

Catherine Bovill, UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH, catherine.bovill@ed.ac.uk
Ashton Croft, NORTH CAROLINA STATE UNIVERSITY, aecroft@ncsu.edu
Caroline Dean Glover, UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND, cglover@richmond.edu
Peter Felten, ELON UNIVERSITY, pfelten@elon.edu



Is Discussing Identity More Important Than Shared Identity to Student-Staff Relationship Building?

ABSTRACT

Research consistently demonstrates that the quality of student-staff interactions matters for positive student outcomes. Some research studies also suggest that identity similarities (homophily) often contribute to meaningful human connections. Yet, the influence of student and staff identities on teaching and learning in higher education is less explored. We report on how undergraduate students and staff at one US university perceive the impact of identities on student-staff classroom relationships. Four themes emerged from our analysis: (1) Shared interests may be more important than shared identity for some students and staff; (2) Students' year of study influences their views on staff identity and student-staff relationships; (3) Identity homophily is a point of connection for some students and staff; (4) Discussing identity, without identity homophily, can lead to positive course-based connections. The first three of these themes align with existing literature, but the fourth theme extends previous research, and we focus on exploring how for some students, discussing identities may be more important than matching identities when interacting with academic staff.

Keywords

identity, student-staff relationships, mattering, race, gender

INTRODUCTION

Considerable evidence demonstrates that positive student-staff relationships have a significant, beneficial effect on students' motivation, engagement, and sense of belonging, which in turn can lead to successful student outcomes (Mayhew et al. 2016). Most of the research on student-staff interactions focuses on the teaching behaviors of academic staff that do, or do not, contribute to students' perceptions of the staff member and of the student-staff relationship. While this behavioral research is practical, it does not address other salient issues, including the qualities of strong student-staff interactions and the roles that shared identity characteristics might play in these connections. In a review of relevant literature, Hagenaur and Volet (2014) concluded that the qualities and conditions that make for significant "teacher-student relationship at university [remain] an important yet under-researched field" (370). In this paper we explore the literature and report the findings from a small-scale qualitative study about positive student-staff relationships and identity at Elon University (USA)—an institution with a global reputation for engaged learning.

BACKGROUND LITERATURE

Student-staff relationships are foundational in undergraduate education. Decades of research reveals that the quality of student interactions with teaching staff "positively influence the breadth and depth of student learning, retention, and graduation rates, and a wide range of other

outcomes, including critical thinking, identity development, communication skills, and leadership abilities” (Felten and Lambert 2020, 5). Positive student-staff relationships in the classroom have been shown to increase students’ academic self-concept and achievement (Parker, Trolan, and Stolzenberg 2021), and while these relationships are significant for all students, scholars in the US have shown that they are particularly influential for first-generation students and students of color (Kezar and Maxey 2014). Approaching relationships from a different angle, critical theorists make similar claims. Freire (1970), for instance, describes education as fundamentally a process of dialogue and relationships, and hooks (1994) explains, “As a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another’s voices, in recognizing one another’s presence” (8). Weaving together critical theory and educational research, Bovill (2020) calls for a “relational pedagogy [that] puts relationships at the heart of teaching and emphasizes that a meaningful connection needs to be established between teacher and students” (3).

Extensive research exists on the ways that staff behaviors influence student learning, perceptions of the teacher and the course, sense of belonging, and even the use of staff feedback (Middleton et al. 2020; Tormey 2021). Scholars of online education have focused extensively on how “teacher immediacy”—such as calling students by name, using humor, and affirming student contributions—positively contributes to student learning (e.g., Glazier 2021; Pacansky-Brock 2017). In on-campus teaching, Frisby and Martin (2010) illustrate the positive impact on student-staff “rapport” of instructors calling students by name, asking questions that build on (and perhaps positively clarify or correct) student comments, and smiling and nodding while students speak. Cooper et al. (2017) show that even in large classes, students are often more motivated if they perceive the instructor cares enough to learn their names. Docan-Morgan and Manusov (2009) investigate what they describe as positive relational turning points between students and instructors, such as discussion of common interests or an expression of praise, which led to increased student motivation and cognitive and affective learning. Students experiencing negative turning points, such as being ridiculed or disciplined, report decreases in those areas. Open communication, helpfulness, and attentiveness are highlighted by Schussler et al. (2021) as important characteristics of instructors who create supportive class environments. Similarly, Keeley, Smith, and Buskist (2006) demonstrate that students value two key dimensions of teaching behavior: (1) caring and supporting, and (2) communicating competency; and Trammell and Aldrich (2016) show how staff empathy contributes positively to rapport with students.

This research demonstrates that seemingly small actions by instructors can lead students to trust staff, creating an environment that inspires learning, belonging, and motivation. Echoing research by Noddings (2010) and others on primary and secondary schools, Snijders et al. (2018) consider the importance of higher education students’ trust in the honesty and benevolence of staff, and in the balance of positive (e.g., sense of belonging and connection) or negative (e.g., anger or frustration) affective experiences students have with staff outside the classroom. Similarly, Chew and Cerbin (2021) document the significance of student trust in academic staff’s competence, integrity, and beneficence. Gravett, Taylor, and Fairchild (2021) emphasise the importance of “mattering” in teaching pedagogies and argue that teaching in ways that communicate to students that they matter is critical in creating more equitable learning environments for all students.

This research on generic behaviors and on the existence (or absence) of trust tends to ignore variations across cultures (Tormey 2021) and does not consider whether student or teacher identities influence student-staff interactions. This is a significant gap, since identities have been demonstrated to be highly salient in both research on, and the experiences of, human interactions

and relationships in many social contexts (e.g., McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001), including higher education. To begin to fill this gap, Trammell and Aldrich (2016) explored whether US students with certain identity characteristics (e.g., first-generation status, age, course level) preferred specific teacher behaviors. Their research did not uncover variation among students in different identity groups, but Baik, Larcombe, and Brooker (2019) found differences across disciplines when they surveyed Australian university students about the teaching practices that contributed to student well-being. In a series of studies, Yeager et al. (2014) demonstrated the importance of identities in the ways US elementary and secondary students interpreted feedback from teachers. In short, research suggests that identities may, and sometimes do, influence the ways students interpret staff behaviors in classroom interactions.

Research also demonstrates the importance of identities in shaping students' views of staff. Bingham et al. (2021) report that undergraduates in a co-taught biology course are more likely to make contact outside of class with a female instructor, rather than a male instructor, which mirrors other studies suggesting students perceive female staff as more approachable and caring (El-Alayli, Hansen-Brown, and Ceynar 2018; Tatum et al. 2013). The salience of instructor identity is also seen in research on student evaluations of teaching, which documents consistent negative effects when students perceive their identities to differ from staff (Pineda and Steinhardt 2020). A recent survey of this research in the US, for example, finds "a gender-affinity effect, with students rating faculty that share their gender more highly" (Kreitzer and Sweet-Cushman 2021, 5). This is consistent with the findings of Kwok and Potter (2021) who investigated student nominations for teaching excellence awards, and found that students were more likely to nominate a teacher who shared their gender, and specifically male students were disproportionately more likely to nominate male teachers. A study of UK undergraduates also shows that "most UK home students prefer being taught by home academics" rather than by international staff; however, students from historically marginalised backgrounds and home students with experiences abroad, are more open to international teachers (Tebbett, Jons, and Hoyler 2021, 522).

These findings are not surprising, since scholars have long documented the significance of homophily in human relationships; simply put, "similarity breeds connection" (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001, 415). It is important to recognise that many identities are fixed, removing the possibility of staff matching identities with all students in the classroom. These differences may lead staff and students to believe that they cannot build positive connections with those who do not share their most salient identities. However, research is clear that encounters with diversity and difference in the classroom can be powerfully educative (Ahmed 2012; Milem 2003). This is because encountering diversity in student-staff relationships can lead to greater individual self-awareness, thus fostering deeper learning (Arminio and Torres 2012).

In this paper, we focus on identity characteristics or domains, not identity development. That means we will not address the rich literature on identity change in higher education (e.g., Jones and Abes 2013). Instead, we focus on identity characteristics that students and staff use to describe themselves at a specific moment in time (when they completed our questionnaire), including race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and socio-economic status. In our coding, we gave particular attention to the intersectionality of identity and the salience of race in American educational contexts. We also recognize that students and staff might erroneously infer identity similarities or differences based on the physical characteristics of another person.

In this study, we build upon prior research to explore whether and how student and staff identities influence the perceived quality of student-staff classroom relationships. This is particularly significant because, as Knupsky and Caballero (2020) show, the changing demographics of

undergraduate students in the US and elsewhere will make issues of identity—and particularly cross-identity interactions—even more common in future higher education classrooms.

METHODS AND RESEARCH CONTEXT

This qualitative study aimed to gather the perceptions of students and staff about whether their identity characteristics influence student-staff classroom-based relationship development, and we asked specifically about examples of positive relationships. The research was carried out at Elon University, North Carolina and received Institutional Review Board ethics approval from Elon University in February 2020. Data collection took place in February and March of 2020, just before the main impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. All data were from in-person, on-campus teaching.

Authors Bovill and Felten designed two online questionnaires—one for staff comprising of 43 closed and open questions, and one for students comprising of 32 closed and open questions. The questionnaires were created using Qualtrics. Bovill and Felten identified staff colleagues from different disciplines who might be willing to allow Bovill to visit their classes in-person to invite students from different years of study to complete the questionnaires during class time. Eight teachers agreed, and enabled Bovill to visit 10 classes in-person. Several of these were composite classes comprised of students from a mix of disciplines and year groups, although we note this led to the largest group of respondents being first year students. Bovill emphasised to the students that in answering the questionnaire, they should not presume that we were asking about the current classroom teacher. There were 196 students that responded to the survey, from which 155 complete questionnaires were usable for data analysis.

To gather data from academic staff, Bovill and Felten created a purposive sample of engaged staff across the university to try to represent a range of gender, racial, and sexual identities, and different years of teaching experience. Bovill sent invitations by email to 22 staff colleagues, inviting them to take part in the research, which led to us receiving 19 completed questionnaires.

We chose to use questionnaires that included many open-ended questions as an effective way to elicit qualitative data from a larger number of students and staff than would be possible through many other data collection methods in the time we had available. We planned to follow the questionnaire with some interviews, but the Covid pandemic led us to abandon a second stage of data collection. The research questionnaire focused on many factors that influence positive student-staff and student-student relationships, but this paper focuses only on those questions specifically related to identity. The full questionnaire and the identity specific questions can be found in Appendix 1.

Prior to commencing analysis, Bovill and Felten agreed there would be significant value to inviting students to be involved in the data analysis process. Bovill invited students in one of Elon University's master's in higher education courses that she had recently taught to join the research team, and authors Croft and Dean Glover joined the team at the start of the data analysis process.

Influenced by grounded theory, we collaboratively developed an initial coding scheme for each question where several members of the team independently analysed the same question and then compared codes. Coding schemes focused on the frequency of words and phrases used by staff and students when describing student-staff relationships, as well as the nuance of the ways students and staff talked about their identities, the identities of others, and how relationships developed. We then moved to searching for emerging key themes from the coding. An iterative process was utilised to determine which themes were most applicable and accurate throughout data analysis. Although team members were involved in all elements of analysis, the majority of coding and thematic analysis was completed by Bovill and Dean Glover and then reviewed by the entire team. Any discrepancies

between team member coding were explored further and resolved through discussion and frequent re-reading of the data and adjustments to coding.

LIMITATIONS

This research provides a snapshot of students and staff experiences of positive classroom-based student-staff relationships at one US private university. The findings do not explore negative or neutral student-staff interactions. The largest group of respondents were the 59 first-year students who made up 38% of all participants. All staff and student responses were collected in the months before the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted higher education worldwide and before the murder of George Floyd by a police officer in Minnesota, which focused additional attention on systemic racism in the US. Both Covid-19 and the racial justice movement might have altered the salience of identities in student-staff interactions, but we cannot know this.

Undergraduate students at Elon University during the 2019–2020 academic year comprised 79.8% white students and 17.9% students of color with similar composition amongst staff who comprised 76% white, 18% staff of color, with the remaining staff and students categorized as “non-resident aliens” or unknown (Elon University 2021). Despite these limitations to our study, the focus on positive classroom-based student-staff relationships is at the heart of our paper. We believe this work raises some interesting and useful questions about the role of both sharing and discussing identities when fostering educationally purposeful relationships.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Our findings are based on 155 student questionnaire responses and 19 staff questionnaire responses. We present the findings under four key themes that emerged from the data:

- (1) Shared interests may be more important than shared identity for some students and staff;
- (2) Students’ year of study influences their views on staff identity and student-staff relationships;
- (3) Identity homophily is a point of connection for some students and staff; and
- (4) Discussing identities, while not having a shared identity, can lead to positive connections.

1. Shared interests may be more important than shared identity for some students and staff

Out of 155 student respondents, 79 students (51%) stated that either identity did not matter, or that identity mattered less than other shared interests in forming positive student-staff relationships: “I don’t think they’ve influenced our relationship at all. I don’t necessarily consider any of those factors when establishing relationships” (student 48). Many students explained that “shared interests” or “shared background” were more important than identity in supporting relationship building. For example, they reported “connecting” with staff due to shared beliefs, a common passion for a subject, or both speaking a particular language: “I think we can relate more, and share similar opinions. I know we are both vegetarian which was nice to relate with” (student 136); “We share an identity of being artists” (student 45). Many staff respondents also told us that shared interests, including political views or intellectual connection, mattered more to relationship development with students than shared identity: “We did have shared interests—dogs, superhero movies, etc.—which are things that seem to cross all identity ‘lines’” (staff 11). Other staff members commented on the importance of a shared passion for an academic discipline:

I think our common love of our discipline serves as the primary lynchpin holding us together . . . We both share a common interest in making sure the least among us has a voice and this is sometimes the focus of our discussions. (staff 19)

A small group of students made normative arguments that identity “should not” be a factor in their relationship with staff, leaving it open to interpretation as to whether identity actually had any influence on relationships: “Those things shouldn’t really matter when it comes to making relationships” (student 10); “. . . if they [the teacher’s identity characteristics] influenced me they were not on purpose” (student 99);

I dont [sic] believe they do or should. It isnt [sic] about whether or not my professor looks like me or has the same background but whether they are willing to help me become a better student and actually care about how I perform. (student 26)

Two students also highlighted that at university, they had not been exposed to staff representing all identities: “I have rarely encountered cultural differences with my professors” (student 84); “I don’t think they have influenced our relationship. I just have not had many professors that are far removed from my social, cultural, ethnic, etc.” (student 50).

2. Students’ year of study influences their views on staff identity and student-staff relationships

The length of time a student has known a staff member, can influence their views about identity in relationships. There were 92 students (59%) who reported knowing staff for one year or less. Out of this group, 37 students explicitly indicated that identity was not a major factor in whether or not they developed a positive relationship with a professor. One student stated, “It wouldn’t matter if he was gay straight male or female or Norwegian, all that mattered was the consistent efforts he made to know us better and his warm personality is what made us like him” (student 8).

First-year students often may not feel ready to fully articulate their identities with peers or staff (e.g., Silver 2020). Many first-year students have a sense of identity uncertainty, they may have difficulty finding the right language to discuss identities, and sometimes feel a lack of safety to share about themselves (e.g., Baxter Magolda 2001; Clydesdale 2008). And yet, first-year students’ identities have already influenced their choices about where and what to study. Early in their time at university, students’ identities will also be pivotal in influencing the relationships they are forming with staff and peers (Felten and Lambert 2020). Opening up discussions about identity between staff and students in these early years can be formative, enabling students to understand others’ perspectives and sending a signal to students that staff care and are interested in them and their academic success—which is essential for students to feel that they belong and matter in higher education (Gravett and Ajjawi 2021; Thomas 2012). It is also these early conversations that can enable first-year students to develop the language and confidence to discuss their own and others’ identities.

Another group of 27 first-year student respondents focused more on similarities with their professors that led to an initial point of connection, such as visible identity characteristics (i.e., gender and to a lesser extent, race) or hobbies and shared career goals. They also mentioned that they often felt more comfortable or safe connecting with female staff when they were having difficulties: “I think because she is female she is more approachable for me” (student 71).

There were 46 students who reported knowing the staff member for approximately two years. These students demonstrated a slight shift toward openness and acceptance being a more important factor in relating to staff than shared identity.

No, I would say the relationship I formed with my teacher didn't have anything to do with these factors. I would say his friendly approach and genuine interest in my succeeding in the class is what made me love his class . . . caring about your students and letting them know that is the #1 thing a teacher can do to facilitate an environment for close relationships. (student 46)

Students who had known staff for 3–4 years mentioned the importance of nuance, depth, and openness as features of their relationships rather than homophily with particular identities:

My professor is very open and does not care if we do not share the same sexuality, pronouns, gender, etc. . . . Even though we are not necessarily the same in these areas we have bonded over similar struggles with family and life in general. (student 64)

3. Identity homophily is a point of connection for some students and staff

Of the 155 student respondents, 69 students (45%) recognized that identity had played a part in shaping the positive relationship that they had with a particular professor. A smaller group of 29 students (19%) mentioned specific identity similarities that were important when forming relationships with staff. The identity similarities that were important to them in forming relationships with staff included gender, race, and sexuality (with greater numbers of students mentioning gender than race and only two students mentioning sexuality). This lends support to arguments in the literature for diversifying staff recruitment to provide role models and to enhance the chances of identity homophily between staff and students: “She has been very open and honest about issues we all face as women. We talk candidly about these issues and are able to connect because of that” (student 152); “I believe our similar race has played a role in our relationship” (student 54); “We’ve definitely bonded over both being queer!” (student 154). Out of 35 students who identified as students of color, six students noted that they shared their race/ethnicity with the staff member they mentioned in the survey. Out of these six students, two considered that sharing the same race/ethnicity with staff played an important role in relationship formation: “She feels like a grown-up, successful version of a person I can become, and that gives me hope in becoming successful too” (student 102).

Cultural background was an important connection point for relationship building, particularly for students studying languages and cultures in the classroom as well: “The professor who have formed [sic] a relationship with is from Latin America and we bonded over conversations about the culture of Latin America because I am studying Spanish and both enjoy speaking Spanish” (student 34). The students’ responses highlight the value of having a diverse university staff who different students can relate to and identify with throughout their university experience.

Looking at the staff responses, about half of staff respondents thought identity mattered and might help in building relationships with particular students, especially when student experiences resonated with staff. One respondent described shared identity as giving them a “common language” with students, such as first generation students, or those who were questioning their identity. One staff member stated that they formed a particularly positive relationship with a student

who “occup[ies] the same intersectional spaces [as me]” (staff 2). In those instances where staff thought identity mattered, there were no clear patterns as to the identities of these staff.

A small number of staff thought that specific identity characteristics were important and supportive of creating connection and stronger relationships. Socio-economic background was thought to be important by two staff members where it related to challenges faced by individuals, such as having a shared understanding of what it is like not to have money. One staff respondent also specifically stated that gender was an important factor in building relationships with female students, but suggested other forms of identity did not matter as much.

4. Discussing identities, while not having a shared identity, can still lead to positive connections

Our findings suggest that while identity homophily is important for some student and staff interactions (particularly in relation to gender and to a lesser extent race), 17 students specifically talked about the positive influence of having open conversations and discussions with staff, with eight specifically mentioning discussions around identity. The words “discussion” and “conversation” were mentioned 42 times by student respondents, and 23 times by staff respondents. The discussion of diverse perspectives providing opportunities to share and learn about a range of identities may be an important factor in enabling bonding and relationship building between students and staff.

Overall, 17 students and 6 staff considered it important to have opportunities for open discussions in order to build positive relationships, including discussions about identity. The discussion of diverse identities may be an overlooked factor in promoting bonding and relationships between students and staff. Indeed, open and respectful student-staff dialogue inside and outside the classroom not only enables the development of meaningful relationships, but research by Schreiner et al. (2020) describes this kind of exchange as a fundamental characteristic of higher education that leads students to thrive in both their personal well-being and their academic work. Acknowledging differences within the classroom and creating space and vulnerability for diversity to be explored from different perspectives can help address the potential gap caused by a lack of homophily in many university classrooms (Chavez and Logerbeam 2016). Our findings also support Docan-Morgan and Manusov’s (2009) research, which demonstrated that discussing common interests can lead to more positive outcomes for students, and Schussler et al. (2021)’s finding that teachers can create supportive class environments through open communication—see for example, the following student comments: “I feel like they have made a positive impact as we can recognize that not everyone is the same” (student 101); “It gave a broader spectrum of ideas and helped us get to know each other in a greater sense. We were able to have conversations with different perspectives that we both may never have experienced otherwise” (student 42);

The class was about race, so it was good to as white people [learn] about subjects that we tend to avoid, and we expanded that to other identity-related items that would affect privilege, and because everyone came from somewhere different it was a really good class, and our professor being different from us reinforced that. (student 66)

Some students of color in this study, who did not share race/ethnicity with staff, indicated that identity differences led to complex conversations that supported relationship formation: “Knowing that we have differences but common interest and even similarities makes the relationship more interesting. I can always expect to get a different view from the professor” (student 19); “He

mentioned things that made me feel welcome on campus. He addressed how he wished Elon had more students of color—which made me think ‘okay, even the professors see there is room for growth here’” (student 67).

Although shared identity is important for some students and staff, the intersectional and dynamic nature of identities means that other factors—including discussing identities—also contribute to nurturing high quality student-staff classroom relationships. This finding does not contradict the need for universities to diversify their staff to better reflect the demographics of their students and communities. That remains vital work for a more just and equitable higher education sector. However, support for this aspiration does not translate into instantaneous diversification of staff on every university campus. It is also not always logistically possible for identity matching between students and staff to happen where, for example, staff need to teach a specialist subject. As one staff respondent in our study commented: “The vast majority of students that I have formed positive relationships with have been of a different gender primarily because such a significant number of students in my office are women” (staff 18). This situation is particularly salient on some campuses where the number of historically marginalised students or staff is small. Many curricula in higher education are focused on developing students’ intercultural competency and developing their abilities to see the world from a variety of perspectives, and in this context, these responses from students who had different identities from their professors are promising.

Opening up discussions about identity was considered risky by a small number of the respondents in this study, sometimes due to fear of judgement or previous negative experiences with sharing identities; a sentiment echoed by scholars who refer to a “pedagogy of vulnerability” (e.g., Brantmeier and McKenna 2020). The risks of sharing identities reflects the reality of living in societies and learning in institutions that have long, deep histories of marginalisation, exclusion, and identity-based harm (e.g., Kulick et al. 2017; Museus, Ledesma, and Parker 2015). As one staff respondent highlighted:

To be frank, I am always apprehensive of sharing details about my identity with students, because I feel that the reaction I get is not always positive . . . encountering student(s) with whom I can share these details and feel that they haven’t judged me or their attitude towards me hasn’t changed, affects this relationship positively. (staff 3)

Building trust and creating a classroom environment where students and staff feel able to discuss identities, perspectives, and experiences (including identities that are less visible) is beneficial for all students, and is particularly significant for first-generation students and students of color (Kezar and Maxey 2014).

CONCLUSION

Our study highlights potential areas for further research. Some students in our study used language around “warmth” and “approachability” more often when speaking about female staff than male staff. This raises questions about whether staff gender directly influences relationship-building. It could also be significant to examine race in another institutional context, as this study came from a medium-sized, predominately white US institution with a small sample size of participants and results might differ at an institution with more students and staff of color. Because this study occurred before the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent racial tensions in the US, there could be additional saliency in racial issues or differences in how identity would affect survey

responses in a later study. The Covid-19 pandemic moved most teaching online for periods of time during 2020–2021, and attitudes to online and hybrid teaching continue to change, meaning; it will be important to explore how building and sustaining student-staff relationships is affected by these different modes of teaching. Furthermore, because this study focused specifically on asking staff and students about positive relationships, future research on negative relationships could provide some contrasting perspectives on student-staff classroom interactions.

Although there is evidence in our findings of the importance of discussing identity, many students and staff emphasized that staff behaviors, approachability, and teaching strategies often play a key role in fostering positive student-staff relationships. This is consistent with the existing literature cited earlier in the paper. Many students spoke of the importance of staff learning and using their names, and showing an interest in them as a person. These findings are important because even when student and staff identities do not match, staff who make efforts to get to know students, who are willing to share things about their own lives, and who demonstrate that they care, are well positioned to create positive relationships whatever their identity and those of their students.

When we set out to explore how students and staff create and sustain positive relationships, we did not initially know whether identity would be considered important by staff and students. Our small study gave us a glimpse of the nuanced nature of the connections between identity and student-staff relationships. We wholeheartedly support the diversification of staff on university campuses, but where this has not yet been achieved, and in contexts where identity homophily is challenging to achieve, our study suggests that there are still things we can do to enhance the likelihood of students and staff forming meaningful relationships. Institutions will not be able to match identity with all their students, but staff who show a genuine interest in students and who are willing to discuss diverse identities in class build more impactful student-staff relationships.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This research was approved through the Elon University Institutional Review Board's ethical review processes.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to the UK/US Fulbright Commission for funding a Fulbright Scholarship for Catherine Bovill to undertake research at Elon University, in 2019–2020. Thank you to Stephen Bloch-Shulman for thoughtful conversations about identity in the early stages of this research.

BIOGRAPHIES

Catherine Bovill is the co-director of the Institute for Academic Development and professor of student engagement in higher education at the University of Edinburgh (UK). Her research focuses on student-staff co-created curricula and relational pedagogy in higher education.

Ashton Croft is a study abroad advisor at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, North Carolina (US). Her work focuses on advising outbound study abroad students and managing global partnerships.

Caroline Dean Glover is an assistant director of student engagement at the Bonner Center for Civic Engagement at the University of Richmond (US). Her work focuses on cultivating high impact practices with students and establishing reciprocal campus-community partnerships.

Peter Felten is the executive director of the Center for Engaged Learning, professor of history, and assistant provost for teaching and learning at Elon University (US). His current research focuses on the ways relationships influence student and staff experiences in higher education.

REFERENCES

- Ahmed, Sara. 2012. *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Arminio, Jan, and Vasti Torres. 2012. "Learning Through Relationships with Others." In *Why Aren't We There Yet? Taking Personal Responsibility for Creating an Inclusive Campus*, edited by Jan Arminio, Vasti Torres, and Raechele L. Pope, 33–55. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.
- Baik, Chi, Wendy Larcombe, and Abi Brooker. 2019. "How Universities Can Enhance Student Mental Wellbeing: The Student Perspective." *Higher Education Research & Development* 38 (4): 674–87.
- Baxter Magolda, Marcia B. 2001. *Making Their Own Way: Narratives for Transforming Higher Education to Promote Self-Authorship*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Bingham, Bailey E., Victoria Rae, Lisa Robertson, M. Alex Smith, and Shoshannah Jacobs. 2021. "Frequency, Topic, and Preferences: Tracking Student Engagement with Several Modalities of Student-Instructor Contact in a First-Year Course." *FEBS Open Bio*: 12–23. <https://doi.org/10.1002/2211-5463.13315>.
- Bovill, Catherine. 2020. *Co-Creating Learning and Teaching: Towards Relational Pedagogy in Higher Education*. St. Albans, UK: Critical Publishing.
- Brantmeier, Edward J., and Maria K. McKenna, editors. 2020. *Pedagogy of Vulnerability*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age.
- Chavez, Alicia Fedelina, and Susan Diana Longerbeam. 2016. *Teaching Across Cultural Strengths: A Guide to Balancing Integrated and Individuated Cultural Frameworks in College Teaching*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.
- Chew, Stephen L., and William J. Cerbin. 2021. "The Cognitive Challenges of Effective Teaching." *Journal of Economic Education* 52 (1): 17–40.
- Clydesdale, Tim. 2008. *The First Year Out: Understanding American Teens after High School*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Cooper, Katelyn M., Brian Haney, Anna Krieg, and Sara E. Brownell. 2017. "What's in a Name? The Importance of Students Perceiving that an Instructor Knows Their Names in a High-Enrollment Biology Classroom." *CBE- Life Sciences Education* 16 (1): 1–13.
- Docan-Morgan, Tony, and Valerie Manusov. 2009. "Relational Turning Point Events and Their Outcomes in College Teacher–Student Relationships from Students' Perspectives." *Communication Education* 58 (2): 155–88.
- El-Alayli, Amani, Ashley A. Hansen-Brown, and Michelle L. Ceynar. 2018. "Dancing Backwards in High Heels: Female Professors Experience More Work Demands and Special Favor Requests, Particularly from Academically Entitled Students." *Sex Roles* 79 (3): 136–50.
- Elon University. 2021. *Elon University Fact Book: 2020–2021* [Fact sheet]. Accessed 7 January 2021. <https://www.elon.edu/u/administration/institutional-research/wp-content/uploads/sites/521/2021/04/Elon-University-Fact-Book-20202021forLinkswEB.pdf>.
- Felten, Peter, and Leo M. Lambert. 2020. *Relationship-Rich Education: How Human Connections Drive Student Success*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Freire, Paulo. 1970. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London: Penguin.
- Frisby, Brandi N., and Matthew M. Martin. 2010. "Instructor-Student and Student-Student Rapport in the Classroom." *Communication Education* 59 (2): 146–64.
- Glazier, Rebecca A. 2021. "Connecting in the Online Classroom: Building Rapport Between Teachers and Students." Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Gravett, Karen, Carol A. Taylor, and Nikki Fairchild. 2021. "Pedagogies of Mattering: Re-conceptualising Relational Pedagogies in Higher Education." *Teaching in Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2021.1989580>.
- Gravett, Karen, and Rola Ajjawi. 2021. "Belonging as Situated Practice." *Studies in Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2021.1894118>.
- Hagenaur, Gerda, and Simone E. Volet. 2014. "Teacher-Student Relationship at University: An Important Yet Under-Researched Field." *Oxford Review of Education* 40 (3): 370–88.
- hooks, bell. 1994. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge.
- Jones, Susan R., and Elisa S. Abes. 2013. *Identity Development of College Students: Advancing Frameworks for Multiple Dimensions of Identity*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

- Keeley, Jared, Dale Smith, and William Buskist. 2006. "The Teacher Behaviors Checklist: Factor Analysis of its Utility for Evaluating Teaching." *Teaching of Psychology* 33 (2): 84–91.
- Kezar, Adriana, and Dan Maxey. 2014. "Faculty Matter: So Why Doesn't Everyone Think So?" *Thought and Action* (Fall): 29–44.
- Knupsky, Aimee, and Soledad M. Caballero. 2020. "Do We Know What They Are Thinking? Theory of Mind and Affect in the Classroom." *Teaching & Learning Inquiry* 8 (1).
<http://dx.doi.org/10.20343/teachlearningu.8.1.8>.
- Kreitzer, Rebecca J., and Jennie Sweet-Cushman. 2021. "Evaluating Student Evaluations of Teachings: A Review of Measurement and Equity Bias in Sets and Recommendations for Ethical Reform." *Journal of Academic Ethics* 20: 73–84. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10805-021-09400-w>.
- Kulick, Alex, Laura J. Wernick, Michael R. Woodford, and Kristen Renn. 2017. "Heterosexism, Depression, and Campus Engagement Among LGBTQ College Students: Intersectional Differences and Opportunities for Healing." *Journal of Homosexuality* 64 (8): 1125–41.
- Kwok, Kathryn, and Jaqueline Potter. 2021. "Gender Stereotyping in Student Perceptions of Teaching Excellence: Applying the Shifting Standards Theory." *Higher Education Research & Development*.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2021.2014411>.
- Mayhew, Matthew J., Alyssa N. Rockenbach, Nicholas A. Bowman, Tricia A.D. Seifert, Gregory C. Wolniak, Ernest T. Pascarella, and Patrick T. Terenzini. 2016. *How College Affects Students: 21st Century Evidence that Higher Education Works*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- McPherson, Miller, Lynn Smith-Lovin, and James M. Cook. 2001. "Birds of a Feather: Homophily in Social Networks." *Annual Review of Sociology* 27: 415–44.
- Middleton, Tristan, Adeela Ahmed Shafi, Richard Millican, and Sian Templeton. 2020. "Developing Effective Assessment Feedback: Academic Buoyancy and the Relational Dimensions of Feedback." *Teaching in Higher Education*: 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2020.1777397>.
- Milem, Jeffrey F. 2003. "The Educational Benefits of Diversity: Evidence from Multiple Sectors." In *Compelling Interest: Examining the Evidence on Racial Dynamics in Higher Education*, edited by Mitchell J. Chang, Daria Witt, James Jones, and Kenji Hakuta, 126–69. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Museus, Samuel D., Maria C. Ledesma, and Tara L. Parker. 2015. *Racism and Racial Equity in Higher Education: ASHE Higher Education Report* 42 (1). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Noddings, Nel. 2010. "Foreword." In *No Education Without Relation*, edited by Charles Bingham and Alexander M. Sidorkin, vii–viii. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Pacansky-Brock, Michelle. 2017. *Best Practices for Teaching with Emerging Technologies*, 2nd Edition. New York: Routledge.
- Parker, Eugene T. III, Tieniell L. Trolian, and Ellen Bara Stolzenberg. 2021. "Student-Faculty Interaction and Academic Self-concept: The Intersection of Race and Gender." *Higher Education Research and Development* 41 (7). <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2021.2010666>.
- Pineda, Pedro, and Isabel Steinhardt. 2020. "The Debate on Student Evaluations of Teaching: Global Convergence Confronts Higher Education Traditions." *Teaching in Higher Education*.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2020.1863351>.
- Schreiner, Laurie A., Tami K. Martinez, Jennifer Drumm, and Crystal Keetch. 2020. "The Role of Faculty in College Student Thriving." In *Thriving in Transitions: A Research-Based Approach to College Student Success*, edited by Laurie A. Schreiner, Michelle C. Louis, and Denise D. Nelson, 193–209. Columbia, SC: National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition.
- Schussler, Elisabeth E., Maryrose Weatherton, Miranda M. Chen Musgrove, Jenifer R. Brigati, and Benjamin J. England. 2021. "Student Perceptions of Instructor Supportiveness: What Characteristics Make a Difference?" *CBE—Life Sciences Education* 20 (2): 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.20-10-0238>.
- Silver, Blake R. 2020. *The Cost of Inclusion: How Student Conformity Leads to Inequality on College Campuses*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Snijders, Ingrid, Remy M. J. P. Rikers, Lisette Wijnia, and Sofie M. M. Loyens. 2018. "Relationship Quality Time: The Validation of a Relationship Quality Scale in Higher Education." *Higher Education Research & Development* 37 (2): 404–17.
- Tatum, Holly E., Beth M. Schwartz, Peggy A. Schimmoeller, and Nicole Perry. 2013. "Classroom Participation and Student-Faculty Interactions: Does Gender Matter?" *The Journal of Higher Education* 84 (6): 745–68.
- Tebbett, Natalie, Heike Jöns, and Michael Hoyer. 2021. "Openness Towards Diversity? Cultural Homophily in Student Perceptions of Teaching and Learning Provided by International and Home Academics." *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 19 (5): 522–44.
- Thomas, Liz. 2012. "Building Student Engagement and Belonging in Higher Education at a Time of Change." *Paul Hamlyn Foundation* 100: 1–99.

- Tormey, Roland. 2021. "Rethinking Student-teacher Relationships in Higher Education: A Multidimensional Approach." *Higher Education* 82: 993–1011. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-021-00711-w>.
- Trammell, Beth A., and Rosalie S. Aldrich. 2016. "Undergraduate Students' Perspectives of Essential Instructor Qualities." *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 16 (1): 15–30. <https://doi.org/10.14434/josotl.v16i1.19178>.
- Yeager, David Scott, Valerie Purdie-Vaughns, Julio Garcia, Nancy Apfel, Patti Brzustoski, Allison Master, William T. HSSERT, Matthew E. Williams, and Geoffrey L. Cohen. 2014. "Breaking the Cycle of Mistrust: Wise Interventions to Provide Critical Feedback Across the Racial Divide." *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 143 (2): 804–24. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0033906>.

APPENDIX

Student and staff questionnaires

Questions relevant to this paper are noted with an asterisk*.

Student Questionnaire

Instruction: Think of a professor with whom you have had the most positive relationship so far at university and who you met in a class

3. *How long have you known this professor?

4. What did the professor do to get to know you when you first met? Tick as many as apply. Multiple Choice:

- Asked you questions about yourself and your interests;
- He/she was approachable;
- Learned your name;
- Icebreaker activities;
- Set ground rules for class;
- Said that he/she was available to be contacted e.g. through office hours or email;
- Other - please specify)

5. What did this professor do to continue to build a positive relationship with you? Tick as many as apply.

Multiple Choice:

- Asked you questions about yourself and your interests
- Was approachable
- Spoke to you outside of class
- Emailed you outside of class
- Remembered your name
- Icebreaker activities
- Set ground rules for class
- Said that he/she was available to be contacted e.g. through office hours or email
- Other - please specify)

6. How many courses has this professor taught you for?

7. What three words would you use to describe the relationship you have with this professor?

8. What did this professor do that was different from what other professors have done, to help to build a positive relationship with you?

Instruction: Identity questions

9. *How would you describe your gender?

10. *Is your professor's gender the same as yours?
11. *How would you describe your race/ethnicity?
12. *Is your professor's race/ethnicity the same as yours?
13. *How would you describe your sexuality?
14. *Is your professor's sexuality the same as yours?
15. *How would you describe your nationality?
16. *Is your professor's nationality the same as yours?
17. *How would you describe your socio-economic status?
18. *Is your professor's socio-economic status the same as yours?
19. *How have these differences and similarities between you and your professor influenced your relationship?

Instruction: Relationships with other students

20. At the start of the course where you met this professor, what did he/she do to help you to get to know the other students in this class? Tick as many as apply. Multiple choice:
- Small group work
 - A group project or assignment
 - Activities with the person sitting next to you
 - Icebreaker activities
 - Set ground rules
 - Other please specify)

21. What three words would you use to describe the relationships you have/had with your peers in this professor's class?

Instruction: Engagement and partnership

22. How academically engaged do/did you feel in this professor's class compared to your other classes? Multiple choice:
- A lot less engaged
 - Less engaged
 - Same
 - More engaged

- A lot more engaged

23. Please explain your previous answer.

24. Has this professor involved you in any activities where you shared responsibility and decision-making for an aspect of learning and teaching? Yes/No

25. Please tell us a bit more about these activities and how you were involved.

26. Is this professor the professor you would describe yourself as having the closest relationship with?

27. Please explain your previous answer

Instruction: Final questions

28. What subject did the professor teach you? (The professor you were thinking of to answer the first set of questions on this survey.)

29. How many students were in the class that this professor taught when you first met him/her?

30. *What year of study are you in? Multiple choice:

- First year/freshman
- Second year/sophomore
- Third year (junior)
- Fourth year (senior)
- Other, please specify

31. Do you have any other comments about the relationships you have with your professors and peers or your engagement with your studies?

Staff Questionnaire

Instruction: Think of a class of students with whom you have formed positive relationships.

Please give the following details:

1. How many students were in the class?

2. What year of study are/were the students in? Multiple choice:

- First year/freshman
- Second year/sophomore
- Third year (junior)
- Fourth year (senior)
- Other please specify

3. How many times per week did you teach this class?
4. In which term did you teach the course? (e.g., fall 2019, winter 2019)
5. What did you do to try to get to know these students in the first class? Please list any specific actions or activities you used.
6. What did you do to continue to build positive relationships with these students throughout the rest of the semester? Please list any specific actions of activities you used.
7. What three words would you use to describe the relationships you formed with this class of students?
8. In the first class with this group of students, what did you do to help the students to get to know one another? Please specify if there were any specific actions or activities that you used to build student-student relationships.
9. How engaged in their studies do you think the students in this class were compared to other groups of students you have taught? Multiple choice:
 - A lot less engaged
 - Less engaged
 - Same
 - More engaged
 - A lot more engaged
- 9b. Please explain your answer to the previous question.
10. When you were teaching this class, did you share responsibility or decision-making with your students about any aspect of learning or teaching?
- 10b. If yes, what did this consist of?

Instruction: Try to identify a specific student who you have formed a positive relationship with:

11. How did you initially form this relationship? Tick as many as apply. Multiple choice:
 - In class
 - Outside class
 - Supervising research
 - Acting as their mentor [non-research]
 - Other please specify

12. Why did you form a particularly positive relationship with this student compared to other students?

13. What three words would you use to describe this relationship?

Instruction: Identity questions

14. *How would you describe your gender?

15. *Is your gender the same as the student's gender?

16. *How would you describe your race/ethnicity?

17. *Is your race/ethnicity the same as the student's race/ethnicity?

18. *How would you describe your sexuality?

19. *Is your sexuality the same as the student's sexuality?

20. *How would you describe your nationality?

21. *Is your nationality the same as the student's nationality?

22. *How would you describe your socio-economic status?

23. *Is your socio-economic status the same as the student's socio-economic status?

24. *How do you think the differences or similarities in your identity to that of the student you formed a positive relationship with, influenced this relationship?

Instruction: Departmental relationships

25. In your Department, what percentage of your colleagues would you say you have a positive relationship with? (0–20%; 21–40%; 41–60%; 61–80%; 81–100%)

26. What three words would you use to describe the relationships you have with colleagues in your Department?

27. How do you build and sustain positive collegial relationships?

28. Who do you talk to about teaching? Tick as many as apply. Multiple choice:

- Department colleagues
- University colleagues from other departments
- Colleagues from other universities nationally
- Colleagues from other universities internationally
- Partner at home

- Other, please specify)

29. How do you establish and sustain relationships with the colleague(s) you talk to about teaching?

Instruction: In your most recent conversation about teaching:

30. What prompted the conversation?

31. Where did your discussion take place?

32. How long did the conversation last?

33. What did you discuss?

Instruction: Final questions

34. Do you have any other comments about the relationships you have with your students or colleagues or your engagement with teaching?

35. What School/Discipline do you teach in?

36. How many years have you taught in higher education? Multiple choice:

- 0–3 years
- 4–7 years
- 8–12 years
- More than 12 years)

37. Have you ever been nominated for, or won a teaching excellence award of any kind?



Copyright for the content of articles published in *Teaching & Learning Inquiry* resides with the authors, and copyright for the publication layout resides with the journal. These copyright holders have agreed that this article should be available on open access under a Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 International (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>). The only constraint on reproduction and distribution, and the only role for copyright in this domain, should be to give authors control over the integrity of their work and the right to be properly acknowledged and cited, and to cite *Teaching & Learning Inquiry* as the original place of publication. Readers are free to share these materials—as long as appropriate credit is given, a link to the license is provided, and any changes are indicated.