

UCCA 102-02

Proposal Essay

12 November 2003

### Invest

The university classroom is a unique and wonderful place. One professor relates that because of “its mysterious potential for changing lives,” she almost expects to hear a booming voice echoing from the burning blackboard, commanding all to take off their shoes, for the ground on which they stand is holy ground (Carson). Here, the untainted expectancy of youth mingles with the vast intellect and experience of the learned, and the result is indeed changed lives. Here, professors are given a unique opportunity to invest their time and wisdom into students, and the profits are immeasurable. But some students at Samford, especially freshmen, do not feel this investment being poured into their lives. These students are not alone and their concerns are not unfounded; a survey conducted at Samford exposes this problem.

Every year Samford freshmen and seniors participate in the National Survey of Student Engagement, or NSSE, which “assesses the extent to which students engage in educational practices associated with high levels of learning and development” (*National*). It scores the university in five “NSSE Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practices” (*National*). As shown in Fig. 1, Samford scored well in the categories of academic challenge and active learning, fairly

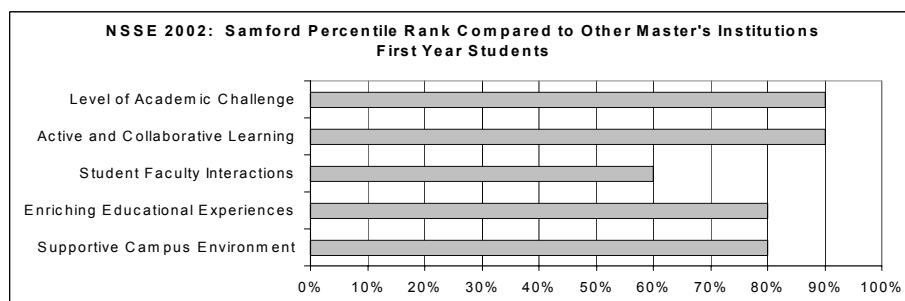


Fig. 1. *National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)*. 2002. Office of Institutional Research, Samford University. 31 Oct. 2003 <<http://www.samford.edu/>>.

environment, but markedly lower in the category of student faculty interaction. Notice also that all three of the lower scoring categories seem to relate; the interaction between students and professors directly affects the creation of enriching educational experiences and a supportive campus environment. What do these figures demonstrate? According to this study, Samford freshmen do not feel as comfortable interacting with their professors as other freshmen attending similar schools. The key to solving this problem is encouraging Samford professors to strive harder to build relationships with their students, especially the unseasoned freshman.

Many think that teachers' relative success or failure comes from their knowledge of and love for their subject. While this aspect is clearly an essential part of the student's learning experience, it is most definitely not the only part. A study of alumni by a professor at Rollins College found that the most effective professors have not only a forte and passion for their subject but also a distinctive relationship with their students (Carson). Some view professors' teaching abilities and relationships with their students as two different things. A professor at the University of Toronto explains this view with an illustration from cooking. The student-teacher relationship is often seen as simply the icing on the cake of learning. But in fact, this relationship is not the icing; it is as vital to the learning process as flour is to the cake (Tiberius).

Why do relationships affect the learning process? Because learning is a process. This same professor notes that learning cannot be forced, that students must take an active role. When teachers and students "form relationships that are trustful, open, and secure, that involve a minimum of control, are cooperative, and are conducted in a reciprocal, interactive manner" (Tiberius), students feel more comfortable with the professor. Because of this familiarity, students are more attentive and more willing to ask questions; "thus, the better the relationship, the better the interaction; the better the interaction, the better the learning" (Tiberius).

Aside from theory, actual examples found at Samford support this notion that student-teacher relationships are key to the learning process. One freshman explains that she does not share a relationship with any of her professors outside that of teacher and student. Because of this fact, she generally dislikes her classes, obviously affecting her performance in these classes (). On the reverse side, her roommate, also a freshman, has had a completely different experience. She can easily cite two faculty members with whom she has a close relationship: her UCCP professor and her academic advisor. Because of the exceptional relationship she shares with her UCCP professor, she puts forth more effort in this class than in any of her other classes; she does not want to disappoint her professor. She has learned the more in this class partly because he is a good teacher, but also because she is more interested in his class than the others (). These examples validate the previous research; a better student-teacher relationship leads to a higher quality of learning.

The goal should, therefore, be a better relationship with your students, but how can you, as a professor, go about doing that? First, you should understand that most students, especially freshmen, are unlikely to initiate this relationship. Both freshmen interviewed stated that the professor would have to initiate the relationship; they, as students, would not push for it (). If your freshman student's initial reaction is hesitancy or timidity, you need to continue to try to make a connection.

The simplest step to take is to open your door. From my own experiences, I can count several times I have intended to stop by a professor's office, seen the closed door, and continued on my way. It is not necessarily the physical closed door that turns me away; it is the formality and the separation that seems to be in place. Put a sign on your door welcoming students in;

encourage us to stop by, maybe even just for a chat. Let us know that we are not an inconvenience.

When describing the relationship that the second interviewee shares with her academic advisor, she emphasized several times that one of its greatest aspects was her advisor's accessibility. He told her that if she ever needed to talk to him about anything at all, academically related or not, he was always available. She felt that he really meant it, and he has followed up on his word. She has talked with him many times about many different concerns, and his advice has had a profound impact on her. She highly anticipates taking one of his classes next semester and expects it to be one of the most rewarding classes she takes throughout college because of the great respect that she has for him (). A small thing can make a big difference: be accessible.

Encourage the relationship outside the classroom as well. The Rollins College study explains that this willingness to invest in students gives them a feeling of worthiness as "people they respect consider them important enough to invite them into their homes, to discuss their future with them, and to devote extra time to them" (Carson). We do respect you, and your attention does make a difference. The first interviewee, though she does not share close relationships with her professors at Samford, remembers a teacher from high school that put forth the extra effort to invest in his students outside of class. She smiled as she remembered his cookouts and attendance at sporting events. He cared about his students as people. He was concerned about their success in his class, but more importantly, he desired to see them succeed in life ().

Next, encourage us. You have no idea of the power that is hidden in your words. Just recently, one of my professors told me that I was doing excellent in his class and asked why I

had not chosen to major in his subject. Though my heart has been set on one profession for the past several years, his few simple words caused me to sit and rethink my plans for days.

Students are impacted by any simple feedback ranging from words like these to the single word ‘excellent’ written atop papers or exams. You have the power to invite us into the world of academic excellence; you can give us confidence. As explained in the Rollins College study, you have a great influence over students and your “ability to see personal worth and academic ability—unrecognized by the students themselves—has transformative power. Students change majors; they grow in self-respect; they start working harder—or more effectively; and, even years later, remembering their professors’ confidence in them, they see both their past and their future in a new light” (Carson).

Building relationships with your students will not only benefit them in ways previously mentioned, but it will also benefit you. As you form relationships, you will see growth and enthusiasm for learning. Think of those students who sit in the corner of your classroom and do only do the minimal amount of work. How rewarding would it be if you could make a connection with them and give them an enthusiasm for learning? You will also be challenged as a professor and as an individual. We as a student body have many different experiences, backgrounds, ideas and talents. Just as you help to shape our thoughts and ideas, we can help to shape yours. We can show you our perspective, which may be different from yours, and this new view will broaden your horizons, making you a better teacher and quite possibly a better person.

Finally, getting to know your students and helping them will allow you to experience the sheer joy of serving others. Remember why you chose to be a professor. Yes, you love your subject. But if you only loved your subject, you could have become an author or a chemist or a

lawyer. Hopefully, you have chosen to be a professor because you love your subject and you love students; don't forget that.

As you can see, this problem is about much more than a statistic reported in some study. Much more than Samford's reputation is at stake. As a professor, you have a unique power and influence over us; you can directly affect our futures. The only question that remains is if you are willing to invest.

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