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Jörg Vianden

Kerri A. Smith

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*Article*

***Unfamiliar Territory: Faculty Discomfort about Interactions with Students During Out-of-Class Academic Initiatives***

Jörg Vianden, Ed.D.  
Assistant Professor, Student Affairs Administration in Higher Education  
University of Wisconsin-La Crosse

Kerri A. Smith  
Assistant Director for Residence Education, University Housing  
University of Arkansas

*A considerable body of research exists on successful student outcomes from interactions with faculty. When such interactions do not take place research often cites issues of student discomfort with faculty members in out-of-class situations as reasons. This qualitative study with eight faculty members at a Southern research institution explored these issues from the faculty perspective. Findings show that faculty may have a similar sense of discomfort about interacting with students outside of the classroom. This has direct implications for the work of student affairs professionals attempting to recruit faculty for co-curricular academic initiatives. The authors offer recommendations for student affairs practice.*

## Introduction

Meaningful interactions with faculty are fundamental to college student success. The body of research on student-faculty interaction is extensive including studies on the positive effects of out-of-class interactions on student outcomes, such as students' educational aspirations, their attitudes toward college, and their academic achievement (e.g., Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Beyond the student outcome literature, studies have investigated the quantity and quality of student-faculty contact emphasizing the importance of frequent and high-quality out of class contact with faculty (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004). Despite the positive effect on students, research indicates that the frequency of interactions beyond the classroom is strikingly limited (Cotten & Wilson, 2006; Vianden, 2009). The most recent data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (2010) show that the vast majority of first-year students at research universities indicate they interact with faculty "never" or "sometimes." From the faculty perspective, the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2010) overall findings suggest that the vast majority of faculty do not connect with undergraduate students for more than a few hours per week out of the classroom, specifically at research institutions. For example, 94% of research institution faculty spent between 0-8 hours per week on "other interactions with students outside of the classroom" (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2010, p. 8). What are the reasons for the lack of quantity and quality of these otherwise educationally purposeful interactions?

One possible explanation for the lack of interaction sought by students includes interpersonal factors that affect student-faculty interactions. Students are often anxious or

intimidated to seek out faculty beyond the classroom (Cotten & Wilson, 2006). In addition, students are often uncomfortable in large classrooms and are reluctant to participate in class discussions because of fear of sounding uninformed or unintelligent to the instructor or fellow students. When this is coupled with faculty members who seem less caring, students feel discouraged to engage in out-of-class visits (Vianden, 2009). Another reason for the lack of engagement of students with faculty outside of class may be a result of the relative shortsightedness of new college students; that is, they are more interested in seeking immediate academic help rather than seeing faculty as long-term contacts to assist beyond the current course (Cotten & Wilson, 2009).

A successful student experience is enhanced by a variety of co-curricular activities that contribute to their holistic development. This frequently takes place under the auspices of student affairs units, including residence life, student activities, new student orientation, and Greek life, who often seek the expertise of faculty members to improve their educational activities for students. The most recent theme issue of the *Journal of College and University Student Housing* edited by Benjamin and Vianden (2011) presents research with strong practical implications for faculty engagement in out-of-class activities, specifically in residence halls. However, such research so far has not addressed potential apprehensions or discomfort faculty may feel about engaging in this way with students.

This article grew out of a larger exploratory study at a Southern doctoral extensive institution on student-faculty interactions beyond the classroom from the faculty perspective. A particularly consistent and strong strand of data emerged from the study that reflected a salient level of faculty discomfort about interacting with students out-of-class. Student affairs administrators may be surprised to hear about these findings as faculty are generally not expected

to have such trepidations. Similarly, the researchers did not assume to find such a strong theme of faculty discomfort emerging from the data. As a result of the exploratory nature of the study and not anticipating these findings, the researchers present the results of the study before relevant literature is discussed. Recommendations for student affairs practice conclude the article.

### **Methods**

The researchers chose the design of a basic interpretive qualitative study (Merriam, 2002). Such a design is utilized when investigators are interested in exploring and understanding participants' perceptions. The depth interview (Miller & Crabtree, 2004) served as the method for data collection because the focus of the inquiry was relatively narrow and the respondents were part of a homogeneous group: faculty engaged in residential co-curricular initiatives at a research institution enrolling 15,000 undergraduates.

### **Sample**

Eight faculty members participated in the study, including five women and three men. The researchers knew all participants from working with them in residential academic initiatives. The sample represents about half of the faculty who were involved in residential education initiatives during the year the study took place. Both authors were residence life staff members tasked with the development of residential academic initiatives and efforts were just beginning to involve more faculty. The sample was representative of the total faculty population involved in residential academic initiatives at this institution – the balance between men and women, tenured, not-yet-tenured, and non-tenured instructors, as well as race or ethnicity was good both among the sample and the total faculty involved.

Even though all faculty were involved in the same residential operation, the sample provided maximum variation desirable of qualitative samples. The female faculty represented

the disciplines of accounting, chemistry, engineering, music, and nursing. The male participants represented the disciplines of animal science, English, and sociology. Further, the sample represented a wide variety of faculty ranks including two contracted instructors (accounting and chemistry), one non-tenure track assistant professor for research and extension (animal science), three tenured associate professors (engineering, music, and nursing), and two full professors with endowed chairs (English and sociology).

The participants' involvement in residential academic initiatives varied as well. The animal science faculty member served as the live-in faculty in residence. The accounting, engineering, music, nursing, and sociology faculty served as so-called faculty associates for thematic learning communities, leading 4-6 educational events per year and engaging students in reflective discussions about their learning. The chemistry instructor served as an instructor in a course-specific academic learning community. Finally, the English professor was involved in service learning activities with residential students and chaperoned student excursions sponsored by residence life staff.

## **Interviews**

After the local institutional review board approved the study, researchers invited the faculty to participate in interviews. Each interview lasted between 60 and 120 minutes and was audio-recorded. Researchers interviewed each participant once. One of the researchers conducted five interviews, while the other conducted the remaining three.

The researchers used prescriptive interview protocols asking each participant each of the questions to allow for consistency among responses. The interview protocol included five domains (general demographics; general faculty role; faculty culture; involvement in residence halls; and faculty recommendations for academic and student affairs professionals) and each

domain included between two and eight questions. For this article, the researchers used interview data primarily from two of the domains: faculty culture and involvement in residence halls. Sample interview questions from the faculty culture domain included, “Please describe how your department views faculty engagement in activities not directly tied to promotion and tenure, such as your engagement in residential programming?” and “How would you describe the differences that exist between faculty and student cultures on this campus?” Sample questions from the involvement domain included, “If you had to describe an ideal interaction outside of the classroom between a faculty member and a student, what would that look like?”, “What do faculty members gain from participating in residential education initiatives?” and “What do faculty members stand to lose from participating in residential education initiatives?” After the completion of each interview, the researchers transcribed each interview verbatim yielding 77 pages of single-spaced interview transcripts.

### **Data Analysis**

The researchers used traditional inductive methods (Merriam, 2002) to analyze the data. After reading the transcripts once, the themes of faculty discomfort around interactions with students became apparent. Subsequently, each researcher re-read and marked each interview transcript for meaningful passages reflecting this sense of anxiety. Consistency of analysis between the two researchers was high; both often marked the same interview passages. After this process, each interviewer established codes that seemed to unitize the data into larger chunks. After completing their individual coding processes, the researchers together combined codes into larger subcategories. Discrepancies among the researchers’ codes were resolved through comprehensive discussions.

First-level coding included constructs such as “faculty are careful around students,” “faculty fear of failure,” or “faculty discomfort outside area of expertise.” After deliberation of what codes could group together, the researchers categorized existing codes into larger themes. Consistent with qualitative methods, the larger themes are presented partially in the participants’ own words. These categories included (1) boundary issues - “I can’t be friends with students”; (2) student emotional issues - “I don’t provide counseling”; (3) unstructured out-of-class environments - “If you go over to the dorm, what are you going to do?”; (4) perceived student views of faculty - “I don’t like feeling rejected; and (5) student vs. faculty culture - “I felt uncomfortable because I didn’t fit.”

## **Findings**

### **Boundary Issues - “I can’t be friends with students.”**

The first theme emerged from faculty perceptions about establishing somewhat rigid boundaries between themselves and students. Specifically, faculty addressed being apprehensive about disclosing personal information to students, not confusing being friendly with being a friend, and remaining professional when interacting with students. In her interview the engineering professor provided insight into how faculty may perceive this issue: “I think some faculty cannot draw the appropriate line. They lose themselves in wanting to be the coolest, the best friend, [and] the most popular.”

The nursing professor discussed her watchfulness around students: “I’m very cautious with boundaries and self disclosure. I would not be the one that would know completely everything about the students.” Talking about drawing the line between friend and faculty, the sociology faculty member made clear that he “[does not] want to be anyone’s friend at the



student's level." The accounting instructor expressed anxiety when discussing what could happen when students misunderstood faculty as friends:

I'm just scared getting to know too much about [the students]. It's about their grade because they assume that you're going to take care of them if you're their friend, they don't have to work as hard.

Some faculty may fear manipulation by students regarding grading. Some participants perceived that faculty who appear friendly can be subject to students' attempts to ensure preferential treatment, regardless of work quality. This may lead some faculty members to adjust their behavior around students outside of class accordingly and it may impede potential interactions.

Discussing ideal contact with students, the engineering faculty member mentioned that she enjoys some informal contact with students; however, she also observed that even in those interactions, "I don't drag my personal life into it. I never say, 'Oh, [my husband] was such a jerk the other night.' You don't do that kind of stuff . . . I still play the role of Dr. Anne."

Underlining the difficulty faculty may have in connecting meaningfully with students the accounting instructor discussed her role in residence hall programming: "To do these residence hall programs you have to kind of let down your guard a little and be a real person and that's a challenge." The metaphor embedded in this statement illustrates that some faculty may feel forced to open up to connect with students, which may produce anxiety for those engaged in co-curricular initiatives.

### **Student Emotional Issues – "I don't provide counseling."**

The second theme emerged from participant apprehensions about dealing with student emotional issues beyond the classroom. The sociology faculty member asserted his willingness to help students with these concerns, "But I don't need or want a student spending an

extraordinary amount of time with me as they relay their personal struggles.” The music professor underscored this by discussing general faculty culture: “We don’t particularly have a culture where students feel free to talk to faculty about other issues in their life. Our faculty . . . don’t know what to do with a crying student in their office. It makes them very uncomfortable.”

Several of the participants indicated a lack of faculty training to successfully deal with student emotional issues. The accounting instructor who served as faculty advisor to a sorority talked about her qualms helping women with emotional concerns: “The people in the sorority would have meltdowns over class issues, teachers, and it just became something I did not feel like I was qualified to handle.” The chemistry instructor discussed the issue of training in detail:

And I think faculty sometimes don’t choose to engage in [emotional topics] because they don’t know who to call and when they are first oriented to this campus really don’t hear about the resources . . . I have had colleagues come in, “a student wrote *this* [in a paper]. What am I supposed to do with that?”

Granted, the co-curricular life of students is not fraught with daily emotional emergencies but faculty may anticipate such issues as they enter the living or co-curricular spaces of college students. This may prevent them from engaging in such activities from the start.

### **Unstructured Environments – “If you go over to the dorm, what are you going to do?”**

The third theme of faculty discomfort with student interactions reflected faculty apprehensions about unstructured environments. Although only the sociology and chemistry faculty addressed these issues in detail, the data were salient and identified concerns other faculty may have about informal or social situations with students. The sociology faculty member noted that residential programming needed to be organized around an academic theme:

[Academics is] what I want to pull people into. We could talk about what [outside of class]? [laughs] You know, what are we going to talk about? I see 5 or 10 minutes maybe of a conversation with an undergraduate student and then things start shutting down. I don't see that as particularly engaging.

He added that if students and faculty were going to interact purely informally outside of class, these activities “need to have at least a shred of structure to them.” The chemistry instructor explained specifically how the culture of residence halls can make faculty uncomfortable:

[For instance] faculty will be invited to go to Palmetto Hall [name changed] for something. They get there, and they don't know how to get in the [locked] building . . . and they are getting uncomfortable already. Or they end up in a room with a bunch of students, but nothing is laid out [and] “we're just going to make chit-chat?” They are so used to something more formalized. [The residence hall] is an entirely different environment for the faculty.”

In addition, she noted that faculty perceive student affairs professionals as very comfortable and natural in interacting with students in unstructured settings, “but faculty are not.” These findings hold critical implications for student affairs professionals who utilize faculty members for co-curricular learning opportunities – being aware of what faculty members may prefer in terms of structure of the activity is a key to success.

### **Student vs. Faculty Culture – “I felt uncomfortable because I didn't fit.”**

The fourth theme reflected the participants' perceptions of not fitting into the student culture. Comparing himself to students who seemed more open and outgoing with one another, the animal scientist commented: “I find it inappropriate to just ask [a student] ‘can I sit down here?’ So I wait until they come or may not come [to sit with me in the dining hall].” As the

faculty in residence, the animal science faculty member was encouraged to eat daily in the dining hall which led to some anxiety about approaching students. He also discussed his discomfort with informal interactions with students on a spring break trip he chaperoned: “Because [the students] were undergrads I didn’t really know how to interact . . . so I try to push myself and somehow you cheat on yourself because you think ‘yeah I can do that’ and then it doesn’t work out.” The engineering faculty member likened some of her experiences with out-of-class interactions with students to a party situation:

So, I think [faculty] almost [have] a fear there. It’s like . . . you are going to a party and you don’t know anybody. You don’t know how you’re going to fit in. It’s like going to a banquet, you are going to be assigned a table, you don’t know who you’re going to sit with, what their background is, their ages, what they do for a living. And, are you going to be the dork at the table that lays the verbal turds in the punchbowl?

Explaining why faculty, especially in engineering, may feel uneasy about social interactions with students beyond the classroom, the engineer elaborated on how faculty trained to be researchers are not always well-equipped to handle ambiguous social situations because of the time these faculty spend alone on research activities. Such issues may be virtually unexpected by student affairs administrators. However, anticipating faculty anxiety in similar situations allows the professional to head off potential difficulties experienced in faculty participation in co-curricular activities.

### **Perceived Student Views of Faculty – “I don’t like feeling rejected.”**

The final theme was very consistent. Most of the participants addressed discomfort about potentially feeling rejected by students in co-curricular settings. For example, the word “scary” featured prominently in the accounting instructor’s points about how students may perceive her

beyond her area of expertise: “You have to convince faculty that students aren’t scary. I think for me, like to do something that wasn’t related to business was scary. It was scary to do something that you never taught before.”

Student attendance at faculty-led events was a potential source of anxiety. The engineering professor discussed apprehension about what low turnout may signal to a faculty member: “It is almost a personal slam to them, ‘so I am not very interesting?’ [*said more slowly as if to show sadness*].” The English professor discussed a perceived sense of failure may trouble faculty. He stated that faculty could be very uncomfortable if they thought students were questioning the professor’s academic training and expertise in an out-of-class activity: “If a faculty member is concerned that a student might see that the emperor has no clothes that could be a loss.” Implied herein are action steps for student affairs administrators to ensure faculty know what to expect from a student audience in a co-curricular setting, and to ensure students know what expertise the faculty member provides.

In summary, the findings show that participants spent time thinking about how to create mutually-beneficial interactions with students outside of class. However, the data also reveal several issues of discomfort faculty have about co-curricular spaces and potential interactions with students in out-of-class environments.

### **Relevant Literature and Discussion**

As the findings show, several inhibitors of successful faculty engagement in co-curricular initiatives with college students exist. To engage faculty in these academic initiatives is already a difficult endeavor given the time and effort they spend preparing for courses, conducting and disseminating research, as well as engaging in institutional, regional, and national service. Potential feelings of discomfort about such engagement compound this problem. Concerns

related to personal and professional boundaries, lack of cultural fit or structure, students' lack of interest or perceptions about faculty expertise can send powerful signals to academics that out-of-class academic activities with students are to be strictly avoided. This is likely unanticipated yet instrumental knowledge for student affairs professionals who aim to collaborate with faculty.

As mentioned above, little to no research exists discussing potential discomfort of faculty members with students in out-of-class scenarios; yet, relevant studies can be drawn from the scholarship on faculty anxiety about general faculty work including teaching, grading, or promotion and tenure proceedings. Our results about boundary issues confirm Sturgeon and Walker's (2009) findings on faculty Facebook use - nearly three-fourths of the participants indicated concerns about the balance between teacher and friend to students. Generally, faculty perceived that social media were contributing to a blurring of the line between friend and teacher. Faculty did not want to be seen as equals among students and anticipated anxiety deciding whether to friend students on facebook.

In another study on boundary issues between teachers and students, Owen and Zwahr-Castro (2007) indicated that faculty derive a sense of anxiety from being perceived as having dual relationships with students (personal and professional). This caused discomfort about losing a sense of objectivity needed in teaching and assessing students. Similar findings emerged in the present study when faculty addressed feeling uncomfortable about gauging personal versus professional relationships with students and fearing student manipulation for preferential treatment. Based on this result it may serve student affairs professionals well to discuss potential boundary issues prior to faculty engagement in co-curricular activities.

Hartney (2007) indicated that faculty are often concerned students may be upset about criticism or poor grades. Participants in the Hartney study further noted feeling emotional about

fear of conflict with students and feeling angry at students' response to faculty feedback. Masking emotions was a strong theme among Hartney's participants: faculty felt they had to conceal their own emotions in class to remain credible in the eyes of students or to not portray vulnerability. This masking added to instructor stress about teaching and connecting with students. Hartney's findings are confirmed in the present study considering discomfort faculty perceived about opening up to students inside the classroom and about remaining professional at all times. This implies the need to help faculty understand how to deal with students seeming unengaged or critical of co-curricular activities with faculty. Specifically in activity structures where out-of-class events with faculty are required of students, faculty must be advised about how students may feel about having to attend.

New faculty report a sense of discomfort from unknown or unclear expectations in teaching, promotion, and tenure issues (Eddy & Gaston-Gayles, 2008). Participants in the study explained that addressing a class full of students for the first time and not knowing how to fill a 3-hour lesson were daunting tasks. Moreover, the authors suggested that new faculty need intentional support and structure to reduce stress in their faculty roles. This directly translates into the co-curricular involvement that seemed to create anxiety among our participants. Much like new faculty need to be oriented about what it means to be a new teacher or researcher, student affairs professionals need to be aware of the potential training or orientation needs of faculty participating in out-of-class activities.

### **Recommendations**

To assist faculty who may be inhibited to participate in co-curricular activities, student affairs staff need to convey specific information about what roles they would like faculty to play in the activity or event. For example, if a movie night and subsequent discussion is planned by

residence life professionals, faculty should know exactly how long the discussion will take, who will be facilitating the discussion, what role the student affairs staff members will be playing, and what the faculty member should prepare. This specific outline of the program will help the professor gain a better understanding of what to expect when they arrive for the event and lessen potential anxieties. Some faculty may be totally comfortable with less structure and fly by the proverbial seat of their pants; however, we suggest erring on the side of caution. In addition, focusing on academic components rather than informal conversation (Cotten & Wilson, 2006) can help assuage faculty apprehension surrounding a lack of structure and peak their commitment because of the focus on academic rather than social components of the activity. The researchers propose that not all informal interactions between students and faculty should be avoided; however, even these events need structure.

Third, student affairs professionals should schedule activities in a location familiar to the faculty member. For example, taking students to a music faculty's studio for a listening session followed by conversations about music's influence on society may make the faculty member more comfortable than if a similar event took place in the student union or a lounge in a residence hall. It might also be more interesting for the student to see a lab or studio rather than a public space in a facility they frequent daily. If an event is occurring in a residence hall, it is important to designate a staff member to meet the faculty member and see them through the duration of the event. Student affairs staff should be specifically trained on how to "chaperone" faculty members this way. In speaking with the interviewer who had assisted the accounting instructor with a specific residence hall program, she expressed how appreciative she was of the in-person help:



You did help me because I was very afraid to do those programs and after the first one I knew it was going to be OK because you stayed there and kind of like just made sure things got started and then [in the end you] came back. I didn't feel completely alone.

Next, faculty who may worry about attendance numbers and level of engagement of students should be assisted by student affairs professionals who recruit students to attend and who provide both undergraduate and professional staff to help facilitate discussion. By utilizing undergraduate student leaders (e.g., RAs, Orientation Leaders, Multicultural Assistants) who know and can engage the audience, the level of participation may be higher than simply relying on the faculty member to initiate and sustain discussion. This takes time, effort, and coordination on the part of the student affairs professional.

The potential concern about faculty being perceived as being real, too friendly, or blurring professional boundaries should be addressed by meeting with faculty throughout the semester to instruct them about what to expect in the co-curricular environment and what is needed in terms of faculty behavior. Such discussions are of mutual benefit because they serve as relationship-builders and expectation-setters for student affairs professionals and faculty and alleviate situations where boundaries may be in question. Overall, training for undergraduate, graduate, and professional staff on how to work with faculty engaged in co-curricular activities is imperative to head off some of these concerns. Student affairs professionals who understand potential faculty trepidations will build stronger partnerships and develop engaging programming to assist with student learning outside of the classroom.

Finally, one last recommendation the authors endorse student affairs professionals may only partially affect. This research laid bare that faculty who wish to interact with students outside of the classroom must step out of their comfort zone. Specifically at research institutions

this zone commonly exists in “safe” activities in research and teaching. If not all academic departments at a given institution engage in training their faculty on strategies for out-of-class interactions with students, we advocate that residence life departments train all the faculty engaged in residential academic initiatives. Training by residence life professionals will help faculty overcome the trepidations and provide specific strategies for how to interact with students.

### **Limitations**

This study had two definite limitations. First, the sample included a small number of faculty at a single Southern research institution. Although findings were salient, generalization should be cautioned as results may only reflect the perceptions of faculty at similar institutions in similar locations. To assume that most faculty at most institutions show discomfort about interacting with students outside of class would be an overstatement. If the study were replicated at a teaching-focused comprehensive institution or liberal arts college the results would likely be very different.

The study is further limited by including only participants who were already engaged in residential academic initiatives at the research site. As a result, the sample is biased by the self-selection of faculty who enthusiastically participate in co-curricular events with students. Including faculty not yet involved may have strengthened the findings or at least provided more varied perspectives.

### **Suggestions for Further Research and Conclusions**

This study discovered surprising yet instructive results. Student affairs professionals do not readily assume that faculty may be uncomfortable about interacting with students outside of class. Due to their daily interactions with students teaching and advising we may overestimate

professors' level of comfort in situations in which faculty may struggle with boundary issues, in which they may not see themselves as experts, or in which they may be confronted with student life concerns. If it is true that faculty make decisions about whether to engage in out-of-class events based partially on emotional factors, most student affairs professionals will continue to struggle engaging faculty in the co-curricular education of students. This discovery calls for more research.

Future quantitative studies should employ larger samples of faculty from a variety of disciplines, ranks, and institutions. Such studies could employ random sampling strategies to enable statistical inferences about faculty engagement and to suggest more generalizability. The development of a theory or theoretical model of faculty out-of-class engagement is a worthy undertaking because such theoretical models do not exist. Employing qualitative methodologies in studies of faculty co-curricular engagement should continue to explore and understand faculty lived experiences but also assist in theory building, specifically when using grounded theory or critical incident technique methodologies.

Regardless of the chosen methodology or size of sample, research on student-faculty out-of-class interactions from the faculty perspective is only just beginning. This study was one of the first to explore how faculty members show discomfort about interacting with students outside of the classroom, which may be a salient reason for them not to consider such engagement in the first place. Unanswered questions remain about how to effectively recruit faculty to engage in academic initiatives organized by student affairs professionals. This should motivate us to continue to study this phenomenon. Student affairs professionals and faculty alike will benefit from practices based on empirical studies of faculty perceptions of out-of-class student learning and development.

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