Increasing Faculty-Student Engagement

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) lists "faculty-student engagement" as one of the benchmarks of effective educational practice. Indeed, multiple studies have confirmed the benefits of faculty-student interaction. Astin (1993, as cited by Cox and Orehovec, 2007) found that all forms of faculty-student interaction have a positive impact on both cognitive and affective student development, and increased student satisfaction in their schooling. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005, as cited by Cox and Orehovec, 2007) found a "correlation between faculty-student interaction and positive student outcomes." Positive student outcomes include improved grade-point averages (Anaya and Cole, 2001 as cited in Cox et al., 2010), plans for graduate study (Hathaway et al. 2002, as cited in Cox et al., 2010), and "greater commitment to the institution (Strauss and Volkwein, 2004, as cited in Cotten and Wilson, 2006). Kezar and Moriarty (2000, as cited in Sax et al., 2005) determined that there was a positive association between student-faculty interaction and students' self-assessed leadership skills and self-confidence.

Unfortunately, increasing the level of faculty-student interaction at university can be a hard to reach goal. One stumbling block may simply be that students don't understand the role of faculty members, or how interacting with faculty can benefit them. Cotten and Wilson found that students, particularly those in their first or second year of university, were completely unaware of what faculty members do besides teach (Cotten and Wilson, 2006).

This confusion can lead to all sorts of misunderstandings. For instance, while a student might perceive a faculty member's hurried conversation as a sign that the faculty member is uninterested in talking, the faculty member may in fact merely be short on time due to other professional commitments (Cotten and Wilson, 2006). Similarly, students may perceive criticism from faculty as disrespectful or overly harsh, while faculty members see the criticism as part of a dispassionate academic process. Students may be seeking emotional validation and thus perceive faculty comments as hypercritical (Cotten and Wilson, 2006), making it unlikely that they will approach a faculty member for advice again.

Furthermore, the effects of student-faculty interaction may be conditional. The willingness of students to engage with faculty outside of class and the effectiveness of these interactions in improving student outcomes may depend on the social-class or first-generation status of the student (Kim and Sax, 2009). For instance, in their survey of over 58,000 students from the University of California system, Kim and Sax found that students from upper-class families and/or whose parents attended college were more likely "to assist faculty with research for course credit, communicate with faculty by email or in person, and interact with faculty during lecture class sessions," and that "upper-class and non-first-generation students are more satisfied with their interaction with faculty than their…lower-class and first generation counterparts" (Kim and Sax, 2009).

So how can faculty-student interaction be increased at Ryerson? A review of recent literature has yielded the following suggestions. We have provided links to *Teaching Tips* documents that provide some ideas for how to apply each of the suggestions in your classroom.

- The attitude that faculty project towards students can affect the amount of interaction they have with their students. Nadler and Nadler found that "empathy and credibility are positively related to out-of-class interaction" (2001, as cited in Cotten and Wilson, 2006). It is not enough to simply post office hours—students have to be repeatedly encouraged to approach faculty with their thoughts and ideas (Cotten and Wilson, 2006).

- o The First Day of Class:
  http://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/lt/resources/handouts/firstdayofclass.pdf
- When faculty have a more interactive teaching style, express active interest in contact with students, disclose something personal about themselves, or show a sense of humor, students feel that faculty are more approachable (Cotten and Wilson, 2006). Even something as simple as an open facial expression can make students feel more comfortable interacting with faculty (Cox et al., 2010).
  - o Making Lectures More Engaging:
    http://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/lt/resources/handouts/EngagingLectures.pdf
  - o Active Learning:
    http://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/lt/resources/handouts/activelearning.pdf
- When faculty have a more positive opinion of student programs at the university, it is more likely that students will participate in these programs. In institutions where faculty stated that learning communities were "very important," for instance, first year students participated at a rate of 55%, as opposed to 3% participation in institutions where faculty said the same program was only "somewhat important" (Kuh, 2009, as cited in Kazmi, 2010).
  - o LTO Resources on Supporting Your Students:
    http://www.ryerson.ca/lt/resources/supporting_students/
- Because of the conditional effects that student-faculty interaction can have on different groups of students, it is important that faculty be aware of the implications of their actions, and to try a variety of approaches when attempting to reach students. For instance, according to Sax et al. "faculty should pay particular attention to the fact that dismissive comments made to female students can have a deleterious effect on their academic confidence and sense of physical well-being" (2005).
  - o Universal Design For Learning:
    http://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/lt/resources/handouts/UDL_handout.pdf
  - o Flexible Learning:
    http://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/lt/resources/handouts/Flexible_Learning_strategies.pdf

Suggestions from Ryerson Faculty

Suggestions for improving student-faculty engagement were gathered from Ryerson faculty at a "Lunch with the Vice Provost" event on January 7, 2012, as well as at a meeting of the Senate Learning and Teaching Committee. The following comments and ideas were put forward:

- **Having activities outside of class is important.**
  - o Several faculty members mentioned lunch events hosted by different departments. In one such program, a different faculty member is a featured guest every other week. Another department hosts pizza get-togethers. Attendance varies depending on the cohort, but the atmosphere is collegial and the students appreciate it. Some faculties at Carleton host breakout groups, where seminar sessions were hosted by faculty members with the goal of talking about current research issues. All these programs were described as bringing the curriculum to life for students, and making their coursework seem relevant and their instructors relatable.
  - o The School of Occupational and Public Health has an active course union that has gotten involved in engaging students and faculty. They host pub nights and sports events, and invite both groups to attend. In this case, the students have taken control of their own involvement, creating a mutual support system and letting them get to know each other. The success of this program was attributed to

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the fact that it's been long running. It was noted that "you have to stay the course, be consistent, hang in there and not go with the flavor of the month."

- o Similarly, the Philosophy Department has a Philosophy Club for undergraduates enrolled in philosophy courses. The program is run by students and hosts activities once a month, showing films or having faculty members give talks. This is another example of faculty-student engagement being pushed forward by the students.
- o Whenever possible, try to get students jobs on campus, either through work-study programs, or in labs or research projects.

- **Engagement begins in the classroom, with courses and assignments structured to encourage interaction with faculty**
  - o "The worst thing we can do is lecture for the full time, not asking for feedback, not asking questions." It is crucial to make classes more student-friendly: "I never run a single class on the same routine. We start and stop at different times. If I'm going to talk for long period of times, I warn them, and build in breaks. I watch fatigue levels, I watch the clock, I get them out early on days that it's dark, warn them about long classes—I give them perks."
  - o Enthusiasm for the material is important, "if you're going to teach down to a student, they are going to lean down to that expectation."
  - o One faculty member uses discussion boards on D2L to interact with students and follow up with questions from class, attaching some small amount of credit to it in order to encourage participation. This helps give shy students a place to talk.
  - o Another faculty member has an open course outline and course documents that the students fill in themselves: "We use Dropbox to work on documents together… they can do it on the subway, they can do it from their cell phone, they just have to put their initial, and even though there is no credit, they're all using it, they're all there."
  - o "One of my most successful strategies has been the ongoing weekly reading journal—not finished writing, but a scholarly conversation, a Socratic dialogue. It's quick to read through them and ask questions. The students feel like you're having a conversation with them. In smaller classes they can exchange with each other, in larger classes, I will read excerpts from them. It really makes a difference."
  - o A further suggestion was to announce office hours at the beginning of every single class.
- **The importance of role models and mentoring, both from peers and from faculty**
  - o Have third or fourth year students mentor first and second years benefits both groups. The peer mentors get leadership experience and a chance to feel valued. The younger students get a model of academic success, part of which involves engaging with faculty members.
  - o Build partnerships with other groups on campus. They often have connections or capacity that can be utilized, rather than trying to increase engagement in a vacuum. The Tri-Mentoring program was mentioned as an example.

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