

The Power of the Personal



David Plunkert for The Chronicle

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By Daniel F. Chambliss

Under fierce pressure to do more with less, colleges today need improvement strategies that are simultaneously reliable, powerful, available, and cheap. Such methods should consistently work well, clearly repay the effort they require, be usable by almost anyone on campus, and require little time and no additional money (since there probably isn't much lying around). These are strict criteria, but they

are achievable. In particular, there is one step colleges can take right now to engage students, without spending a cent or creating a new program: They can encourage more face-to-face human contact. Such human contact, with its power to grab students' attention and motivate them, may be the key to workable improvement strategies.

In a 10-year longitudinal study of students at a small college, funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Christopher G. Takacs and I found that personal relationships with both peers and faculty members, starting from direct contact, were fundamentally important to undergraduate success and could readily be facilitated by institutions. The influence of friends, teachers, and mentors on students' careers can be truly pervasive, running from start to finish. Especially for traditional-age students at residential colleges, research has shown that friendships are a necessary prerequisite for retention and integration. Research has also shown that peer and professor connections are the central daily motivators for exploring, discussing, studying, and learning, and that relationships of all kinds are often tied to a major positive result. What matters most in college, then, is who meets whom, and when.

Meanwhile, institutions themselves can promote the right sorts of contact through thoughtful dorm design and room assignments, location of faculty offices, scheduling of classes, and deployment of teaching faculty.

Even an apparently minor personal encounter can go a long way in helping a student. For example, one student from

our study, who planned to major in psychology, happened to meet a nice Chinese professor at orientation, and two years later was living and studying full time in Beijing. Another met a fellow student in their dorm who was a tutor in the Writing Center and taught him the fundamentals of composition, which the first student's high school had neglected. When yet another student casually enrolled in an art-history course, she was hooked by the lively professor and found her academic home.

While conducting research for our book, *How College Works*, we saw how a single meeting with a professor to work through a paper could have a decisive effect on a student's writing, and how just a single visit to a faculty member's home could significantly shift a student's entire vision of the college experience. Time and again, finding the right person, at the right moment, seemed to have an outsize impact on a student's success—in return for relatively little effort on the part of the college.

Fortunately, as they try to increase students' contact with engaging professors, colleges are not completely at the mercy of their student-faculty ratios. Even a small number of exciting people and events, properly located, can have a disproportionately positive impact on students' educational careers. A university in toto may be huge, but any one student has to find only two or three good friends, and one or two inspiring professors, to have a great college

experience. The trick is to make sure students find those people.

At the same time, a handful of exciting large courses and great lecturers can still engage large numbers of students. And certainly different professors appeal to, and can help, different students. In one day, a president or dean can "work the crowd" at orientation and inspire countless students, just as a single great lecturer can hold forth to a thousand students in an auditorium, potentially creating an intellectual community that reaches out to the rest of the campus.

The personal touch motivates students at all kinds of institutions, not just smaller or more selective ones. In her book *The College Fear Factor: How Students and Professors Misunderstand One Another*, Rebecca D. Cox studied several dozen community colleges across the country. She found that first-generation and nontraditional students, often hesitant to approach any authority figure, needed their professors to take the initiative in getting to know and understand them. In turn, professors' caring attitude was vital in helping students meet the challenges of college. Many of George Kuh's nationally validated best practices in student engagement (such as an emphasis on student research, senior theses, and learning communities) rest on the principle of getting students and professors together closely.

The 2014 [Gallup-Purdue Index](#) found that having "a mentor

who encouraged my hopes and dreams," "professors who cared about me," and "at least one professor who made me excited about learning" made students far more likely to be successful later in life. Even some of the leading providers of online higher education understand the importance of human contact: Southern New Hampshire University's recent television campaign features a bus traveling the country to hand-deliver diplomas to beaming students, who are delighted to finally meet face-to-face with someone from the university.

When I give talks suggesting that colleges focus more on fostering relationships, some audience member—usually a professor—always asks, "But what about academics?" Academics seem to segregate learning away from life. A scientist at a U.S. News & World Report "top 10" college bemoaned that students in our research cited "making good friends" as a top outcome of higher education—but the scientist later admitted that he himself had been recruited into his department by the "fun" people in it. At another college, a political scientist said, "OK, we run a nice country club, but we don't need to be mothering, all warm and fuzzy." A comment on a recent article asked, "Isn't this ... what summer camp is?" Still another said, "I didn't go to college to make friends—no, I went for an education."

Those are reasonable reservations, but they miss the point: Without at least workable relationships with peers and teachers, academic education is unlikely to happen at all. Most students do, in fact, care about making friends, and about being respected and encouraged by their teachers. The critics, I think, cling to the old myth of the solitary intellectual. They forget that critical thinking is not an isolated technical skill; it's a socially embedded way of living, a habitual way of being with other people. It has to be practiced with others; the courage required to participate needs to be modeled.

Communication, too, must be rehearsed with real audiences who care enough to listen or to read. Nursing and even engineering really do involve using skills with other people, and in all fields students can and do teach one another. In college I learned about Kant, Hegel, Wittgenstein, and Foucault from my fellow undergraduate Paul; about literary criticism from Stan; about 19th-century English history from Polly; and about bicycle repair from Steve. More generally, good relationships with supportive fellow students, caring professors, and helpful staff members in the university can smooth a student's path to a wide array of social, academic, and career benefits.

It's not that formal programs, facilities, and funding don't matter; they do. But at its heart, higher education is a human activity, powered primarily by bringing thinkers together. So rather than attending so much to programs and policies, maybe higher education should focus first on its people, and on helping them find—and eventually care

about—one another.

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