but a class to class issue. Research has shown that if students' expectations and needs are not met, it may reduce their persistence (Rosenbaum, Becker, Cepa, & Zepata, 2016). Much of the research is focused on academic advising, financial aid and accommodations, and campus climate, which include housing and food services (Rosenbaum et al., 2011). While research into these areas has been extensive, little research exists in looking at the fundamental relationship developed between instructors and students. Rucks-Ahidiana and Bork (2020) discuss in their research that while students frequently mention faculty and staff as important in campus relationships, they typically refer to them "without indicating a relationship with those individuals" (p. 593). They go on to explain that while there is a difference between the high school and college setting, students do look for close relationships with faculty in mentoring roles, such as role modeling and career outcomes. Flores-Caballero (2020) discusses in her research that a main reason a student does not persist in college is due to "lack of quality time with professors and counselors—many education experts agree the experience of the student is better if teachers and academic authorities have a personalized approach" (p. 100). The significance of this study builds upon the knowledge that developing relationships between instructors and students paves the way for increased likelihood of academic success and retention at the college

level. Understanding what students perceive as important factors in those developmental relationships can help colleges focus professional development opportunities in specific areas to build stronger relationships between instructors and students at the college level. Moreover, is there a difference in types of students in how they view characteristics of developmental relationships? This study sought to examine the following research question: Is there a statistically significant difference between survey response scores on the **Developmental Relationships Framework (2020)** between the following subgroups: gender, first-generation college student, year in school? The null hypothesis for this research question was: There will be no statistically significant difference between survey response scores on the **Developmental Relationships Framework (2020)** between the following subgroups: gender, first-generation college student, year in school. The following sections describe a review of literature into the components of developmental relationships and how they relate to higher education, provide a description of the research design, data collection, and data analysis, and close with a discussion of the findings, implications of this study, and opportunities for further research.
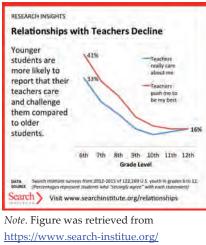
Literature Review

While this study focuses on adult learners, the dynamic of building relationships has been thoroughly studied in K-12 education and youth students. "Every day, teachers, coaches and colleagues build natural mentoring relationships with youth through simple interactions" (Rhodes, 2017). Building positive relationships with their teachers is proven to be one of the best indicators of students' success in school. Research has shown that the better the relationship is between teacher and student, the more successful the student is in all areas of growth— academic, social, emotional (Davis, 2003; Opdenakker, 2012). It is this relationship that motivates students to want to do their best and continue to learn, encourages them to go beyond their capabilities, and develops that sense of self-accomplishment and self-worth that is critical for success in life beyond their academic careers. There is no doubt of the critical role strong teacher/student relationships play in the education of young children, but as they grow, so too does their independence and their self-inflicted desire to not rely on adults. O'Neil et al. (2019) in their study of 675 middle school students found that 29 percent experienced strong developmental relationships with their teachers. Further study showed that only 16 percent of twelfth graders believed their teachers cared about them and challenged them to do their best (See Figure 1).

Figure 1

Relationships with Teachers

Note. Figure was retrieved from https://www.search-institue.org/developmental-relationships/learning-developmental-relationships/

What Are Developmental Relationships?

What are developmental relationships? The Search Institute of Minnesota (2018) defines developmental relationships as "…close connections through which young people discover who they are, cultivate abilities to shape their own lives, and learn how to engage with and contribute to the world around them." People are more likely to be successful in life when relationships are built with those who are important in their lives. These relationships assist young people in determining who they are, provide opportunities to discover and engage in activities that shape who they are, and assist them in their abilities to engage with others and contribute to the world around them. Based on 5 elements with 20 specific actions, the Institute has designed a Developmental Relationships Framework. It is through reframing the idea that relationships are more than simply 'caring' that relationships are developed with many different types of people and in many different places (O'Neil et al., 2019). The following elements support the overall outcome of developing quality relationships: express care, challenge growth, provide support, share power, and expand possibilities. These five elements are the pillars of the Developmental Relationships Framework. Each of the elements identifies specific actions that can be both practiced and researched (Pekel, 2019):

1. Express care: "Show me that I matter to you." This element is shown through the actions of dependability, the ability to listen, belief in oneself, a warm and inviting personality, and the ability to encourage.
2. Challenge growth: "Push me to keep getting better." This element is shown through the actions of high expectations in doing one's best, the ability to stretch oneself, taking responsibility for one's own actions, holding oneself accountable, and the ability to reflect on failures and make changes for the better.
3. Provide support: "Help me complete tasks and achieve goals." This element is shown through the actions of the ability to navigate through the difficult situations, empowerment, advocacy, and setting boundaries to stay on focus.
4. Share power: "Treat me with respect and give me a say." This element is shown through the actions of respect, inclusion, collaboration, and leadership opportunities.
5. Expand possibilities: "Connect me with people that broaden my world." This element is shown through the abilities to inspire one to see future possibilities, broaden horizons allowing one to accept new ideas and be open to new experiences, and make connections with others who can help a person grow.

Twenty-first century skills cannot be accomplished through knowledge gained in books. Twenty-first century skills are practiced and mastered through opportunities provided by and supported by classroom instructors. By establishing classroom routines and creating a culture of learning, "…teachers play an important role in helping students with the transition from extrinsic forms of achievement motivation to

developing an integrated 'identity' of a learner and the self-regulation of behavior" (Davis, 2003).

Table 1

Twenty-First Century Skills

21st Century Skills
Overall work quality
Technical competence
Problem solving
Creativity and innovation
Communications
Teamwork
Flexibility and adaptability
Initiative and self-direction
Social and cross-cultural skills
Productivity and accountability
Leadership and responsibility

Note. From *21st century skills: Learning for our life in our times* (p. 7), by B. Trilling and C. Fadel, 2009, Jossey-Bass/Wiley. Copyright 2009 by Bernie Trilling and Charles Fadel.

If developmental relationships are to be successful and work to promote positive development, there must be buy-in and support from all of the stakeholders involved, "…and this requires framing the conversation in ways that enable people to recognize that relationships should be a matter of collective concern and that they require systemic support" (Davis, 2003, p. 215). By utilizing the Developmental Relationships Framework, instructors encourage students to plan and set goals not just for academics but to complement academic achievement by monitoring and challenging students' practice of 21st century goals.

Developmental Relationships in the College Setting

How important is it for these young men and women to have that same opportunity to develop relationships with their college instructors? What characteristics do they view as most important for their instructors to have to help in building positive relationships? Are they too old to need that support? And do college instructors dismiss their students as adults and feel less attached, thus resulting in less of a need to build those relationships that were required all through the student's academic years to be supported, motivated, and encouraged to do their best? Rhodes et al. (2017) discuss their findings regarding the need for college students to continue to have a degree of mentoring and support if they are to be engaged in their work as well as thrive both socially and emotionally. Rhodes et al. (2017) states:

> We learned that if graduates felt 'supported' during college—by professors who cared, made them excited about learning and who encouraged them to pursue their goals and dreams—their odds of being engaged in work more

than doubled, as did their odds of thriving in their well-being. This finding was true of graduates of all ages and years of graduation; in other words, it's a career—and life—trajectory game changer. (p. 422)

While the previous sections above discuss the background into what developmental relationships are and how they are important in the K-12 setting, it leads to whether or not they are relevant in the college setting. Guzzardo et al. (2021) describes that as 6-year graduation rates at universities across the nation are around 60%, the need for student/faculty relationship building can help increase persistence and retention, closing gaps in graduation rates. In their qualitative study of 53 students, student-faculty relationships can "create conducive learning environments where students can thrive, especially during times of crisis" (p. 41). They further state that, "S-F [Student-Faculty] interactions are positively linked to students' success, because of their effect on students' academic achievement, satisfaction with college, intellectual and personal development, persistence and attrition, as well as career and educational aspirations" (p. 43).

Grantham et al. (2015) further examined developmental relationships in terms of factors found on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). Their research determined that while the characteristics of the NSSE survey are focused on in class interactions related to grading, feedback, and other learning characteristics, themes emerged related to personal discussions related to non-academic work, respect, caring, and enthusiasm, furthering the need for examination into developmental relationship characteristics. They go on to state:

> [Educators] often ignore 'soft skills' such as communication skills and affect in the classroom in formal programming. Our findings suggest that perhaps an avenue for faculty development, at least at research institutions, should focus on helping faculty members relate to students more effectively in their interpersonal interactions, creating a more supportive learning environment for our students in which they can thrive and succeed. (p. 131)

It is important in this time, especially with the COVID-19 crisis, that faculty members increase their awareness not only on the components of effective teaching in the classroom, but identify and focus on the "soft skills" for creating more interpersonal interactions with students. This research attempts, through The Developmental Relationship Framework (2020), to identify if there are any differences between perceptions of undergraduate students within components of the 20 identified areas of the framework in relation to GPA, gender, year in school and first-generation students.

Research Design

To investigate this research question, we designed a quantitative study using a 20-question survey that was focused on perceptions of on-ground undergraduate students utilizing components of The Developmental Relationship Framework from the Search Institute (Appendix). The survey was distributed to all on-ground, full time undergraduate students of a small, midwestern liberal arts university in April of 2020. The researchers employed a causal-comparative research design, or ex post facto research design, as students had already experienced the teaching of their instructors

during the academic year. Both descriptive statistics and inferential statistics (T-test and Mann-Whitney U) were utilized to measure the variables and the results are reported below. This type of design seeks to find relationships between independent and dependent variables after an action has occurred.

Response Rate and Demographic Data

The survey was sent to 686 students through the Office of Student Life as well as placed in the weekly newsletter for a six-week period of time. Students were sent email reminders each week for the 6 weeks. It is important to note that this survey was opened during the shutdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 97 students completed the survey in its entirety, with 37 students being 1st/2nd year students (Freshman/Sophomore) and 60 3rd/4th year students (Junior/Senior), giving a 14.1% overall response rate. In terms of gender, 12 males and 85 females completed the survey. In terms of first-generation college students, 70 reported that they were not first-generation compared to 27 that were first-generation. Of the 97 students, 23 were transfer students. Table 1 displays the information related to breakdown:

Table 2

Students' Self-Reported GPA Range

Number of Students	GPA Range
2	2.0-2.49
5	2.5-2.99
18	3.0-3.49
72	3.5-4.0

Data Analysis

The instrument contained 20 items. The internal consistency of the instrument was verified by calculating the Cronbach's Alpha for 97 cases, which was determined to be acceptable (0.88). The 97 scores are normally distributed whereby a linear relationship was found between the observed and expected normal values. While a negative skew (0.88) and a negative kurtosis (-0.05) were observed, the values fell within the acceptable range. The mean score was 2.75 with a variance of 0.07 and range of 0.95. No statistically significant differences in scores were found between men and women [$t(94) = 0.65$, $p>0.05$]. Additional Mann-Whitney U tests were performed to examine distributions by gender. No differences were found among any items between men and women. No statistically significant differences in mean scores were found between first-generation and non-first-generation groups [$t(94) = -0.55$, $p>0.05$]. No statistically significant differences in mean scores were found between Freshman/Sophomore and Junior/Senior groups, [$t(94) = 0.45$, $p>0.05$]. No statistically significant differences were found between high and low GPA groups (above or below 3.50 GPA) [$t(94) = 0.86$, $p>0.05$]. The findings result in an acceptance of the null hypothesis and rejection of the alternative hypothesis.

Discussion of the Findings

This study sought to examine the following research question: Is there a statistically significant difference between survey response scores on the

Developmental Relationships Framework (2020) between the following subgroups: gender, first-generation college student, year in school. The null hypothesis for this research question was: There will be no statistically significant difference between survey response scores on the **Developmental Relationships Framework (2020)** between the following subgroups: gender, first-generation college student, year in school. Based upon the Mann-Whitney U tests that were performed, no significant differences were found in the responses between the three subgroups, while also finding that the mean response for the questionnaire was 2.75 for each question. In terms of the questionnaire, all respondents felt that all 20 items of the Developmental Relationships Framework were between somewhat to very important, with each criterion's mean scores falling between 2.6 and 2.75. It can be further hypothesized that accepting the null hypothesis in this case is a positive in the sense that students in all subgroups, whether first-generation, gender, or year in school, find these 20 characteristics important in their instructors. While the N size for the data set was lower than normal due to the COVID-19 pandemic occurring when the survey was released, these results do open up the possibility for continued examination on these developmental relationship characteristics and population subgroups to be explored in future studies, which will be discussed in the next sections.

Implications for Practice

Higher education is continuing to face declines in enrollment and challenges in retaining current students (Rosenbaum et al., 2016). Retention has moved away from being a semester to semester issue to being a class by class issue. While the results discussed above indicated no statistically significant differences between subgroups, it could be discussed with instructors and faculty that utilizing these characteristics in their interactions with students could result in increased relationship building in the classroom, which, in turn, could lead to better retention and persistence of students. The mean scores of the responses identified that the student population (M=2.75) found these characteristics to be either very important or somewhat important. While not significant, the Mann-Whitney U tests identified being dependable/trustworthy, stretching their learning/pushing them farther, holding them accountable, and broadening their horizons/expanding their minds as the highest rated responses. As discussed in the work of Guzzardo et al. (2021), Grantham et al. (2015), and Rhodes et al. (2017), continued professional development and training, especially at large institutions, could create better faculty-student relationships and, in turn, close the retention gap. Another implication of this research would be its continued utilization in higher education settings to see if characteristics identified in the framework have carryover between the K-12 world and the higher education world. Additional ideas of how to implement this study model differently are described in the next section.

Recommendations for Future Research

Many potential additional research opportunities can arise from this research design. The authors recommend that the research study be conducted at other small, liberal arts institutions in the same fashion, utilizing different regions, if possible, to see if the same results would be found. Further studies could also examine other subgroups, such as race/ethnicity. Another recommendation for future research could

come from changing the research question to identify which of the 20 items would be the highest prioritized value and compare it amongst the subgroups. It would be interesting to see if there are certain qualities of the framework that are valued by certain groups more than others. Another possible research study could focus on the differences found between research based, larger universities and smaller, non-research focused institutions to determine if there was a difference between responses of students. As discussed by Grantham et al. (2015), not much emphasis is placed on "soft skills" and developmental relationships in larger institutions because of larger class sizes and focus on research; however, knowing what students want could change current perceptions.

Conclusion

Implications of this research demonstrated that while there were no significant differences between groups in terms of responses to the questions related to developmental relationships, student mean responses for each of the characteristics were moderate to high, indicating that all groups found some value in having these characteristics present in their instructors. Previous research discussed in the introduction and review of literature maintain that having a positive relationship between faculty and students can help with retention and overall satisfaction of being in college (Davis, 2003; O'Neil et al., 2019). While students believed that having a relationship with their professors was important, it was not determined what characteristics were considered the most important, which begs the question: Do the characteristics that students look for in their professors differ between genders, first-generation, and year in school? While this research yielded no

Knowing which developmental relationship characteristics are sought by students can help institutions better allocate their time and resources in order to impact retention and persistence through their educational experience.

differences between the responses of the groups and that they valued similar characteristics, larger data sets could help to build a more robust list of characteristics that each demographic believes to be important. Knowing which developmental relationship characteristics are sought by students can help institutions better allocate their time and resources in order to impact retention and persistence through their educational experience. The instructor in the room has such a profound impact on the experience of the student and should continue to be investigated.

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Appendix

Survey

Student Perceptions of Developmental Relationships
Informed Consent and Demographic Questions

Please read the following and decide if you would like to continue.

Question Title
* 1. Informed Consent to Participate in Research

Study title: Student perceptions of Developmental Relationship Framework components and their importance in relationship building with college instructors. Researcher[s]
We're inviting you to take a survey for research. This survey is completely voluntary. There are no negative consequences if you don't want to take it. If you start the survey, you can always change your mind and stop at any time.

What is the purpose of this study?

This study will investigate your perceptions of Developmental Relationship components and if you believe that they are important in fostering a relationship with your instructors. This research will help to guide important professional development for instructors to better understand your needs as a student.

What will I do?

This survey will ask questions about components that have been shown in research to help create Developmental Relationships. It includes 20 questions based on the 5 components of the Developmental Relationships Framework created by the Search Institute (www.mentoring.org, 2020). The survey will take about 5-10 minutes to complete.

Risks

This survey will be anonymous and will have no bearing on your current status at [name of school].

Possible benefits:

Better understanding our students and creating opportunities for professional development for our instructors is of much importance to us. The completion of this survey and the statistical analysis to follow will help to further these two goals.

Estimated number of participants:

The goal for this research is to collect responses from 40% of the population, which would be approximately 275 students.

How long will it take?

5-10 minutes

Confidentiality and Data Security

All survey results will be kept in a password protected file. No ID numbers will be used to link responses to students. Data will be destroyed 3 years from the date of completion.

Questions about the research, complaints, or problems: Contact [researcher name]. Questions about your rights as a research participant, complaints, or problems: Contact the [researcher].

Please print or save this screen if you want to be able to access the information later.

IRB #: 226 ([name of school])
IRB Approval Date: April 2nd, 2020Agreement to Participate

Your participation is completely voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time.

To take this survey, you must be:
· **At least 18 years old**
· **Are currently registered as an on-ground student at [name of school]**

If you meet these criteria and would like to take the survey, click the button below to start.

   ○   Yes

   ○   No

2. What is your gender?

   ○   Female

   ○   Male

3. Which best describes your year in school (credit wise)?

   ○   Freshman (0-30 credits)

   ○   Sophomore (31-60 credits)

   ○   Junior (61-90 credits)

   ○   Senior (91+ credits)

4. Are you a first-generation college student?

   ○   Yes

   ○   No

Please rank the level of importance to the following statements.

Statement	Level of Importance				
	Extremely important	Very important	Somewhat important	Not so important	Not at all important
5. It is important for my instructor(s) to be dependable; be someone I can trust.					
6. It is important for my instructor(s) to listen; really pay attention when we are together.					
7. It is important for my instructor(s) to believe in me; make me feel known and valued.					
8. It is important for my instructor(s) to be warm; that they enjoy being with me.					
9. It is important for my instructor(s) to be encouraging; praise me					

for my effort and achievements.

10. It is important for my instructor(s) to expect my best; expect me to live up to my potential.

11. It is important for my instructor(s) to stretch my learning; push me to go further.

12. It is important for my instructor(s) to hold me accountable; insist I take responsibility for my actions.

13. It is important for my instructor(s) to reflect on my failures; help me to learn from mistakes and setbacks.

14. It is important for my instructor(s) to help me navigate; guide me through hard situations and systems.

15. It is important for my instructor(s) to empower me; build my confidence to take charge of my life.

16. It is important for my instructor(s) to advocate

17. It is important for my instructor(s) to set boundaries; put in place limits that keep me on track.

18. It is important for my instructor(s) to respect me; take me seriously and treat me fairly.

19. It is important for my instructor(s) to include me; involve me in decisions that affect me.

20. It is important for my instructor(s) to collaborate; work with

me to solve problems and reach goals.

21. It is important for my instructor(s) to let me lead; create opportunities for me to act and lead.

22. It is important for my instructor(s) to inspire; inspire me to see possibilities for my future.

23. It is important for my instructor(s) to broaden my horizons; expose me to new ideas, experiences, and places.

24. It is important for my instructor(s) to connect with me; introduce me to people who can help me grow.

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