

Beyond the classroom: a case study of first-year student perceptions of required student-faculty conferences

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Abstract: Instructors of first-year students must understand that many of the frustrations they encounter with this demographic are a normal part of a transition process. Not only are first-year students asked to adjust to new academic demands, they also must learn how to live independently in a new environment. An effective way to facilitate academic development is to require conferences that: 1) address the student as a person within the first-year context, and 2) focus on course content and academic development. The former is initially prioritized over the latter to meet the specific needs of first-year students. In the fall semester of 2009, the author conducted a case study with three sections of Critical Writing, an interdisciplinary general education critical thinking and writing course. Students met with the instructor throughout the semester, and at the end of the course, they completed a 25-question in-class anonymous, multiple-choice survey to gauge their perceptions of the impact of required conferences on their academic experiences. The data show that students very clearly perceived the conferences as helpful for their learning and overall experience of the course.

Keywords: freshmen, first-year students, required conferences; student-faculty interaction, retention, transition, best practices, general education, office hours, engagement.

I. Introduction.

Often, when I tell new academic colleagues what I do and what I love – “I teach first-year general education” – I am met with groaning, exasperation, and frustration. They cringe, shrink back into themselves and commend me for having the patience to deal with students at the introductory level. Then, typically, they launch into dissertations about how unprepared first-year students are, how freshmen don’t or can’t read, how they demonstrate all the signs of academic apathy: tardiness, sleeping in class, cell phones, incomplete homework, poor grades. They stare in disbelief when I say that I truly love teaching freshmen, that I find it a highly rewarding experience filled with opportunities, and that really, when it comes down to it, I find it an honor and privilege.

First-year students are unique in that, although they have expectations about what their college experiences will be like – a blend of mythologies from the media, their friends, and their own desires – many of them have little to no experience with college life and are flabbergasted by the reality of their first year. As instructors of first-year students, we are able to help usher these students into our institutions, these foreign lands where many of them are on their own for the first time. We are able to witness their transformation from high-school teenagers to college students exploring their new lives. At the same time, we have to be careful – much of the

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discourse around first-year students is filled with all too romantic notions of transformation. We also need to be realistic about the unique challenges these students present. Students new to a university environment have a diversity of academic and non-academic obstacles to overcome, particularly in their first semester.

I have been teaching first-year writing in various capacities for the past nine years. To help address the specific needs of first-year students, I require two conferences during the semester and structure them into my syllabus and grading scale. My experience with Writing Center pedagogy has informed my desire to work one-on-one with students, but more anecdotally, in the years I have required conferences, I have found that, if I make a personal connection with students early on in the semester, they are more likely to return to office hours when they need help with course content. My two conferences are semi-structured. The first acts as an icebreaker, the second as personalized academic support.

In the fall semester of 2009, I conducted a case study with three sections of Critical Writing, an interdisciplinary general education critical thinking and writing course. Students met with me throughout the semester, and at the end of the course, they completed a 25-question in-class anonymous, multiple-choice survey to gauge their perceptions of the impact of required conferences on their experiences. The data show that my students very clearly perceived the conferences as helpful for their learning and overall experience of the course. Required conferences can be effective in any discipline and, although this paper specifically discusses first-year students, may be implemented at any level.

II. What we know.

Over and over the research shows that students find it meaningful to build relationships with faculty. Richard Light (2001), in *Making the Most Out of College*, reports that students “point out repeatedly that getting constructive, somewhat personalized advice might be the single most underestimated feature of a great college experience” and how “certain faculty members make a special difference in their lives” (p.5). In one of his studies, Light also found that four-fifths of students reported that the specific, critical moment that profoundly changed them happened outside the classroom (p.8). Similarly, the first principle in Chickering and Gamson’s (1987) highly referenced “Seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education” is contact between students and faculty. As these authors argue, “frequent student-faculty contact in and out of class is an important factor in student motivation and involvement. Knowing a few faculty members well enhances students’ intellectual commitment and encourages them to think about their own values and plans” (Chickering and Gamson, 1987).

Student-faculty interaction is most often manifest through academically common practices: collaboration on research projects, independent studies/special projects, departmental or university committees, student organizations, advisement, and office hours. For example, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) findings support high levels of student-faculty interaction. “Working with a professor on a research project or serving with faculty members on a college committee or community organization lets students see first-hand how experts identify and solve practical problems. Through such interactions teachers become role models, mentors, and guides for continuous, life-long learning” (NSSE, 2008).

Although such avenues are well traveled and can positively impact students, these interactions typically engage a certain type of student, one who is already prepared and committed to high academic engagement. Traditional practices of student-faculty interaction are

often seen as rewards and are actively sought after by high-achieving, engaged students. They are largely voluntary.

Requiring conferences for all students is an attempt to provide the opportunity for increased student-faculty interaction to all enrolled in the course, to mandate engagement for everyone. In the conferences, the students who sit in the back and avoid eye contact are required to chat about the class, their experiences, and what they need to improve the conditions for their learning. In an interview, John N. Gardner (2003), highlights mandatory interventions. He says:

“I think we’ve gotten too focused on treating them as independent adults and letting them sink or swim on their own...but the older I got, the more I realized that my students...were more likely to be successful if I made them do certain things. Once the students did them, they found out that they were helpful, and then they pursued them voluntarily. One of the things we’ve learned from the instrument *Your First College Year*...is that students recognize they need help and they report all kinds of stress, but do they go get the help? No, they don’t. A best practice would be to mandate student participation in more of these interventions” (p. 12).

Light (2001) reports that students who seem to grow most significantly in the higher education experience include interacting with faculty as one contributing factor; however, they also report that this interaction is difficult because it doesn’t always come naturally (p. 10).

I’d bet most faculty hold office hours, but I’d also bet that overall, the number of students who attend are low – or at least until it’s nearly too late and the student’s learning (and grade) is in jeopardy. Seeking out faculty for help can be especially challenging for first-year students who might expect faculty to be unavailable, who might be intimidated by their professors, who might have poor time management skills and therefore do not make the effort of attending office hours, who might be overwhelmed with their transition into college life.

Tim Clydesdale (2007), author of *The First Year Out: Understanding American Teens After High School*, found that "most of the mainstream American teens [he] spoke with neither liberated themselves intellectually nor broadened themselves socially during their first year out." Rather, he discovered that what teens really focus on during their first year is basic daily life survival on their own, i.e. how to negotiate new friends, money, time management, dorm life. In other words, rather than experiencing the mind-blowing, life-changing class that reorients the student’s whole world view to an informed, academic one – the kind of experience we see in movies like *Wonder Boys* – students are occupied with worries about finishing their homework and getting to class on time when they need to replace the pre-paid cafeteria ID card they lost, not wanting to call home to tell their parents they need help, and all of this in the midst of a new group of friends, mere strangers.

This reality for first-year students is reflected in Upcraft and Gardner’s (1989) definition of freshman success. They “believe freshman succeed when then they make progress toward fulfilling their educational and personal goals: 1) developing academic and intellectual competence; 2) establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships, 3) developing an identity, 4) deciding on a career and life-style; 5) maintaining personal health and wellness; and 6) developing an integrated philosophy of life” (p.2). Telling is the fact that all but the first of Upcraft and Gardner’s goals focus on psycho-social personal growth of first-year students.

It is also worthy to tangentially note that student perceptions of such interactions can increase retention (O’Gara et al., 2009). Students who have that extra support feel more connected to the university and are motivated to do what it takes to remain in the institution.

Jaswal et al. (2008) note that “retention research shows that the earlier a student is connected to the social and academic systems of the college the greater their academic achievement and thus their commitment to graduating” (p. 55). Retention of freshmen not only benefits the students themselves, but also, from an administrative standpoint, benefits the entire institution.

III. Case Study.

As noted above, in the fall semester of 2009, I conducted a small case study with my three sections of Critical Writing, a critical thinking and writing course in the University Studies interdisciplinary general education core curriculum at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University (A&T). North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State University is a historically black university in Greensboro, NC known for our civil rights legacy, particularly for our A&T four – the four freshmen who refused to get up from the Woolworth’s whites-only lunch counter. Currently, our first-year students are 91% African American, 52% female, and largely from North Carolina at 78%. The average age of our first-year students is 20-years-old (Wabash, 2009). Although A&T first-year students fit the standard prototype for “freshmen,” (18-years-old, just out of high school, full-time students who reside on campus, attending a four year university), it should be noted that nationwide, “The student landscape is dotted with almost as many profiles as there are students, and our thinking about first year students should reflect their diversity...The average age is slightly over 25 (Ishler, 2005, p.17). Overall, first year students are diverse in age, class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, preparedness, etc. Our course objectives include critical writing and reading skills, effective communication, research, use of technology, assessment, and collaboration. As a required part of the curriculum, students meet with me twice during the semester for one-on-one meetings, the first at the very beginning of the course, and the second anytime thereafter. To gauge student perceptions of the impact of these meetings on their learning, I gave students an in-class anonymous multiple-choice survey, consisting of 25-questions.

A. Conference One.

The first required conference is a simple, friendly get-to-know-you meeting (unless the student wants to work on course content), and happens within the first two weeks of the semester. I bring a sign-up sheet to class and pass it around so students can sign up for a fifteen-minute conference. In this conference, I do not prioritize academic issues because I really just want to get to know my students. My objectives, made explicit, for the first conference are:

- To build trust with students by getting to know them on a personal level and allowing them to get to know me too (not only as faculty, but also as a “real” person);
- To be sure my students know where my office is and to tell them on a one-on-one level that I can and should be used as a resource;
- To be sure students understand the objectives of the course and to answer any questions they might have early on.

Although we as instructors, of course, want our students to develop in academic course content and process, it is critical that we recognize the fact that academics might be the last thing on their minds *and* that this is a normal part of transforming into college students. As professionals, we can help alleviate some of the burden of their transition and ultimately facilitate academic success.

A study done by Palmer et al. (2009) shows that many first-year students feel as if they don't belong at the university because they reside in a liminal "betwixt space" (between their home-space and the university-space) and that a variety of complex social-interpersonal interactions influence how well they transition more fully into the university space. One thing we can do as instructors is demystify the institution by giving the institution a human face, a kind of mentor or in-between figure to help them bridge the gap. Shanley and Johnston (2008) state that for first-semester college students, success is found not only in their organizational abilities and time management skills, but also in *knowing their professors* [my emphasis].

From my conversations during these meetings, I have discovered that first-year students typically expect two types of college professors: The hard-edged, unforgiving, stern professor, an immovable stone wall of knowledge and high expectations or the sloppy liberal-minded professor who doesn't take attendance, is slack with assignments, has fun and engaging lectures, and leaves class satisfied at her/his own brilliance. Both of these kinds of stereotypical professors do not demonstrate the care that freshmen need and ultimately desire. Both prioritize easy teaching and their own careers, and both unfortunately fail to demonstrate real concern for student learning and tend to represent a cold institution that sees students as numbers.

So, during the initial required conference, I offer them a different kind of professor. I start with personal, but not prying, questions about their college experiences so far. I ask questions like: How are you? How's the transition to college? From where did you move? What do your friends and family think about you being in college? What is your roommate like? What is your dorm like? What is the hardest thing you're dealing with now, and how can I help? Do you have a major? What classes are you really excited about?

I believe it is fair that while I ask students to disclose some personal information about themselves that I also share personal information about myself throughout the conference, although I am very intentional about not making the conference about me, my lessons, and my advice. This first conference is devoted to making sure my students feel that they have a voice, and that it will be heard. To close, I wrap it up by reiterating the objectives of the conference and ask if they have any questions about the course. And finally, I casually sum up our conversation to let my students know I have been listening and to help me solidify some of the individual details in my own mind.

B. Conference Two.

Students schedule the second conference themselves at any time during the rest of the semester. I have found that after my first conference, it is fairly easy to get most students to return. In fact, many of them come regularly both to work on assignments and to just say hi when they're in the building. Because the students themselves schedule these conferences, they tend to be spread out through the semester, so I do not have to set aside such a large amount of time at once. And, to help alleviate some of the time demand, I encourage students to simply come to my office hours, when I have time set aside for them anyway. The second conference tends to be around 30-minutes, like a typical Writing Center session.

For the second conference, my objectives are different. Rather than a personal conference just to get to know students, I focus on academic skills and strongly encourage them to bring in a course project to work on. (But, I do give them credit anyway if they just want to talk about something else.). In these conferences, I can explain things we discussed in class in a more tailored way to suit individual students. I can "personalize instruction" by having a more

interactive dialogue with them. I can ask more direct questions, allow more time for them to process, and focus our discussion more directly to their learning style. For example, if I know someone is a visual learner, we can sketch out an image, a diagram, or a graph together to elucidate concepts or make connections. Or, I can draw upon their specific interests, interests I began to learn about in the first conference, and use examples/analogies that make more sense to them as individuals. Most students find one-on-one help extremely enlightening; I can't describe how fun it is to witness students' light bulbs turn on, and how excited they become when they understand something in a new way.

C. Findings.

I have required conferences for years, assuming they made a difference, hoping the time I invested was actually worth it; however, until this past fall, I did not collect data. Although my case study is small, with only 52 participants, the findings are encouraging. Survey questions 1-3 provided logistical information: 78.8% met with me two or more times, with 34.5% meeting more than the requirement. During the conferences, students reported that they mostly worked on writing (88.5%), but also ranking high were their personal difficulties and/or student life (75%) and overall academic performance (73%). 48% reported discussing academic motivation, while 32% said they worked on general study skills. 78.9% of the conferences lasted between 10-30 minutes.

The rest of the survey data is included in the following table, but it is interesting to highlight some important content of the students' perception of the conferences. 92% of students believed the conferences helped them feel I cared about them as individuals. 71% believed the conferences helped them with reading and writing skills, so much so that 82% believed the course should continue to require conferences for this course. 88.4% agreed that, generally, first year courses should require at least one conference. These numbers are obviously high, which highlights the fact that over half agreed that they might not have met with me had the conferences *not* been mandatory. Students very clearly perceived the helpfulness of the conferences for their learning and overall experience of the course.

Table 1. Survey results for questions 4-25

Survey Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I feel that the required conferences were worth my time.	73.1%	21.2%	5.8%	0%	0%
In general, it is important to me that I know my instructors care about me as an individual.	78.8%	15.4%	5.8%	0%	0%
The conferences helped me feel my instructor cares about me as an individual.	67.3%	25%	4, 7.7%	0%	0%
The conferences helped me develop my writing skills.	25%	46.2%	19.2%	9.6%	0%
The conferences helped me develop my reading skills.	25%	46.2%	19.2%	9.6%	0%
The conferences helped me develop my study skills.	13.5%	26.9%	44.2%	15.4%	0%
The conferences helped me feel more comfortable participating in class than I otherwise would've felt.	15.4%	32.7%	40.4%	7.7%	3.8%
The conferences motivated me to stay on task and do my coursework.	26.9%	53.8%	13.5%	5.8%	0%
The conferences helped me understand course content I did not understand in class.	30.8%	34.6%	23.1%	9.6%	1.9%
The conferences helped me learn about other resources.	26.9%	36.5%	26.9%	9.6%	0%
The conferences helped me feel as though I am part of the A&T community.	11.5%	25%	46.2%	13.5%	1.9%
The amount of time I spent on homework for this course increased because of the conferences.	11.5%	30.8%	34.6%	19.2%	3.8%

During my conferences, I was able to ask questions that I would not have been able to ask during class time.	46.2%	38.5%	11.5%	3.8%	0%
The level of my engagement in the course materials increased because of my conferences.	17.3%	46.2%	28.8%	7.7%	0%
The conferences made me more comfortable approaching my other instructors in other courses.	21.2%	38.5%	26.9%	13.5%	0%
The conferences made me feel a sense of belonging at A&T.	11.5%	26.9%	51.9%	5.8%	3.8%
Student conferences in this course should continue to be required.	55.8%	26.9%	13.5%	1.9%	1.9%
My conferences made it more likely that I stay at A&T for another year.	23.1%	25%	23.1%	25%	3.8%
If conferences were not a requirement of the course, I might NOT Have met with my instructor.	21.2%	32.7%	19.2%	19.2%	7.7%
In general, first-year courses should require <i>at least</i> one conference.	59.6%	28.8%	4, 7.7%	1.9%	0%
I feel as though the conferences were an important part of my learning in this course.	28.8%	44.2%	15.4%	9.6%	0%
Overall, my conferences improved my experience at A&T.	19.2%	32.7%	36.5%	5.8%	3.8%

*Data was collected on 12/1/2009 from Beth Kaufka's fall 2009 sections of UNST 110 Critical Writing 014, 034, 036 from 52 respondents.

The degree to which my case study is generalizable is certainly questionable, largely due to my small sample size and my particular personality. Furthermore, this study only assesses students' perceptions of learning; the next step, then, is to investigate the correlation between student perceptions and actual student learning, in addition to other student-related issues such as engagement and retention. Note, however, that although this study itself may not be generalizable, the survey findings are consistent with the literature on engagement and retention, as cited in the literature discussed in this article. Either way, faculty should feel optimistic about this method of interacting with students, in addition to the more traditional avenues such as collaboration on research projects and serving on committees – and faculty should be encouraged to design more thorough studies of the impact of required student-faculty conferences on learning.

IV. Implementation Trouble Spots.

I'll be the first to admit required conferences are necessarily time-consuming, particularly the first round. Think about it. Let's say you have 25 students in a class, and you teach three sections of the course for a total of 75 students. Let's say you spend fifteen minutes with each student, this comes to nearly 19 hours without factoring in any breaks, any meetings that run over fifteen minutes, students forgetting to come, getting lost on their way to your office, or standing you up altogether. Depending on what you want your schedule to look like during the scheduled conferences, this can take an entire week or even two. You might factor in some kind of consequence for students who miss their first conference. I let students reschedule, but for only partial credit. I recommend you run through familiar lesson plans and schedule light grading during your week of scheduled conferences, in addition to scheduling around committee work; I've never had to cancel a class for conferences.

Another significant challenge with time comes from the fact that, after their first conference, after you demonstrate your capacity for support, many students will use your office hours. (Some of us tend to relish our un-used office hours as a time to get work done. There are certainly times that I do!). And outside of office hours, you'll find that your students pop in "just to say hi." You can also expect to write more letters of recommendation for internships, jobs, scholarships, and study abroad programs. This can be at once both an honor and a burden. (I have been a reference for nine students already this semester, and we are just half way through.)

One way to help manage time is to give your conferences some shape by defining your goals. You will probably have larger, overarching goals like helping students develop into self-regulated, self-motivated learners. But it is helpful to have specific conference goals, and to state those goals up front with students so they understand the intentions of the meeting. Do you want to focus only on course goals, for instance: clarifying the very first major assignment and helping students get started? Or do you want to provide motivation and inspiration? Encouragement? Consider, also, structure and amount of preparation. Do you want students to come with a completed assignment to discuss? Will you have a time limit, and how will you stick to it? Do you want to have a kind of script to ensure all students get the same kind of information and attention from you? Or, do you want to just roll with it and see where the conversations lead you? Whatever way, it is helpful to both you and your students to be clear about your objectives.

It is also critical that, despite how much you care about your students, you maintain high academic standards and hold them accountable to course policies. When students make bad choices, they must suffer through the consequences. If you are doing these conferences in an effective way, they actually help students understand that you will hold them accountable for their actions, and they will not resent you for doing so. In fact, effective conferences can mediate the burden because students should know your expectations of them. One of my students wrote in her end-of-semester reflection essay:

“The meetings gave me a better understanding of your expectations [my emphasis] and my mistakes. This only allowed us to build a connection with you as our teacher and in my opinion it showed me that you were a concerned teacher who was willing to listen to our problems, assist us, motivate us, and point us in the right direction. I guess this is why I looked forward to coming to class, because you were the first teacher to show support.”

And, these conferences help mitigate the accusation that “you just don’t like me” when there is a consequence for a poor academic choice. In fact, I have never had a student lodge that complaint with me.

V. Conclusion.

As discussed above, the research clearly shows that students value personal relationships with faculty, that good teaching and high quality interactions with faculty promote growth, and the more contact students have with their teachers, the better. In general, good undergraduate education teaching practice encourages high levels of student-faculty interaction. Required one-on-one student-faculty conferences can be an effective way to positively affect student learning.

Required conferences ultimately become very memorable moments for students. For me, they are critically important for setting the tone for the class and helping students feel cared about in a way that enhances their learning. They often tell me about this directly, and many of them write about it in their end of the semester reflections. They write in surprise that I *actually care about them*. I am always both happy and saddened that this conference means so much to them – happy that I have helped them in their overall experience of their first year, and saddened that they don’t feel cared about (or respected) in many of their other courses.

The data here suggest that required conferences help students get off to a good start, help facilitate in them an awareness of what kind of students they are, their learning styles, the particular challenges they have overcome or are still dealing with. I can help them understand themselves by listening to them and telling them what I think they are communicating: *It sounds*

like you are an auditory learner; It sounds like you're saying that you miss home; It sounds like you're saying you would be willing to get some tutoring. It is also nice that students can learn about you, too, which helps facilitate a relationship of mutual respect. I tell them about my children, about the kind of student I was/am, about my learning style and the subject areas and skills that I find difficult, how I overcome my own obstacles with writer's block, procrastination, time management, and stress.

Part of our job as first-year instructors is to put a real human face on our institutions. We have the responsibility of demystifying the university while simultaneously creating a feeling of respect for higher education and creating a realistic version of what it takes to be successful. This is all nice and good, but really, when I am honest with myself, my motivation is a selfish one. The impact on student learning is secondary to the kind of joy I experience getting to know a new group of unique, interesting, and fun students each and every semester. It helps take the work out of my work.

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