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Are office hours obsolete?

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ABSTRACT

Office hours are a higher-education tradition. Unchanged for past-decades, the upheaval due to the COVID pandemic, transitioned office hours in many institutions from face-to-face to virtual and other formats. Historically office hours are a resource underused by students. Faculty-student interactions are considered a high-impact activity aimed at promoting student success. One purpose of office hours is to increase student access to faculty. It is time to revitalize and revamp this tradition. Increasing student engagement, clarifying course requirements, and role modeling professional behavior are potential goals for office hours and student-faculty interactions. To meet these goals, faculty will need to undertake activities that are much more active than the typical passive activity of office hours.

Key Words: Office hours, Student engagement, High-impact activity, Faculty-student interaction

1. INTRODUCTION

Institutional requirements for office hours are a component of faculty academic life in establishments of higher education. Due to the health crisis with the novel Covid-19 virus, the institutional resource has undergone a dramatic make-over. Faculty passively waiting in their offices for students to use the time selectively set aside is morphed into virtual hours with much of the same results as face-to-face office hours. Before changes brought about by COVID, students infrequently or rarely took advantage of faculty office hours.[1] Sadly, the underuse of office hours is exaggerated in underrepresented students. Students underrepresented on college campuses (those with disadvantaged backgrounds, first-time college students, and students from historically underrepresented racial/ethnic groups) traditionally need support in identifying promotive factors, assets, and resources that foster academic achievement.[2] Faculty-student interactions are a resources students could utilize to ensure academic success.

Studies have reported that faculty-student interactions are essential for student engagement, academic success, and professional development.[1, 3] Academic institutions often mandate computations to determine the number of office hours required by faculty. The rationale for office hours is to promote faculty-student interactions, thereby, fostering student success. It is questionable whether this is achieved with the current structure of office hours. Speculation if the academic environment will return to pre-COVID conditions, is yet to be answered; however, it is clear that revolutionary changes need to be made on academic office hours to enhance student success.

2. BACKGROUND

According to the National Student Engagement Survey,[4] student-faculty interactions are high-impact practices. Specific interactions between faculty and students considered high-impact include discussing career plans with faculty, working on activities other than coursework with faculty, discussing other topics outside of class, and discussing the student's academic performance.[4] Joyce[5] reported stu-

dents rarely attending office hours and avoiding out-of-class interactions. There are multiple reasons students have for avoiding office hours.

A project conducted at a university required students to make an appointment with their professor and summarize expectations before meeting and reflections after the meeting.[6] Students expressed fear, a desire not to bother the professor, nervousness, and intimidation. These feelings are enhanced in underrepresented students and those who would greatly benefit from using faculty office hours. Reflections after the experience included the meetings were helpful, improved understanding of expectations and coursework, were pleasant experiences, and provided career guidance.

Student-faculty interactions during office hours provide much more than the dissemination of course requirements and expectations. It is an opportunity for students to practice interpersonal and professional skills prior to entering the workforce.[3] Jackson and Knupsky[7] highlight office hours as a prime-time to enhance relationship-building with the student, potentially leading to future collaboration opportunities. In addition, positive relationships between faculty and students personalize the educational experience and promote student success.[7] Amidst the COVID pandemic, retention of students is a priority. It is time to take a closer look at how faculty engage with students.

3. IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

3.1 Implication for students

Students asked to participate in activities in addition to typical classroom activities often ask, "what's in it for me?" Evidence has shown that de-motivated students in the classroom will be less likely to engage in other resources offered.[8] This suggests that merely changing office hours from face-to-face to virtual will do little to increase student use of this resource.[9] Benefits from faculty-student interactions are numerous, and students need to be cognizant of these benefits. Framing office hours or contact sessions as candidly beneficial, with a straightforward elucidation of attendance advantages, may increase student participation.

Students are more multigenerational now than before; however, the majority are classified as millennials and generation Z. Characteristics of these generations are parenting techniques called "helicopter parents." Students of this generation are accustomed to high levels of guidance, oversight, high use of technology, coupled with desires to interact with peers in collaborative ways.[8] Manipulating generational predispositions' physiognomies will increase the high-impact strategy of faculty-student interaction. Successful engagement of students through faculty-student contact requires fluidity in

strategies and educational culture.

3.2 Implication for faculty

Expectations of students have changed. Whether advances in technology stimulated change, changes in the way we live, or generational differences of students, it is clear that traditional office hours are underused and not accomplishing what they are intended to accomplish. Students are learning in a 24/7, technology-driven environment. Attempts at promoting faculty-student interactions need to acknowledge and respect the current environment and generational expectations. Restrictive rules, such as selective office hours only, are not aligned with current learners' expectations.

Active, innovative, and creative practices that encourage faculty-student interactions should be encouraged and supported. One single approach is doomed to fail. Academic institutions should align requirements for office-hours with the expectations of students. For example, meaningful student contact is higher-impact than faculty waiting in an office for students to show up. There is a need to align academic institutional requirements with student expectations and challenge faculty to increase student contact activities.

Studies have shown that redefining spaces, from typical office settings to public places where students congregate, increase interactions and decreases social distance between faculty and students.[3] Brown bag lunches and mentoring sessions, chat rooms, use of social networking sites offer many innovative methods for faculty to connect with students. Whether face-to-face or virtual, office hours are a passive method to interact with students. The time has come to utilize active methods to engage and interact. Creative approaches such as coffee-time, setting aside time to "catch" students before or after class, offering meet-and-greets, and increasing faculty visibility are just a few active approaches to achieving more meaningful interactions with students.

3.3 Faculty recommendations

To better prepare professionals for the future, faculty must be open to change. Ask students what his or her preferences are for meeting outside the classroom. Demonstrating a willingness to meet with students will spark ideas and creative conduits to ensure the meetings are attended and beneficial for both the student and the faculty member. Understanding that underrepresented students take extra effort on the part of the faculty to reach can assure that this group of students will make use of the valuable resource of student-faculty interactions outside the classroom. Mentor-type relationships, even if only for the duration of the course, were found to decrease psychological distress and promote successful adjustment particularly in underrepresented students.[2] This is another

avenue to promote student-faculty interactions.

There is an assortment of activities and ideas that can be cultivated into successful student-faculty interaction opportunities. Faculty should consider making use of areas where students congregate as opportunities for interactions. Locations such as lounges, areas outside classrooms, lunch areas, break rooms, meeting spaces in the library, and bookstores are ideal locations to meet with students in a less threatening environment. Offering book clubs, focus study sessions, avenues for the voicing of "anonymous' student questions/concerns are additional ideas to create an environment for open engagement with students.

4. CONCLUSION

Faculty office hours have been a component of academic life for decades. The rationale behind office hours is noble; however, the time has come to revamp and revitalize. Unchanged for past-decades, the upheaval due to the COVID pandemic forced changes in office hours' structure. His-

torically office hours are a resource underused by students. Faculty-student interactions are considered a high-impact activity aimed at promoting student success. Increasing student engagement, clarifying course requirements, and role modeling professional behavior are potential goals for office hours/student-faculty interactions. To meet these goals, faculty will need to undertake activities that are much more active than the typical passive activity of office hours.

Office hours are not just another requirement for faculty to check off the "to-do" list. Purposeful contact with students increases both faculty and student satisfaction. One strategy or method will not meet the needs of all students. Diverse endeavors are more inclusive and may improve student access to faculty, particularly with underrepresented students. Planned activities designed to promote faculty-student contact can increase student success and better prepare students for their chosen careers.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST DISCLOSURE
The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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