Chapter 1: Introduction

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Background of Study

A tremendous amount of research supports that student engagement is related to positive student outcomes such as higher GPA, retention, higher aspirations, and degree completion. (Citation XXX). The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), a survey tool developed by the Community College Leadership Program at The University of Texas at Austin, measures the following five benchmarks in student engagement: active and collaborative learning, student effort, academic challenge, student-faculty interaction, and support for learners (CCSSE Web site XXXX). Therefore, student-faculty interaction is one of the key components to positive student outcomes. By focusing only on the student-faculty interaction component, I am able to take a closer look at what shapes the interaction from the students’ perspectives and from faculty members’ perspectives.

Student-faculty interaction positively benefits all students while affecting certain groups of students more. For example, many non-traditional students, who are often first-generation college students, part-time students, older and from low to middle income socioeconomic statuses, may feel out of place with college. They may not want to impose upon faculty members’ time to interact with them or the students may not have the time due to their work schedule. Therefore, they miss out on an opportunity to engage in an activity that increases positive student outcomes. But when interaction is initiated by the educational practitioner, the non-traditional student has the opportunity to benefit from the student-faculty interaction. Rendon, Jalomo, and Nora found that a caring faculty member transformed the non-traditional
into powerful learners when he or she provided encouragement, supported them, and reassured the students in their ability to succeed (2000). Because of how students engage differently in the current practices of student-faculty interactions, it becomes more important for educational practitioners to intentionally engage in interactions with students both in and out of the classroom.

In contrast, many traditional students consider student-faculty interaction as a natural activity that students have the right to engage in. Traditional students, are typically middle to upper income status, full-time students, working part time or less, ages 18-24 (XXXXX, 2010, Rendón, 1994; Terenzini, Allison, Gregg, Jalomo, Millar, Rendón, & Upcraft, 1993; Jalomo, 1995). They tend to be more familiar with the college culture, how it works, and are aware of the expectations of being a college student as shaped by elite universities such as Harvard. When universities and colleges were being developed in the United States, students were from the elite, the rich, and the privileged. They were the best of the best. This paradigm of a student persisted through the years even as access to education began to change and as educational missions began to change. College is no longer only for the traditional student. The old student paradigm and the characteristics of the traditional student no longer represent a majority of the community college student body. Access to college has changed with proprietary university availability and with community colleges accepting the top 100%. So, students are coming in with different amounts of resources, capital, opportunities and knowledge. Yet, many educational practitioners still use the old student paradigm and believe that all students should know what to expect from college, how to maneuver through it, and understand the expectations of student-faculty interaction.
As a consequence of the different viewpoints of student-faculty interaction, the context of student-faculty interaction needs to be examined from the student’s perspective, from the faculty member’s perspective, and from the institution’s structural perspective making student-faculty interaction a three-way street. Rendon states that the role of the institution, not just of a professor, is to take an active role in encouraging, supporting, and reassuring students (Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). Again, institutions cannot take a passive role in student-faculty interaction. The institution needs to foster an environment that encourages and initiates interaction with students.

**Statement of the Problem**

Student-faculty interaction is a key element of student engagement which is linked to positive student outcomes; yet, many faculty members underestimate the impact of their interaction on students and consequently, have minimal student-faculty interaction. At the same time, students also underestimate the importance of interacting with faculty and choose not to interact with faculty. For example, while over XX% students believe that seeing a counselor is a valuable experience, only XX% actually see a counselor regularly (XX, XX). In addition, students are more interested in interacting with other students rather than with faculty (Anderson & Carta-Falsa, 2002). While some students are comfortable in college with approaching faculty and asking for help, many other students are not as comfortable. Not all students are familiar with college concepts and culture, let alone how to engage in student-faculty interaction. Therefore, understanding the students’ perspective of student-faculty interaction as well as the faculty’s perspective of student-faculty interaction is important to
examine so that we can determine the disconnect, if any, and implement changes in how student-faculty interaction is initiated.

**Significance of Study**

As educational practitioners, we are interested in the persistence of our students. We want to see our students move from semester to semester and gradually progress toward obtaining a certificate or degree. In order for these students to persist, they have to overcome a variety of obstacles such as financial costs of college, working full-time, raising a family, understanding the culture of college, facing their fears of not being smart enough, let alone the amount of work that is required for college (Cox, 2009). As these obstacles become more difficult, students begin to doubt their ability to handle their situations. They begin to doubt that the benefits of a degree will outweigh the amount of sacrifices that need to be made in attending college. While educational practitioners do not have control over outside circumstances of a student, practitioners do have control over whether or not he or she chooses to validate the student’s experience through student-faculty interaction.

Student-faculty interaction has been researched extensively and is shown to have positive effects on students. For non-traditional students, student-faculty interaction that validates a student’s experiences is shown to make a big difference in terms of persistence and retention of those students (Rendon, 1996). According to surveys about student-faculty interaction, interaction numbers are surprisingly low (XXX, 2010). Students often to not make the time to interact with faculty although they think the interaction if valuable (XXX, 2010). To complicate student-faculty interaction further, a majority of community college professors teach part-time while a significant amount of students also attend part-time creating more
barriers for meeting outside of class. Student-faculty interaction can make a significant impact on students, yet it is not occurring enough on our campuses. This research looks to examine the context of interactions between faculty and students outside of the classroom.

While student-faculty interaction has been researched both quantitatively and qualitatively from the student's perspective at the university level, student-faculty interaction has not been examined qualitatively from faculty's perspective at the community college level. Much of the research focuses only on student characteristics and behavior. Therefore, this study will provide useful insights about influencing student-faculty interaction at the community college level from both perspectives of students and faculty. This study has the potential to influence community college structures and practices in hopes of increasing student-faculty interactions while increasing persistence as well.

Purpose of Study

Current literature supports that student-faculty interaction is important and contributes to positive student outcomes, but little has been done by faculty, staff and administration to change the quality and quantity of interaction with students. Student-faculty interaction has remained relatively unchanged with a few exceptions of select programs that are unable to service the entire student population due to limitation of resources. I am interested in exposing faculty and student hindrances in student-faculty interaction.

The purpose of this study will be to understand and describe the context (what they want, what they expect, what they actually do, structural factors) of the different levels of interaction.
participation in student-faculty interaction for community college students and faculty using ground theory design resulting in a grounded theory of themes or patterns. At this stage in the research, I will be focusing on student-faculty interaction outside of class time, but including classroom related interactions and interactions with student services.

Research Questions

While much of the research on student-faculty interaction focuses on student perspectives, this research intends to focus on faculty perspectives and structural issues as well as student perspectives. This research is focusing on what is occurring between faculty and students in terms of student-faculty interaction. This research takes a look at what students and faculty expect and assume about student-faculty interaction, but it also takes the examination further by also looking at what the students and faculty actually do. What faculty do and think will also be analyzed to see which thoughts and actions promote or hinder student-faculty interaction, and which thoughts and actions match their own and each other’s thoughts and actions. And finally, each group will be asked about the context of the interaction or the lack of interaction. The research questions for this topic fall into three groups and include the following:

1. What theories/assumptions/perceptions about student-faculty interaction underlie how students and faculty interact with each other?

2. How do faculty and students engage in interaction with each other?

3. What promotes and deters student-faculty interaction?

Methodology
This study utilizes a qualitative methodology to examine student-faculty interactions. In order to understand the context of student-faculty interactions outside of the classroom from faculty’s perspective, individual interviews of faculty will be conducted. A sample will be drawn from a single community college in order to address the structure at the college. Statistics such as part-time, full-time, recognition for awards, discipline, and student service area will be taken into consideration when selecting faculty members.

In order to understand the students’ perceptions and assumptions, several focus groups will be conducted. The composition of the focus groups will also be intentionally selected to represent gender, various ethnic groups on campus, part-time and full-time students, socio-economic statuses, in addition to a variety of ages and abilities. Depending on the emerging theory, later focus groups may be divided by certain student characteristics.

Finally, to address the consistency of what is said and what is done, observations will be conducted in various student services areas such as counseling, tutoring labs, math and writing labs and the library. Observations of interviewed faculty will also be conducted before and after class time and during office hours.

Definitions of Terms

The following are the definition of terms used for this research.

*Student engagement.* “Represents the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities” (Kuh, 2001, 2003, 2009).


Positive student outcomes. These include factors that lead to academic success such as increased motivation, positive influence on attitudes, interests, and values, higher levels of effort, studying with others, speaking to counselors, higher GPAs, better perception of campus climate (Chang, 2005; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Cole, 2008; Cress, 2008; Rugutt & Chemosit, 2009; Thompson, 2001).

Validation. Actions relating to academics initiated by a faculty member, friend, or family member that foster student attitudes and behaviors that lead to academic development and validates the student as being capable of performing academic work (Rendon, 1994).

Non-traditional student. Students who are older, of lower socioeconomic status, attend part-time, are of an ethnic background that previously constrained them from participation, with inadequate preparation (Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

Traditional student. Students who are White, ages 18 to 22, attend college full-time, did not work, had few family responsibilities (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Student-faculty interaction. Formal and informal, and social versus academic interactions between students and faculty (professors, counselors, tutors, mentors) associated with personal, social, and intellectual outcomes.

Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations

In this study, the assumption is that the students and faculty have enough self-awareness to represent a true picture of what they actually think and do rather than representing a picture of what is politically correct to say and do. This study is delimited to
community college students and faculty. As for limitations, the sample for the focus groups and interviews may or may not be representative of the population because of the different characteristics I will be looking for in the sample participants. Also, because I will be looking for the most vocal participants, the vocal participants may or may not be representative of the population as a whole. There is a possibility that they may be the vocal minority.

**Role of Researcher**

As the researcher, I have a personal interest in the study because I work in student services and want to improve access and equity for all students. Secondly, my feelings about SFI is that it can be increased and changed for improvement. Because of this, I may code the data with blinders on because of my assumptions and closeness to the topic. I may be looking for answers that I want versus analyzing emerging themes. To combat this, I will triangulate the data by conducting repeat focus groups and by conducting observations and individual student interviews.

References