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Academic, social, and deeper Life Interactions: An emerging framework for promoting student success

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RESEARCH BRIEFS

Academic, Social, and Deeper Life Interactions: An Emerging Framework for Promoting Student Success

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Summary

Scholars and practitioners often categorize the college experience around the academic or social domains of students' lives (Kuh & Hu, 2001; Tinto, 1975). These two categories are insufficient, however, because they fail to capture students' experiences that involve meaning making and values that go beyond the academic or social spheres. In our research, we developed and refined an instrument that measures three categories of interactions in a valid and reliable manner: academic, social, and "deeper life" interactions. Deeper life interactions describe encounters that prompt critical thinking about meaning, value, and purpose. We measured these student interactions with peers, faculty, and staff among more than 4,000 undergraduates in institutions across the United States to understand their effect on outcomes related to academic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal well-being. Our research found that academic, social, and deeper life interactions are distinct categories that influence student success outcomes in unique ways.

Background

In the 1970s, Tinto (1975) launched his seminal work on college student success, explaining how scholars and practitioners should concern themselves not only with the academic aspects of the college experience but also the social features. He successfully argued that the social domain of students' lives is important not just for social outcomes but also for academic outcomes, such as grades and student persistence. This scholarship expanded campus leaders' understanding of what is important in the college experience, and it validated the efforts of student affairs professionals to improve the out-of-class experience of college students.

Although Tinto's (1975) work was paradigm-shifting at the time, it has since become the status quo for understanding the student experience (Braxton et al., 2013; Metz, 2004). Several subsequent decades of research and practice on college student success necessitate a more sophisticated framework (Kinzie, 2020). In short,



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encapsulating the student experience into only academic and social domains limits what scholars and practitioners can know and do regarding how to help students succeed. To this end, several recent studies affirm a third category of interactions—deeper life—and provide new knowledge on how academic, social, and deeper life interactions with peers, faculty, and staff can help students flourish (Erck, 2020; Sriram & McLevain, 2016).

New Scholarship on Academic, Social, and Deeper Life Interactions

The three categories of academic, social, and deeper life interactions provide a clearer picture of how student interactions connect to student success. Sriram and McLevain (2016) first introduced the concept of deeper life interactions when studying student-faculty interactions in on-campus residential environments with faculty-in-residence programs. They defined deeper life interactions as those “that occur around life’s big questions and meaning-making” (p. 605), wondering if interactions that perhaps begin as academic or social in nature could transform into something else when they delve into questions of values and purpose. Interactions that fall into the deeper life category include conversations around life’s big questions, family and personal life, an examination

of personal values, or a student’s purpose in life. For example, a conversation about a student’s major could be an academic interaction, but it can transform into a deeper life interaction when the discussion turns to how a student wants to make the world a better place. Having coffee together is a social interaction, but it becomes a deeper life interaction when a student confides about a deeply personal matter during the time together.

While previous research (McLevain & Sriram, n.d.; Sriram & McLevain, 2016) highlighted the emergence of deeper life interactions, a key limitation of this work was that it only examined student-faculty interactions. During a three-year research seminar on residential learning communities at Elon University’s Center for Engaged Learning, a team of scholars and practitioners sought to address this limitation. This team created a new version of the instrument that measured academic, social, and deeper life interactions between students and peers, faculty, and staff (Sriram et al., 2020-a). The result was a survey instrument that was psychometrically sound in terms of construct validity (from factor analysis) and reliability (Cronbach’s alpha). The latest version of the instrument stems from both exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses tested with multiple samples (Erck, 2020; Sriram et al., 2020-a; Sriram & McLevain, 2016). The instrument measures eight latent variables as shown in Table 1.

Table 1
The Academic, Social, and Deeper Life Interactions Instrument

Variable	Sample Item	Number of Items	Reliability (Cronbach’s alpha)
Academic Interactions with Peers	Other students at my institution help me with my classes.	4	.90
Academic Interactions with Faculty	Faculty at my institution help me to be academically successful.	4	.93
Academic Interactions with Staff	There are staff at my institution with whom I can have academic conversations.	4	.95
Social Interactions with Peers	There are other students at my institution I can hang out with.	3	.93
Social Interactions—Greetings with Faculty/Staff	I would feel very comfortable exchanging greetings (hello, goodbye, how are you?) with faculty or staff at my institution.	3	.86
Social Interactions—Time with Faculty/Staff	I would not hesitate to share a meal with faculty or staff at my institution.	2	.91
Deeper Life Interactions with Peers	I feel very comfortable engaging in conversation with other students about my family and/or personal life.	4	.92
Deeper Life Interactions with Faculty/Staff	I have discussions with faculty or staff that cause me to examine or reflect on my own beliefs or values.	4	.90

Initially, the intent was to have nine variables that measured academic, social, and deeper life interactions separately with peers, faculty, and staff. We achieved this goal with academic interactions. With social and deeper life interactions, however, factor analysis revealed a few surprises. First, when responding to our survey, students answered items regarding social interactions with faculty and staff in such similar ways that we had to combine faculty and staff into one variable based on factor analysis. But students responded differently to items related to exchanging greetings versus items related to spending time with faculty/staff. Therefore, although we intended to have social interactions with faculty and social interactions with staff as separate variables, factor analysis resulted in one variable that included greetings with faculty and staff (social interactions–greetings) and one that included spending time with faculty and staff (social interactions–time). In a similar pattern, instead of deeper life interactions with faculty and deeper life interactions with staff, factor analysis led us to one variable: deeper life interactions with faculty/staff (Sriram et al., 2020-a).

With an established instrument to measure student interactions with various constituents, the question turned to how these interactions influence student success outcomes. As such, Sriram et al. (2020-c) examined how academic, social, and deeper life interactions impact sense of community, a powerful predictor of student success defined as students feeling they matter to others in their network and are engaged with others in meaningful work at their institution (Schreiner, 2017). In a multi-institutional study with students from different types and sizes of four-year institutions, Sriram et al. (2020-c) found that five types of interactions predicted a surprising 50% of students’ sense of community on campus. Listed in order of influence, those five types of interactions were: academic interactions with peers, social interactions with peers, deeper life interactions with peers, deeper life interactions with faculty/staff, and social interactions with faculty/staff that involve a commitment of time (social interactions–time).

The study grouped all students together in the analysis without examining demographic differences. In a subsequent study on conditional effects, Sriram et al. (2020-b) found that students of color and first-generation students had relatively lower satisfaction in deeper life interactions with peers. First-year students also had lower satisfaction in deeper life interactions with peers when compared to sophomores, juniors, and seniors. Across these demographic characteristics, however, students did not differ on their deeper life interactions with faculty/staff. These findings mean that campus leaders should take extra care to help students of color, first-generation students, and first-year students develop peer relationships that occur around meaning, value, and purpose.

Thriving has become an increasingly attractive way for scholars and practitioners to measure student success holistically (Schreiner et al., 2020), and academic, social, and deeper life interactions provide ways to facilitate thriving. The concept of thriving, which is rooted in the field of positive psychology and partially derived from the construct of flourishing (Keyes & Haidt, 2003), is defined as optimal functioning related to academic engagement, interpersonal relationships, and intrapersonal well-being. Thriving is composed of five factors that can be used to determine student success: academic determination, engaged learning, positive perspective, social connectedness, and diverse citizenship. Research (Erck, 2020; Erck & Sriram, under review) has found that student interactions collectively explain a significant portion of thriving in college students. Specifically, deeper life interactions had the strongest effect on thriving, followed by academic interactions and then social interactions. Interactions with faculty and staff had large effects on academic determination, engaged learning, positive perspective, and diverse citizenship. Interactions with peers had large effects on academic determination, social connectedness, and positive perspective. Table 2 provides an overview of how student interactions influence the five factors of thriving and sense of community.

Table 2
Summary of Strongest Interaction Contributions to Student Outcome Variables

Outcome Variable	Interaction Variable	Standardized Total Effect*
Academic Well-Being	Academic Determination	
	Deeper Life Interactions with Faculty/Staff	0.25
	Academic Interactions with Peers	0.23
	Academic Interactions with Faculty	0.19
	Engaged Learning	
	Deeper Life Interactions with Faculty/Staff	0.25
Interpersonal Well-Being	Academic Interactions with Faculty	0.24
	Social Connectedness	
	Deeper Life Interactions with Peers	0.49
	Social Interactions–Greetings with Faculty/Staff	0.23
	Social Interactions with Peers	0.19
	Diverse Citizenship	
	Deeper Life Interactions with Faculty/Staff	0.35

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Outcome Variable	Interaction Variable	Standardized Total Effect*
Intrapersonal Well-Being	Positive Perspective	
	Deeper Life Interactions with Faculty/Staff	0.31
	Deeper Life Interactions with Peers	0.17
	Sense of Community	
	Academic Interactions with Peers	0.22
	Social Interactions with Peers	0.21
	Deeper Life Interactions with Peers	0.20
	Deeper Life Interactions with Faculty/Staff	0.09
	Social Interactions—Time with Faculty/Staff	0.07

* All reported effect sizes are statistically significant. We interpret effect sizes of .06 as small, .12 as medium, and .20 as large. Altogether, interactions predict 50% of sense of community and 66% of thriving.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Academic, social, and deeper life interactions provide an emerging framework for promoting student success. Our recent research on these interactions is significant for several reasons. First, our research has led to a valid and reliable instrument for measuring interactions and confirms that deeper life interactions is a unique category with distinct contributions to student thriving. Second, previous research tended to study student-faculty interactions or student-peer interactions separately. These studies did not assess faculty and peer interactions together, nor did they include staff, whose vital role in fostering student success is understudied (Martin & Seifert, 2011). Third, our research demonstrates how these different interactions influence important student outcome variables that go beyond merely measuring grade point average or retention. Below are key findings and recommendations.

Peer Interactions Are Critical for Student Success

Helping students thrive requires that campus leaders help students foster relationships with peers, faculty, and staff. All relationships matter, and peer interactions have been found to be among the most influential. Academic, social, and deeper life interactions with peers all have a strong, positive influence on students’ academic determination, social connectedness, positive perspective in the face of challenge, and sense of community. Campus leaders should not assume that peer interactions are maximized simply because students are near one another. Instead, programs and policies should be implemented to promote academic, social, and deeper life interactions among students. For example, residential learning communities “provide an ideal environment for these relationships to flourish” (Sriram et al., 2020-a, p. 241). Students in programs such as living-learning communities are provided ample opportunities for interacting in the classroom setting, residence hall, and social or community events. These recurring peer interactions help students to build meaningful

relationships and can prove valuable for the student experience (Inkelas et al., 2018).

Interventions should be tailored specifically to meet the needs of students of color, first-generation students, and first-year students, as these groups have reported lower levels of satisfaction in deeper life interactions. Not all programs need to address all three types of interactions. For example, orientation programs may emphasize academic interactions, programs in the first few weeks of the academic year may focus on social interactions, and smaller niche programs, such as mentoring initiatives, could help students discuss issues of meaning, value, and purpose with peers as the semester progresses.

Faculty/Staff Interactions Contribute in Distinct Ways

Faculty and staff are sometimes seen as different constituents for students. Other times, however, students do not meaningfully distinguish between their interactions with professors versus administrators. For academic interactions, students respond differently to items regarding interactions with faculty or interactions with staff. Academic interactions with faculty help to promote academic determination and engaged learning—two essential components of academic success. For social and deeper life interactions, however, students do not distinguish between faculty and staff. In social interactions, the distinction students make is whether the interactions with faculty/staff are oriented around greetings (e.g., knowing the student’s name and acknowledging the student in passing) or whether they require time (such as getting coffee or sharing a meal). Social interactions—greetings foster increased social connectedness (e.g., feelings about friendships), and social interactions—time promotes a sense of community (e.g., feelings of belonging).

Deeper life interactions with faculty/staff—those interactions that involve conversations about meaning, value, and purpose—are powerful predictors of academic

determination, engaged learning, diverse citizenship, and positive perspective. These interactions also have a small but notable influence on sense of community with the institution. Deeper life interactions with faculty/staff are the only significant contributor to diverse citizenship, which pertains to making a difference in the lives of others and being receptive to people with differing backgrounds and perspectives. To understand their role in society and how to learn from diverse people and perspectives, students need relationships with faculty and staff that go deeper by discussing life's big questions or that cause students to reflect upon their beliefs and values (Beckowski & Gebauer, 2018).

Programs Should be Evaluated Based on the Interactions They Foster

Programs, policies, and environments on campus can be intentionally designed to promote deeper life interactions, which are both the most difficult to foster and the most powerful predictors of student success. It is important to note that the interactions themselves foster success for students, not necessarily the fact that a particular program exists. In other words, it is not a matter of whether a campus has a program but rather whether that program leads to academic, social, or deeper life interactions with peers, faculty, or staff. We propose that practitioners inventory their programs to determine how they are inhibiting or stimulating such interactions. Administrators can get a sense of such interactions by conducting qualitative interviews with students, holding focus groups, or using the instrument discussed in this article to measure these interactions with a larger sample. Utilizing a more comprehensive framework for understanding and fostering interactions by including deeper life elements can help drive changes that enhance the student experience. The programs, policies, and environments that best promote these interactions will make the strongest contributions to student flourishing.

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