Exclusion and Inclusion in Student-Faculty Informal Interaction: A Critical Perspective

Laurie Mook
University of Alberta, Canada

Introduction

The impact of student-faculty interaction on higher education students has been the object of countless studies and journal articles. Study after study has confirmed the hypothesis that a close student-faculty relationship positively affects academic achievement, occupational decisions, educational aspirations, institutional persistence, intellectual and personal development, academic and non-academic satisfaction, and attitudes toward college (Kwong, 1991; Lamport, 1993; Moore, Lovell, McGann, & Wyrick, 1998; Nagda, Gregerman, Jonides, von Hippel, & Lerner, 1998; Pascarella, 1980; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Romanski, 1987)[1]. However, in spite of their important contributions to the field, most of these studies fail to sufficiently address student-faculty interaction in the broader context of class, race and gender inequalities. At the same time, the critical literature on the role of educational institutions in reproducing and reinforcing social inequalities (e.g. Anyon, 1980; Bourdieu, 1986; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Contenta, 1993; Hurn, 1985; Oakes, 1985; Rist, 1970; Sadker & Sadker, 1994) has paid little attention to student-faculty interaction outside of the classroom, particularly at the post-secondary level.

Building on these two bodies of scholarship, this article explores informal student-faculty interaction with respect to participation rates of different undergraduate student groups. Using U.S. national data collected by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), the study shows that different groups of students interact with faculty at different rates and in different ways[2]. The study finds that, in a self-perpetuating cycle, students who are more likely to be successful in university (for example with those with high positive self-concepts), are also the students who have a high frequency of interactions with faculty, increasing their chances of academic success even further and strengthening their structural position of advantage. Students with low self-concept and other groups who are more at risk, are more often non- or low-interactors. This paper begins by briefly examining the ideas that were used to guide the study, and then describes its methods and findings. It concludes with a discussion of the implications for institutions of higher education, faculty and students.

Theoretical Framework

Critical theories of education, particularly those focusing on dynamics of reproduction, put forth the argument that educational institutions, through formal and informal policies and practices, tend to reinforce socio-economic structures of domination. These dynamics of reproduction include situations where teachers' expectations of students are based on criteria other than real ability; situations where certain groups are treated differently in terms of attention, teaching styles and counseling; and situations where some students benefit from a structural position of advantage because of socio-economic class, having more access to books, computers and cultural activities as well as a class-based system of beliefs that facilitates taking advantage of school opportunities. Critical

theory also examines why certain groups are more socially mobile than others, for example through looking at access to resources that are necessary to enhance one's knowledge, how a particular type of knowledge creates a particular type of status group, and how social collectivities try to maximize advantages by restricting access to resources and opportunities to a select few (Parkin, 1979, in Vieira, 1996).

Research on classroom interaction suggests a correlation between teachers' expectations of students' performance and students' actual performance. The classic study of this phenomenon, also known as 'self-fulfilling prophecy,' is that of Rosenthal & Jacobson (1968). In this study, teachers were told that certain elementary students were expected to "bloom" that year, although unknown to the teachers, the students were chosen at random. Students were tested at the beginning and end of the year, and the "bloomers" performed significantly better than the unlabeled group. Testing of students in higher education also resulted in equally significant gains when instructors had high expectations (Eden, 1990). Current studies argue that self-fulfilling prophecies are stronger for certain groups, especially African American students, students with low socio-economic status, low achievers, those with low self-concepts, students in a new environment (such as those entering elementary or middle school), new military trainees, or in situations where the teacher did not know the student well, such as at the beginning of the school year (Madon, Jussim, & Eccles, 1997; Smith, Jussim, & Eccles, 1999).

In a formative study, Rist (1970) observed kindergarten, first and second grade children in a poor, black, urban school, to determine how teachers decided their students' academic potential. He found that judgments made about the academic ability of the children (and the "tracks" in which they were placed) were based not on their real abilities, but rather on non-academic characteristics such as the child's physical appearance, interactive behavior, use of language, and known social status. Indeed, the teacher placed students in three seating arrangements that corresponded to their expected performance. Once students were labeled, a self-fulfilling prophecy began to operate, and performances met expectations; students who were placed in the fast group and expected to do well, performed at a high level, and students who were placed in the slow groups performed at the expected slow level. Moreover, this was not a temporary situation. The placement arranged by the kindergarten teacher continued throughout elementary school. Regardless of their ability, children who were placed in the lower group and labeled as 'slow learners' were likely to stay there for the rest of their educational careers. Similarly, Oakes (1985) found that the intelligent quotient (IQ) scores of senior high school students decreased after they were put in lower streams. This is even more significant when the connection between track placements and student background characteristics is considered; poor and minority students were disproportionately placed in low-ability or non-college-bound tracks, and were under-represented in programs for the gifted and talented (Oakes, 1986). One explanation of why it is difficult for those placed in low tracks or labeled as slow learners to increase social mobility is provided by Madon et al. (1997, p. 805): "research shows that, in comparison to lows, teachers interact more with highs, are friendlier to highs, prepare more for highs, and provide highs with greater opportunity to learn and display knowledge."

Teacher expectations were also studied by Sadker & Sadker (1994). In their research they found that teachers were more likely to call on boys than on girls, and to take more time responding to a question from a boy than from a girl. Interestingly, girls were equal to boys in terms of academic achievement and psychological health in the early years of schooling. However, by the end of high school, girls were lower in both achievement and self-esteem. Girls also performed lower on standardized college entrance examinations (for example the Scholastic Aptitude Test [SAT]), which then led to lower numbers of scholarships and career opportunities. Sadker & Sadker thus argued that girls do not receive the same educational opportunity as boys in the classroom.

Expectations are also related to an individual's self-concept. Shavelson, Hubner, and Stanton (1976) report that self-concept develops early in life, is particularly influenced by environmental reinforcements and significant others (such as parents and teachers), and is altered very little over the course of time. Although general self-concept has been found to be quite stable, self-concept in specific areas (such as in individual subject areas) has been found to vary. In these cases, studies have also found that if a change in self-perception does occur, it also tends to result in a change in performance (Johnson, 1981; Lecky, 1945). In a classic study analyzing spelling abilities, Lecky (1945) noticed that some children made the same number of spelling errors per page regardless of the difficulty of the words they were asked to spell. He also found that by changing their self-perception, their spelling performance improved. Thus, he surmised that students' level of achievement may be related to the perception of their abilities as learners.

Research on self-concepts has shown that the relationship between students' academic achievement and self-concept of ability, especially academic self-concept, is moderately strong (Hamachek, 1995). Although there has been some debate about which comes first, self-concept or achievement, the studies show that one mutually reinforces the other, and that their relationship is "dynamically interactive and reciprocal" (Hamachek, 1995, p. 420). In a review of research, Hamachek (1995) found that those with a positive self-concept and who were doing well academically tended to feel more motivated, were more assertive, took more risks, set realistic reachable goals, were task-persistent, took school work seriously, were able to work independently, had a high degree of curiosity, preferred challenging school work, and were intrinsically motivated to do well in school. Interestingly, research has also found that elementary and high school students with higher self-concepts tended to see their success as a factor of ability, and failure as due to bad luck, or lack of effort. Conversely, students with a lower self-concept perceived the inverse: success was equated with good luck, and failure with lack of ability (Hamachek, 1995).

At the systemic level, studies analyzing the impact of social class and parental education on educational attainment have found that offspring of parents with higher class status and higher levels of education do better academically than those in lower classes or with lower education levels (Arellano & Padilla, 1996; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Egerton, 1997; Nakhaie & Curtis, 1998). One explanation for this advantage is that those in higher status groups have higher 'cultural capital.'

Three types of 'cultural capital' are distinguished by Bourdieu (1986, p. 243): (1) embodied, which refers to "long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body;" (2)

objectified, for example material goods such as books, computers, and art; and (3) institutionalized, as in the form of educational qualifications. Cultural capital arises from a combination of economic capital and "the intervention of habitus, as a socially constituted cognitive capacity" (Bourdieu, 1986, n.3, p. 255). Economic capital enables the accumulation of cultural capital by facilitating the purchase of services or material goods, which allow for an "increased volume of useful time" (n. 20, p. 258), and the purchase of material goods such as "pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc." (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243). However, the mere 'purchase' of time or material goods does not by itself lead to increased cultural capital; it is also necessary to have the appropriate 'habitus,' or class-based "predispositions to perceive, appreciate, and act, which in turn govern the selection of problems, their solution, and the evaluation of solutions" (Murphy, 1988, p. 19).

Additionally, cultural capital is institutionalized by formally recognizing certain types of academic qualifications and ensuring that they can be exchanged in the labor market. By recognizing certain personality traits, values, expectations, cognitive skills and attitudes in the educational curriculum of programs leading to high status credentials, those with the appropriate cultural capital continue to achieve greater social status than those without these competencies.

These barriers result in the exclusion of certain status groups from the achievement of social mobility, and are precisely the focus of closure theory, as developed by Weber and then elaborated upon by Parkin and Murphy and implicitly by Bourdieu and Collins (Chua & Poullaos, 1998). Closure theory seeks to effect macro-level structural changes in order to alter micro-level attitudinal changes (Murphy, 1981), and is a useful tool for analyzing relationships within and among scholarly disciplines, and between the scholarly community and the community-at-large (Chua & Poullaos, 1998; Morrow & Torres, 1995, 1998). Whereas in the past, a person may have been excluded from education because of gender, class or ethnicity, today exclusion operates in more subtle ways: instead of directly excluding individuals of a subordinate group, educational institutions exclude a specific characteristic such as language (Bourdieu, 1986; Murphy, 1981). Thus, the principle behind exclusion is that of imposing criteria which are applied equally to all, thereby legitimating inequalities, but which are more suited to the dominant group, and thereby reproducing inequalities (Murphy, 1981). This illusion of equality assumes "that in a selective system the selected ones are those who are supposed to succeed and, conversely, that the rejected ones were going to fail sooner or later anyway" (Schugurensky, 2000).

Although the expansion of higher education that took place during the 1960s and 1970s opened opportunities for many people, the structural organization of the system and the culture of individual institutions have often contributed to the perpetuation of the status quo and to the hindering of social and economic mobility. Indeed, in higher education, class, gender, and ethnic inequalities are present in the form of 'second generation segregation' such as tracking and ability grouping, in institutional stratification (e.g. elite private universities, public universities and community colleges), enrollment patterns (e.g. under-representation of working class, ethnic minorities and women in programs leading to high-status, high-paid careers), and classroom interaction (e.g. paying more attention to male and white voices), etc. (Astin, 1972; Clark, 1960; Margolis & Romero,

1998; Oakes, 1985; Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Spring, 1996; Velez, 1985). It is the argument of this paper that informal student-faculty informal interaction may also contribute to perpetuating these inequalities.

Implications of student-faculty informal interaction on achievement

With respect to this study, the concepts of teacher expectations and self-concept, cultural capital, and closure are useful to illuminate the impact of student-faculty informal interaction on achievement. For those with low achievement or low self-concept, much can be gained by encouraging positive interactions with faculty, such as taking a personal interest in their progress, or engaging them in a faculty research project (Madon et al., 1997; Nagda et al., 1998; Page, 1997). The differential cultural capital that undergraduate students bring with them to the university must be considered. This can make a substantial difference in the way they take advantage of the opportunities offered by the college, including initiating contacts with faculty, and in the way they are labeled and treated by faculty members. With regard to student initiated interactions, those students who have been socialized to seek out such relations, or know how much they can gain by 'playing the game,' continue to gain advantage. Those students who do not initiate such interactions, for whatever reasons, including low self-concept that results from low expectations or self-fulfilling prophecies, are not getting the same benefits as those who do. This dynamic could, for instance, reinforce or inhibit a decision to continue to graduate school.

The concept of closure is also a useful tool to explain inequalities in the educational system. It can be applied to understand the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion of student-faculty interaction outside of the classroom, particularly in the case of faculty-initiated interactions. Through informal interaction with students, faculty can often enhance their positions as gatekeepers, influencing who gets into graduate school and controlling the social and academic integration of graduate students by allocating assistantships and providing opportunities to work on research projects, attend professional meetings, and co-author manuscripts (Clark & Garza, 1994; Margolis & Romero, 1998). As a result of this dynamic, students who interact more are gradually able to enter the inner circles of academia, and those who do not interact are gradually left outside.

Critical studies show that in spite of the widespread belief that contemporary society is meritocratic and that schools provide equal opportunity to everyone, the educational system often serves as a mechanism of social reproduction. In this respect, academic achievement is not a natural phenomena that can be explained only by individual (e.g. genetic or attitudinal) variables; it is socially constructed, and in turn can play a crucial role in maintaining the situation of privilege of dominant groups (Kuh and Whitt, 1988; McDermott, 1987; Trueba, 1991). Among the multiple dynamics through which educational institutions reinforce inequalities are faculty-student interactions, both inside and outside of the classroom. This does not imply necessary a malign intent on the part of faculty. In most cases, faculty members do not intentionally engage in different types of interaction with students according to factors like class, gender or race, and may not be aware of their differential impact on achievement.

It must also be noted that a positive correlation between academic achievement and interaction does not clearly establish a relation of causality. In other words, it is difficult to assess to what extent interaction follows achievement, or vice-versa. In any case, regardless of the relative weight of each effect, it is most likely that the two variables feed each other. In this circular causation, high achievers interact more, and high interactors achieve more. Low achievers, by being excluded (or self-excluded) from informal interaction, miss an excellent opportunity to reverse their situation, and hence the original gap between 'winners' and 'losers' is further increased.

The Study

With these theoretical concepts in mind, patterns of informal interaction between students and faculty were analyzed using the database of a major longitudinal study of university and college students in the United States. Quantitative data were collected as part a national longitudinal study conducted by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) based at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Students were surveyed when they entered college in 1987 and then again four years later. Nearly 290,000 first year students completed entering surveys. However, a sampling strategy to re-survey this cohort in 1991 was necessary because of fiscal constraints. Follow-up questionnaires were mailed to the students' home addresses in the summer of 1991, and non-respondents received a second survey in the early fall. Data was also requested from the registrars of each institution in order to correct for questionnaire non-response bias (HERI, 1992).

Response rates to the follow-up questionnaire were 68 percent for registrars at institutions and 21 percent for students (see Figure 1 below). A sophisticated weighting procedure developed by Astin and Molm (1972, cited in HERI, 1992) was used to correct for potential non-response bias using the CIRP survey of first year students, the stratification cell of the student's institution, and the registrar's data (HERI, 1992). Three stages were used in this weighting procedure. First, a series of multiple stepwise regression analyses were done to remove response bias in the CIRP entering year student survey and the registrars' data. These regressions determined the characteristics of first year students which could predict whether or not a student would respond to the follow-up survey.

Figure 1. Sample and Respondent Counts and Rates (1991)

	Number sampled	Follow-up # respondents	Registrar # respondents	Follow-up Percent	Registrar Percent
Total	27,111	5,615	18,382	20.7	67.8
Female	16,474	2,922	10,997	25.3	69.4
Male	10,637	2,693	7,385	17.7	66.8
All 4-yr institutions	22,942	4,977	16,297	21.7	71.0
All 2-yr institutions	4,169	638	2,085	15.3	50.0

Source: The American College Student, 1991: National Norms for 1987 and 1989 College Freshmen.

Second, a weighting factor for each student who responded to the survey was determined, and non-respondents were dropped. Responding students who were determined to have a high probability of responding were given a small weight, and those who were determined to have a low probability of responding were given a large weight. Finally, a second weight was used to match population counts by sex and stratification cell. The final weight was determined by the product of these two weighting factors (HERI, 1992).

Limitations of the study

Before presenting the findings of this study, several limitations must be noted. First, the study is a secondary analysis performed with existing data not collected specifically for the purpose of analyzing student-faculty informal interaction in terms of the variables used in this study (identified below). Thus, some changes could have been made in the wording of questions, or in the type of questions asked. For example, instead of asking for the amount of time (in general) spent talking to faculty outside of the classroom, more specific questions could have been asked such as the amount of time spent in specific types of informal interactions with faculty, or whether the interaction was initiated by the student or the faculty member. Second, although a sophisticated weighting procedure was used to compensate for non-response bias, some irregularities could occur when comparing similar categories. Third, the data used was for one cohort only, and results may vary for other groups. Fourth, all data was collected by means of a self-reported questionnaire. Self-assessment is the product of numerous motivational, cognitive and personality factors, including the desire to think well of oneself (Kruger, 1999). Thus questions may have been interpreted in multiple ways, and answers may not have necessarily reflected actual behavior. Finally, student-faculty informal interaction is a complex variable, with many influencing factors. Ideally, it should be studied as such, taking into consideration not only frequency, type and impact of interaction, but also other factors such as dynamics between actors, timing, academic program, atmosphere of interaction, goals of participants, place, components of interaction, use of new technologies, and institutional size and culture. Thus, in addition to undertaking quantitative studies, it is important to conduct qualitative and ethnographic studies which employ observation and in-depth interviewing to more fully understand this dynamic.

Findings

In order to find out if student-faculty interaction participation rates varied across different undergraduate student groups, five involvement variables and one frequency variable were explored:

1) Since entering college have you worked on a professor's research project?
2) During the past year, were you a guest in a professor's home?
3) Since entering college have you had faculty take personal interest in your progress
4) Since entering college have you found any faculty member who provided tutorial assistance or help improving your study skills?
5) Since entering college have you found any faculty member who provided advice and guidance about your educational program?
6) Number of hours spent talking to faculty in a typical week during the previous year. These were analyzed in terms of three academic self-concepts and two social self-

concepts: academic ability, intellectual self-confidence, writing ability; public speaking ability, and leadership ability.

Generally, it was found that the more positive the academic self-concept, i.e. self-measured academic ability, intellectual self-confidence and writing ability, the higher the rate of participation in research projects with a professor, having a faculty member take a personal interest in them (the exception being those who rated themselves as below average in academic ability), and being a guest in a professor's home (See Figures 2, 3 and 4 below). For example, only 5.3 percent of those who had rated themselves as below average in academic ability had been a guest in a professor's home during the past year, as compared to 32.4 percent of those who rated themselves in the highest 10 percent (See Figure 2 below).

Figure 2 Self-perception of academic ability

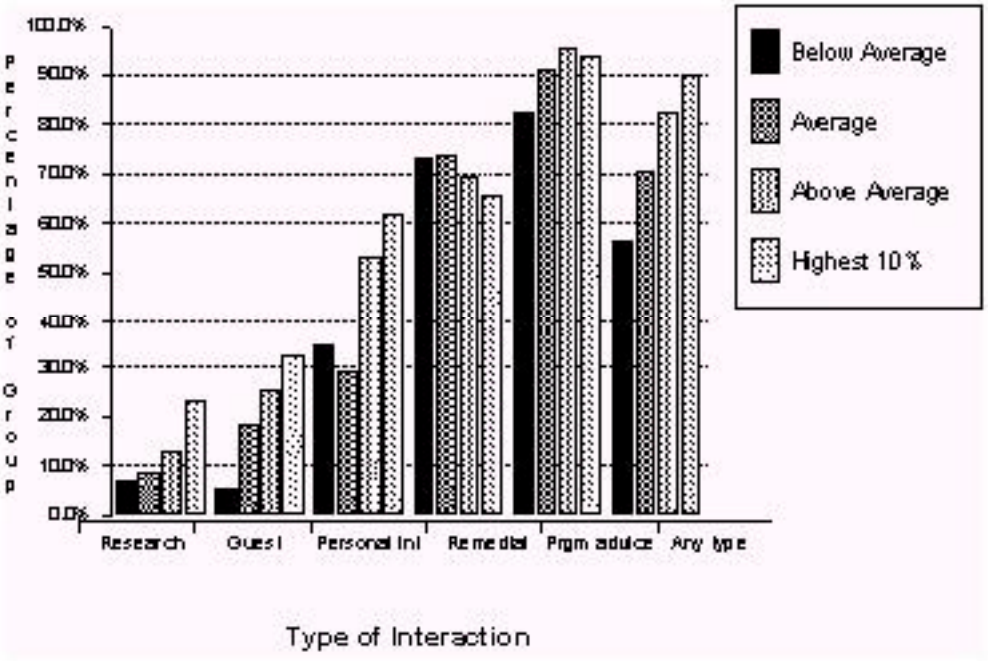


Figure 3 Self-perception of intellectual self-confidence

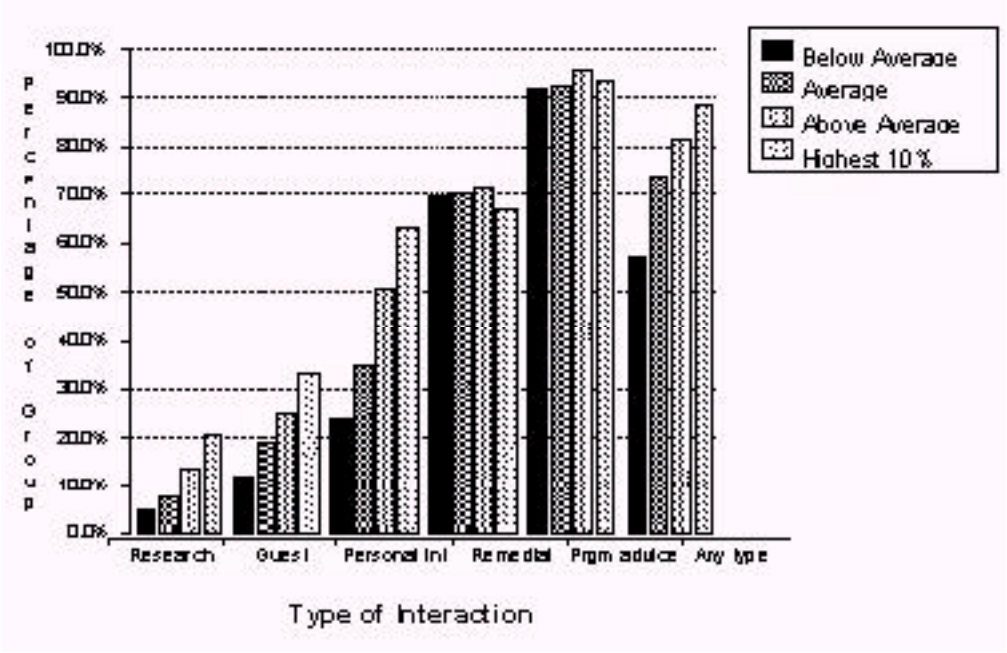
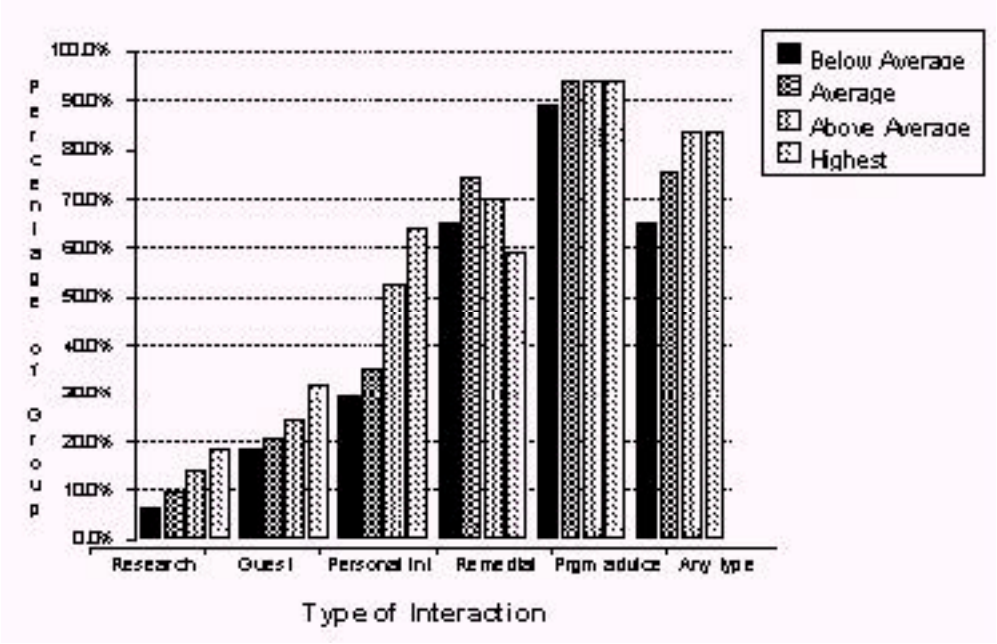


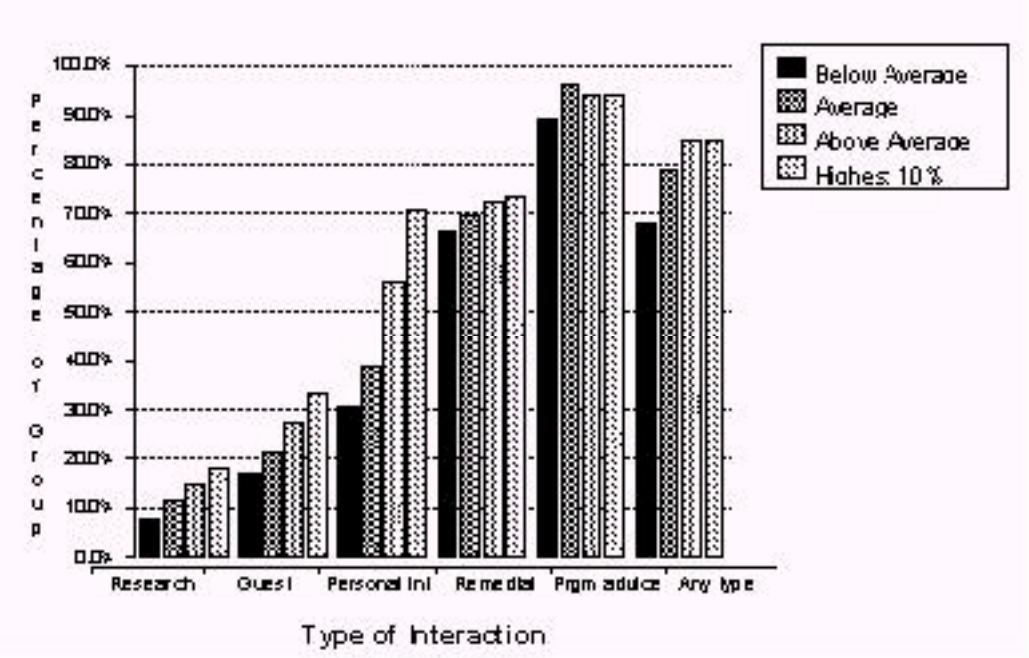
Figure 4 Self-perception of writing ability



Compared to other groups, those who rated themselves in the highest 10 percent were less likely to have received remedial or tutorial assistance from faculty. Conversely, those who had rated themselves as below average were less likely to have found faculty who provided them with program advice and guidance. Additionally, the higher the academic self-concept, the higher the percentage of students that talked with faculty in any type of interaction outside the classroom in a typical week.

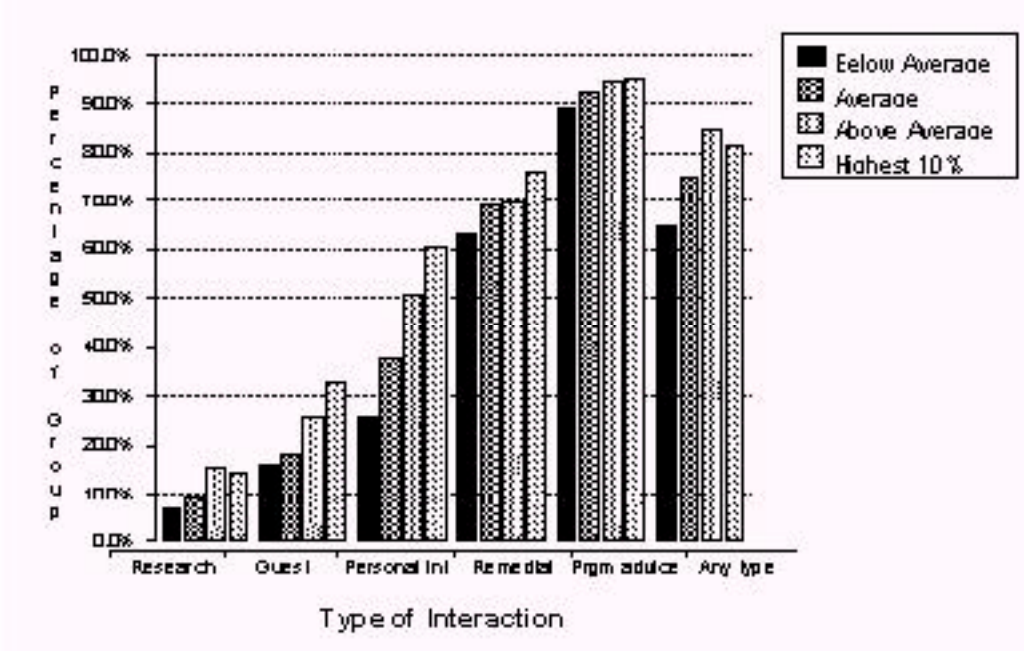
The results for social self-concepts, public speaking and leadership also showed major differences. As with academic self-concepts, in terms of public-speaking ability, participation rates in faculty research projects increased as perceptions of ability increases, as they did in being a guest in a professor's home, in having a faculty member take a personal interest in their progress, and in receiving remedial or tutorials assistance (See Figure 5 below). Most noticeable was the difference in the percentage of students who had found a faculty member who had taken a personal interest in their progress: from 30.8 percent of those rating themselves as below average, to 70.9 percent of those rating themselves in the highest 10 percent. Rates for receiving program advice were higher for those students with average and above self-concepts. For interaction with faculty outside the classroom in general, students with below average self-ratings participated much less than the other categories.

Figure 5 Self-perception of public speaking ability



In terms of leadership self-concept, for the most part the same trends as for public speaking were found: as perception of ability increased, so did participation rates (See Figure 6 below). There were two exceptions: those who rated themselves in the highest 10 percent participated at a slightly lower rate than those who rated themselves as above average in a professor's research project, and in interaction in general.

Figure 6 Self-perception of leadership ability



In general, the study shows that as academic or social self-concept increases, so do participation rates in certain types of student-faculty interaction. The most noticeable differences occurred in interactions focusing on research, being a guest in a professor's home, or having a professor take a personal interest in a student's progress. Interactions focusing on remedial activities, or on program advice, showed less of a difference between categories in participation rates. Overall, when looking at interactions with faculty outside the classroom, a much larger percentage of those with perceptions of above average abilities participated than those with average or below average self-perceived abilities.

Conclusion

This study examined student-faculty informal interaction in higher education, with a focus on equality of opportunity for under-represented groups. Following the insights of critical educational theories, it questioned the assumption that students live in a meritocracy, which assumes that a fair distribution of success exists and that educational achievement can be exclusively attributed to individual factors such as effort, intelligence and diligence. On the contrary, it assumed that educational institutions are not neutral, and play a role in fostering differential achievement among students. This differential achievement is, at times, the result of planned intervention (e.g. tracking); at other times it is an unintended result of institutional and personal dynamics.

Whereas many studies on educational inequality have focused on intergenerational mobility and on classroom interactions, very few have examined informal teacher/student interactions. This study constitutes an attempt to contribute to this body of research. Central to this approach is the examination of issues such as how different groups of students interact with faculty, why some groups are excluded (and/or self-excluded) from these interactions, and what the implications are in terms of benefits and disadvantages. As shown in this study, different groups of students interact at different rates and in different ways with faculty. In general terms, those students who were less

likely to interact with professors during their undergraduate years were those with below average self-ratings. On the other hand, those with high academic self-ratings were the most likely to have worked on a professor's research project, have faculty take personal interest in their progress, or be a guest in a professor's home. This indicates that students who are more likely to be successful in the university are also the students who are interacting more with faculty, increasing even further their chances of academic achievement. Those groups who are more at risk are more often non- or low-interactors. In other words, different groups of undergraduate students benefit in different ways from student-faculty informal interaction, with the already advantaged groups having more opportunities to increase their structural position of advantage, and creating new and more subtle mechanisms of closure.

In terms of future research agendas, several implications for institutional programs designed to promote student-faculty informal interaction arise from this study. There is a need for research which determines what kinds of interactions have the most impact on student success for different groups of students. More studies are needed which focus on under-represented groups in order to more fully understand the dynamics and impact of student-faculty informal interaction. This would also require an analysis of the rate of interactions most typical for each student population in their institution (i.e. by ethnicity, gender, social class, etc.), identifying high interactors, low interactors and non-interactors. Efforts could be made to target low and non-interactors for participation in programs which have the most impact on their success. For those with low self-concept this includes finding ways "to help (students) feel better about themselves as learners" (Hamachek, 1995, p. 422) in order to help them succeed in college. Additionally, as this research study is based completely on student responses, a comparative exploration of faculty perspectives on similar interactions would add valuable insights to these processes. This being said however, the intensification of the academic workforce and a reward structure that favors publications over teaching may leave interactions outside of the classroom as a low priority for faculty members. Perhaps as policy makers, university administrators, professors and students become more aware of the relevance and the potential impact of informal interaction between faculty and students, mechanisms to facilitate this type of interaction (particularly among undergraduate students) will be built into institutional structures, including criteria for faculty-promotion decisions. Many people's most memorable moments of their college years are the result of informal interactions with faculty. This dynamic is an important part of an undergraduate's university experience, and could have considerable impact on their professional and academic futures. Furthermore, any research which attempts to more fully understand this process benefits not only the student, but also the faculty, the institution and the community at large.

Notes

Most literature on the topic tends to assume that student-faculty interactions have a positive impact. Few studies mention the possible negative effects of student-faculty interaction. Since any relationship between students and professors is shaped by power (Zalk, 1990, p.145), there is always a possibility of abuse of power. As Zalk points out, a professor can nurture or inhibit a student's ability to think critically, enhance or

diminish student's self-esteem, and influence students to continue or give up. The possibility of abuse of power has implications for institutional programming, and raises the necessity of providing safeguards and clear definitions of unethical behavior for both faculty and students.

The author thanks UCLA Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) for making these data available for analysis.

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