

Academic Engagement through Routine-Embedded Relationships:

Thirty Voices

**Outcomes Assessment Task Force Report**

**Springfield College**

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## Executive Summary

This qualitative study of student perceptions regarding their undergraduate educational experiences utilized focus group methodology. The purpose of the study was to examine student perceptions gleaned from quantitative National Survey of Student Engagement data that were not consonant with faculty perceptions of the undergraduate educational experience at Springfield College.

Four focus groups totaling 30 participants ranged in size from six to nine seniors. Each group met for a two-hour session. Sessions were conducted over a period of three weeks from late October into early November in private, quiet, comfortable rooms with participants seated at a table in view of each other. Participants had signed consent forms and were provided with refreshments, as well as a \$25 stipend. A research assistant took notes throughout the sessions. The researcher served as session moderator. All sessions were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher.

Results indicate that participants valued engagement with faculty, particularly when those relationships are embedded in the routines of campus life—classes, advising, and going about normal daily activities. Participants elaborated on their reasons for choosing the college, their transition to college-level academics, the evolution of their academic experiences over several years, and the types of classes that they found to be engaging. The researcher concluded from participant elaborations that routine teaching, advising, and campus activities are seen as enhancing academic engagement when active learning experiences are cultivated within a context of interpersonal relationships.

## Participant Recruitment

In order to insure a level of trustworthiness, the selection of the student participants was a critical component of this research design. Due to the fact that we wanted to explore the undergraduate educational experiences of Springfield College students, it seemed most appropriate that we delimit the population to seniors in the Schools of Arts, Sciences, and Professional Studies (ASPS) and Health, Physical Education, and Recreation (HPER). Seniors were selected because they would have had exposure to the majority of their curriculum and would have been exposed to a variety of different courses and instructors. In order to insure that the seniors who were selected for the focus group were representative of the student population, we randomly selected the students who would be asked to participate in the study. In completing the random selection we wanted to insure that the students were representative of students across the two schools, various majors, and athletic status. As a result, the sample was stratified based upon the size of major, school, and athletic status. Size of major was broken down into three strata, small, medium, and large majors. Large majors were those majors who had 50 or more seniors enrolled in the major. Examples of majors placed in this category included, Business Management, Movement and Sports Studies, and Psychology. Students from large majors composed approximately 41 percent of the senior class. Medium majors included majors who had between 11 and 49 seniors enrolled in the major and represented 37 percent of the senior class. Examples of majors placed in this category included Communication/Sports Journalism, Applied Exercise Science, Sports Management, and Physical Therapy. Small majors included majors who had 10 or fewer seniors enrolled in the major and represented 22 percent of the senior class. Examples of

majors placed in this category included Sports Biology, Criminal Justice, Sociology, and Therapeutic Recreation Services. Athletic status was defined by whether or not the student was an active member of an intercollegiate athletic team within the past academic year and represented approximately 30 percent of the senior class. Seniors from ASPS comprised 60 percent of the senior cohort with the remaining 40 percent consisting of seniors from HPER. The stratified random sample was constructed so that the list of potential participants was proportionally representative of these strata. An original list of randomly selected seniors was developed and these students were initially contacted and asked to participate in the focus groups. When a student declined to participate in the research study for whatever reason, another student from the same sub-group who also had been randomly selected was contacted.

In total 37 randomly selected students initially agreed to participate in a focus group session. Students were scheduled into one of four focus group sessions based upon their availability. Students were offered a \$25 monetary incentive for participating the hour and a half session and food was provided at each session. Following standard guidelines for focus group methodology, each of the four sessions was comprised of 6 to 9 student participants. Of the 37 students who initially agreed to participate, 30 did participate.

### Focus Group Sessions

Each session began with introductions among the researcher/moderator, the research assistant, and the participants, all of whom had been seated according to identifying cards placed on the table. A handout reviewing the study's purpose was provided to each participant. (*We are here to learn about your experiences as a student at this college, focusing on academics and faculty.*) The moderator's role was explained. (*I am here to facilitate your discussion. I will suggest ways to start and move through your discussion.*) The time frame for discussion was stipulated (one hour and 30 minutes, allowing 15 minutes before and after for setup and closure activities). The participants' role was defined:

- You can help by sharing your perspectives.
- There are no “right or wrong” responses. Please—
  - Speak one at a time.
  - Encourage everyone to share.
  - Help each other stay on track.
  - Feel free to suggest topics that haven't surfaced.
  - Do not use names of other students or individual faculty members.
- Your names will be protected.

- We will learn both from your individual comments and your interactions as a group.

Focus group questions were refined over a period of months, moving from the proposal draft, through the OATF September meeting, to minor revision of the script after the first focus group session. Across four sessions, the questioning sequence assumed an overall pattern. The opening question was one that all participants answered, in turn and briefly. (*How did you come to be a student at Springfield College?*) An introductory question was designed to get at the academic experiences of participants. (*What was your transition to Springfield College like during your first year?*) A transition question encouraged greater breadth in relating academic experiences. (*How did your academic experiences evolve over your years at Springfield College?*) Key questions then directly addressed the study's purpose. (*How would you characterize your experiences with Springfield College classes and professors?*) An ending question was meant to facilitate interpretation of responses and insure coverage from the participants' perspectives. (*How would you summarize your academic experience at Springfield College?*)

Each session ended with thanks, reminders to grab snacks and stipends on the way out, and invitations to participate in a follow up session in late November if a fifth session were required. Of the 37 potential participants who indicated they would attend sessions, 30 did participate. Of those, 25 had been willing to attend a fifth session if invited. That fifth session ultimately proved unnecessary, as the data seemed clear and consistent.

### Debriefing, Transcribing, and Developing Understandings

Analysis of participant responses began informally as the researcher and assistant debriefed after each session. Both were struck by the clear messages conveyed by participants about their academic experiences at the college. Messages conveyed during the first session were repeated with little variation throughout the remaining three sessions.

After the first session, a meeting between the researcher and assistant was held to review notes that had been taken by the assistant. The purpose of this meeting was to begin to check understandings of participant responses and determine whether the questioning route or other aspects of session process needed to be refined. It was agreed that our understandings were congruent and that—other than simplifying the questioning sequence—no changes in the focus group process were required.

As a further check on understandings of responses and assessment of process, the researcher transcribed the first session verbatim before conducting the second session. As two tapes had been produced of each session, once the transcript was complete, it was possible to check for accuracy against the second tape. A number of corrections resulted from this ability to hear voices from the different position of the second recorder. (This process of transcription and second tape checking was completed for all four sessions.) The transcription of the first session provided the researcher with confirmation about initial understandings of participant responses, as well as assurance that the process was yielding potentially useful data.

Focus groups two, three, and four were then conducted, followed by transcription of session two, a second formal debriefing meeting with the assistant, and the completion of transcripts for sessions three and four.

The researcher identified themes that were derived from the emphasis participants placed on particular aspects of their academic experience at the college. Themes represented experiences that were common across both individual participants and group sessions. More importantly, the themes were selected to provide potential insights about students' 1) sense of academic engagement, 2) relationships with faculty, and 3) perceptions of the college experience that differed from those of faculty. Within each theme, patterns were identified that reinforced the theme itself and used the qualitative focus group methodology to advantage. Particular examples and contrasting assertions provide glimpses of academically engaging classes, motivating relationships, and the college experience as seen with student eyes.

### Findings

#### **Campus—Home Away from Home—Cornny or Not**

One theme was the role of the college campus as a home away from home, participant experience of the college as a community, and the bearing that experience had on how students adjusted to college-level academics (and other aspects of college life). From first impressions during campus tours, to bonding experiences during orientation, to dorms that provided the support of either older students or teammates, what resulted during the first year for these students (who experienced September 11, 2001 during their first semester) was a sense of comfort, community, and relationship that sustained them

through a period of transition and challenge, academically and otherwise. The following quotes serve to illustrate the patterns discerned within the campus theme.

### **First Impressions**

*Not to be corny or whatever, but it was something about the atmosphere that I just felt comfortable. I was like, "This is where I'm going to go." I don't want to feel like I'm away from home. I want to feel like it can be like a second home.*

### **Orientation as Bonding Experience**

*First off, when you come here, they stick you in NSO, whether you want to do it or not. New Student Orientation—it's basically three or four days of just bonding with a bunch of people whom you don't know. That was cool for me because I didn't know anyone here. Right off the bat, there were a couple of kids in my NSO group who still are my best friends today. Right from there, I had a great experience.*

### **Dorms with "Older Models"**

*I was in (a dorm), which was definitely—I was with all these nice people. There was a mixture of older kids. I think there was even a senior on our floor. This was my chance to come in and make a change and try to be the popular kid. The older kids...basically taught you to just knock it off and be yourself. It was a huge growing experience for me the first year. If I were in (another dorm), I probably would not have been back here. I would have been absolutely miserable. The dorm made a huge difference.*

### **Dorms with Class- and Team-Mates**

*I lived in (a dorm which was), I would say, a different experience from everybody here, but I wouldn't change that for the world. I thought that there were so many people there who were in the same shoes as me, who were having the same experiences as me.*

*My teammates were in there. My classmates were in there. It was just so easy to have everybody real close. You never had to leave the building. If you were doing anatomy homework or if you needed help with college writing, somebody on some floor in that building is always in your class. You can always go to them. I think that that's what I needed. Had I been in a (another dorm), where there were other age groups, I'm the kind of person who would have just instantly froze around those people and not been able to do anything—probably shut myself in my room. Since I was with all freshmen, it was really convenient.*

### **Campus Community as Extended Family**

*When I went home for Christmas break, one of my professors, whom I had really enjoyed, had passed away and all these tough things were happening, but I'd come back to this really warm and welcoming Springfield College and all these new friends that I'd met.... There was so much to do and so many friends around that, when you were dealing with these situations, you were dealing with them as a group. You really never had to be by yourself. There was always someone there. After September 11, there was a big memorial in Marsh that day. The president spoke. Father Leo spoke. You were there with all your friends. It was so easy to deal with a lot of the really tough things that happened that year, specifically for me and for the world, too. We really are, kind of corny, like a family. I really feel like I'm a big part of a big family here. That really helped me a lot, started me off on the right foot. I feel that I just have taken advantage of those opportunities year after year, getting involved in more...taking on leadership roles.*

### **Advising—An Inconsistent Adjunct to the Academic Experience**

It may not be central to the work of the professoriate or recognized in the system of institutional rewards, but students are sharply aware of the role of advising in their overall academic experience. From informal relationships based on accessibility or mutual and personal interests, to formal advising relationships that may or may not be productive, participants indicated that they appreciated personal attention and appropriate advising. Participants noticed when the advising process was reduced to the pro forma signing of a student's previously prepared registration sheet. While some participants proclaimed independence of the need for a close formal advising relationship, others celebrated the discovery of mentors who would guide the student during the undergraduate experience and beyond. Student comments indicating the variety of advising experiences follow.

#### **Informal Advising Relationships—Mutual and Personal Interest**

*Even when I haven't had classes with some professors, I've spent time talking with them, visiting them in their offices, and they've always been really helpful. It's definitely the ones who are real passionate about what they do, who really share a love for your major with you, and they're excited for what you're doing and what you're becoming. I had one that I had last year (who is) definitely going to help me decide what grad school to go to and (is) totally willing to write me recommendations, anything I need, anytime. (The professor invites) me to come to (the) office because we just have a*

*really good relationship. (The professor) genuinely cares about me, not just as a student, but as a person.*

### **Formal Advising Relationships—The Luck of the Draw—Or Not**

*My advisor, I met...during the orientation. I've had three classes with (my advisor). We have a good relationship, but I would never really look to (my advisor) for any real guidance because I've heard a lot of negative things about (her/him being) all over the place...papers all over. You go in (the) office and (it's) not organized at all. It's kind of scary. I had a piece of paper that has all the classes I need to take, so I always fill it out myself and have (my advisor) sign my schedule. I was doing everything myself. I knew what I had to take and I knew how to fill it in.*

### **Formal Advising Relationships—The Choice of a Mentor**

*Coming here as a freshman I had no rules. I had my own room. I could do whatever I wanted. I had time management problems I guess you could say. As an undecided freshman, you're supposed to take First Year Success, I believe it is. They teach you time management and my teacher and I, we had this connection. I wanted (that teacher) to be my advisor, so I switched.... (My advisor) has helped me throughout the past four years. I still call (my advisor) when I need help. I didn't have a hard time settling in, I had a hard time more managing when I had to do homework, when I should go to bed, more of that, not the actual work load or classes.*

### **Requirements, Majors, Instructors, and Instruction**

As far as courses are concerned, it could reasonably be assumed that student appraisals would vary as they moved from the general All College Requirements to the

specific (and presumably selected) major requirements. That assumption appeared largely correct; students often spoke of becoming more engaged as they got deeper into the major. Yet, there was also discussion of either regretting not having made the most of the ACRs, or appreciating the rounding out of their education that the ACRs provided. Students viewed the ACR versus major difference in terms not only of their interest, but also their perception of faculty attitudes about teaching ACR versus major courses. Participants perceive that professors are more likely to be invested in major classes and students. Recognition of the professor as able to make any class (ACR or not) engaging by caring about students and seeming to enjoy teaching, providing sufficient challenge, and working to ensure that students understand, synthesize, or apply information is illustrated below.

#### **All College Requirements—Academic Regrets and Broadened Horizons**

*Once I got into my major courses, I learned a lot and found them to be more difficult. Now I feel like my education was not as balanced and I don't know enough about humanities and math and science because I got focused so much. All those classes, I call them the easy classes that I didn't seem to care about much and I got As through, didn't really make an impact on me. The professors didn't really make an impact on me because I just went, did everything I did in high school, and got an A.*

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*The professors in my major are awesome. I can't really say enough about them. Taking ACRs, I've had some awesome teachers whom I wouldn't have been able to meet and (learn) their different perspectives about the subjects that they teach if we didn't have the ACRs. I don't like the fact that we're required to take them, but if I weren't*

*required to, then I wouldn't have met them and learned what they have to tell me about their perspectives on the world.*

### **Major Focus—Interpersonal Connections and Relevant Preparation**

*For me, the biggest turning point was actually switching majors. Not only in my academics, but I noticed it in my own personality, as well. The first semester I was in (my new major), I got a 4.0. That kind of kicked me into gear. All my professors were great. I had five different classes and they were all (in my new major), so I had four different (major-related) teachers. So, I met all the professors that first year. One of them became my advisor. I got right into it. That was a huge turning point for me because I realized what I wanted to do.*

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*Thankfully, teachers here, in the major, have been exceptional. They were worth the money that I came here to pay for those who had to teach me what I do now. Not to boast or anything, I think I'm very good at what I do now and I'm very excited about doing it every day for a long, long time. A lot of testament goes to those guys. The negative stuff I have comes from the early years in the classroom and from teachers who didn't seem to care because I wasn't (in their majors). There are exceptions to the rule, but those are what sticks out in your head, is the glaring moments when you knew that what you were doing in a class wasn't worth your time and wasn't worth the teacher's time. There was a handful of those....*

### **A Teacher Makes a Difference—Caring and Challenge**

*I have a professor this semester—I have a really hard last name—(who) actually is the first professor that has ever learned how to say my last name. I think that is great*

*because it just shows that (this professor) really does care, not only about me as a student, but that I'm a real person, that s/he should know how to say my last name.*

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*I also think it's the teacher you have. Freshman year, I only remember having two great teachers. I really enjoyed their classes because they were more discussion-based and they really challenged you to think about different things. All of my classes could have been that great if teachers had really challenged me to think about their subject in a way that interested me. I know that's really hard for people to do. I've only had a few teachers at this school who have really done that for me, instead of just spitting out information so I can write it down, asking questions about it and getting my thought process going. A lot of my classes are always lecture, too, so I've really only had three teachers here who have really challenged me to do that on my own and think about things and figure out things on my own. In my major, I have one teacher right now who is just great. I also have one teacher right now who is awful, who will just read from the slide. Just give me the power point presentation. I'll read it on my own. I don't need to come to class at eight in the morning for this. I do have one teacher who will talk about a subject and say, "Okay, what would you do in the situation? What would you do?" You really have to think about it. It's problem-solving in the class. I'm so much more interested in that than I am just listening to somebody spit out facts so I can write them down and memorizing everything just to pass an exam.*

### **The Big Picture—Bringing It All Together**

*The teachers (who) show that they are human and they make mistakes, it's much easier for you to interact with them. I had this one teacher who (was) just so passionate*

*about what s/he did, just the way s/he explained things and (conducted) group activities. We were like, why is s/he doing this? But then, after, you get the big picture. I learned so much...things like how to apply (what was learned) so many different ways. S/he was just very open to students.*

### **Hearing and Watching Is Not Knowing and Doing**

*I would just say that teachers who make sure that...you know what you're learning. You really know it and they won't move on until they're sure that you know it. They ask questions to make sure that you know it. They kind of drill it endlessly, a good drill. They don't just: they're set on a certain schedule and they have to do it, like certain classes with power point: we're doing this, these points, today and there's no discussion. Teachers who care about what you have to say, too, (versus) teachers (who) just read it off and go onto the next slide, instead of bouncing off of different people's ideas, kind of like a focus group and learning from each other. I think I learn better with discussion, instead of—if it's eight o'clock in the morning and it's a lecture and I'm just staring at a screen, I'm going to fall asleep, if the light's off. It's just boring to me.*

### **Dynamics of Motivation**

A number of patterns emerged that suggested dynamics of the academic experience that are motivating. Participants asserted that faculty expectations of them matter. Also asserted was the fact that expectations seemed to shift over the course of their years at the college. In addition, participants have their own expectations for professors. Participants appreciated being able to influence the behavior of professors and what occurs in classes, the ability to interact with each other and professors during classes, and the fact that experience happens within a context of feelings. Intimidation (or

more correctly, feeling intimidated) was reported as occurring in a variety of situations over the course of the undergraduate experience. Support as an antidote to intimidation seemed to inspire much gratitude. Teaching styles were recognized as having different effects on different students (with different learning styles), individual students could cite several effective styles, and professors who implemented a variety of styles received accolades. Any teaching strategies that engaged their minds—stimulated their own thinking—were cited by students as noteworthy. The following quotes help paint a portrait of class and professor characteristics that academically motivated these participants.

### **Expectations Evolve and Are on a Two-Way Street**

*I feel the courses got a lot more demanding as you progressed and I think that's good. But I also thought (the faculty) were more open. They showed more care to you as an individual, I think. Mainly, freshman year to sophomore year, it changed a little bit, but I felt like you were kind of just a person, just a number. I felt like freshman year, and I think a lot of people feel this way; it's kind of like a weeding out process. They just kind of throw stuff in your face. They figure out who wants to be here, who doesn't have it in him to stick with it, and they're like, I don't know, they just really, really challenge you. They care about you, but it's like, "If you drop, we don't care. We're looking for the people who want to do this." Then, as you get going, the next few years they're like, "Okay, come and talk to me. I'm going to help you do this. If you don't do a good job, step it up." Then they really get on you about being professional and having high expectations for you and you can't do less than that. They kind of get in your face more about it, get more personal, and also get higher expectations....*

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*Best professor, definitely, had to be one of the toughest classes I've probably taken.... (The professor) came in and the first day, I thought, this is going to be awful. (This professor) was strict. S/He came in and said, "This is what it is. This is tough. If you don't do what you're supposed to do, then you're not going to make it," which I like. I like it that s/he was strict from the beginning and told you what was expected, but s/he wasn't that way the whole time. S/He told some of the funniest stories I've ever heard in my life. S/He also...came in one morning and said, "I apologize. I don't know what I taught yesterday. It was awful. It was an awful, awful job. I'm going to do it again today. I'm going to go over it again today." (This professor) took responsibility for what (was) taught. S/He was strict, but made it enjoyable and I learned so much, so much.*

### **Student Influence on Professor Behavior**

*In my major...the professors really try to make the class interesting for not only for us, but themselves. You can tell that they are always growing and learning as professors. They also treat us as equals. They are teaching us, but...when you're getting lectured at it's very hard to soak a lot of stuff in, so it's a lot better to have open discussion with people. Professors who really stick to the syllabus and don't let classes run over because they're afraid that they won't get all their stuff taught: you can tell when teachers are like that, when they can't just step out of the box and let the class take on a life of its own.*

### **Interaction Among Students and With Professors**

*I was just like, why do I have to take this? It's on my schedule. I'll go. The teacher made it. S/He was so energetic. S/He was cracking jokes about it. S/He knew a lot of the*

*people didn't want to be there. S/He just made it so interesting. It was fun. S/He covered a lot. S/He laid down the law the first day. As we went on and as we got comfortable with the class, s/he let little things go. We always ended up giving (this teacher) the respect that s/he wanted. A lot of small group work, which I like because interacting with others—it's better like that.*

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*I thought it was a little bit harder and my grade was a lot better because I just felt like the teacher would take the time and give you the picture of what they wanted to see instead of just basically what the book would say that you can't understand.... This teacher really had an interest in making you understand. S/He wouldn't get frustrated with you if you couldn't understand. You could ask questions. You saw (this teacher) more as a person. To me, that makes a big difference with a teacher, is being able to see them as a person and not just as the teacher who stands up there and talks, but you can talk to them. You see another side of them, than just a teacher. That, for me, makes a lot of sense with learning, knowing the teacher and getting to see them as a person.*

### **Intimidation Happens (during any year)**

*My first semester, I was really intimidated by faculty, by professors. I remember in a couple of classes that I had, smaller classes, they said that a lot of surveys have shown that the more successful students have forged a relationship with at least one professor. I remember thinking, oh yeah, that's going to happen. I'm going to become a friend with a professor. In that respect, I was intimidated by the professors. They had office hours and everything, but I don't think, the first semester, I ever went to see a professor outside of class. I think a lot of the ACRs your freshman year, the teacher kind*

*of just teaches it with, how do I want to say it, like they have a formula down, since they're used to teaching that class over and over they teach it the same way. You feel like you don't want to step out of line and stop and ask them a question and see them outside of class about something. I think that's what intimidated me; especially my first class ever in college...was probably the largest class on campus. That was a shock right off the bat, the size. You're thrown into college and this person walks in, they teach a class, and they walk out. There are the office hours, but where are they going? Where are their rooms?*

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*I felt more intimidated by the professors within my major. I think that so much is expected from my major that I would imagine that classes probably get harder and harder as the years go by and the same professors every year (are) making changes, adjusting classes; I think that much more is expected from those classes. In that sense the teachers are more intimidating, not to mention, when you're taking (some) classes, sometimes the staff member that teaches it changes. It might be that staff member's first year teaching it or it's been two or three years since he or she has taught it, I think they're just a little bit more lenient, don't expect as much.*

**Support Helps (during any year)**

*I guess I would say the same thing, a teacher who has passion for the subject they're teaching were the classes I've enjoyed the most. You can just tell if a teacher really wants to be there, really wants to help their students. That's when you get the most out of it, because they wanted me to understand. That's when you can understand the most and take the most out of the class.*

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*(The teacher's) ready to teach, comes in every morning, if s/he's a minute late, s/he's like, "Oh, I'm sorry," really cares and will do anything for you, to help you. If you get a bad grade, s/he doesn't get mad that you're not putting the effort. It's like, "How can I help you to understand this more," never gets upset at anyone.*

### **Teaching Styles: Same Style—Different Result**

*You just went in. You know you didn't really need that much sleep, because all you'd have to do is just take notes about what the teacher was going to say. Sometimes, you'd have discussions, but for the most part it was all lectures and the professor usually didn't really talk to you. They just talked at you, really. If they asked questions, you could kind of get out of it. (During) freshman year, all those classes, if you didn't like it, you didn't really have to pay attention. You'd just have to write down your notes. I know I didn't really focus. I did well in all my classes freshman year, but when I was in class, it wasn't benefiting my major or anything, so I'd take the notes, take the test, and once it was over, I forgot all about it. I thought they were all the same.*

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*I got into that class and the instructor had a sense of humor. (The instructor) was so energetic and so in love with what s/he was teaching. I think that was honestly the only class, the most difficult class I had taken in college, was the only class I never skipped! I never missed once. As far as the difficult core courses that I had to take, that was also one of the best grades I've gotten throughout school. It was a lecture. It was a big 60-person lecture. I wanted to go to that class. I didn't want to miss it. I woke up every day and I went and I sat right in front. It was just so, I wanted to be there.*

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### **Teaching Styles: Same Student—Different Preferences**

*I have three different professor-types of classes that all work for me. The first is...where the teacher taught by example. ...Demonstration was a key factor for me. Also, when the professor almost puts as much work into the course as the students do, I have a professor now who (is) amazing. This professor's constantly finding articles for us and passing them along to us, passing on websites and there's tons of information that s/he passes along to us. You know s/he's doing (the teaching) side of the job and not just like, "Oh, yeah, do this. I'll check up on you later kind of a thing." The third type...it's more hands on...and it was almost more of a discussion where we would just go in and (the professor) wouldn't have a lesson plan, nothing, and we would just ask questions and s/he'd have every answer and just in general knew everything about everything kind of a teacher. I'm convinced that's the class where I learned the absolute most in (the subject), life, (the discipline), everything. It was an amazing course.*

### **Teaching Styles: Same Instructor—Different Styles**

*I've had a mixture of bad and good teachers, but I think that the ones that have left the biggest impact on me are the ones that practiced what they preached. I had a...class and the teacher was a coach of a team here. (This teacher) was absolutely amazing, the energy level that (was) brought to the class. It was nine o'clock in the morning and it was (the teacher's) prime time to be awake. (This teacher) just loved life. S/He would use examples...plus bring in two quotes of the day. S/He knew everybody's name the second day of class, which right now, second part of the first semester of this year, half my teachers don't even know who I am. The way that (this teacher) presented*

*her/himself, and it wasn't strict lecture either, it was a lot of group work. We had some debates in class about some controversial issues. We played family feud games for review. It made me want to go to class. I learned a lot. I'm thinking about maybe that type of a field for a master's degree some day.*

### **Beyond Substance and Style—Developing Student Thinking**

*The best teachers are able to play devil's advocate, no matter what opinions are being thrown out there. They can make you look at both sides. They're impartial. They're not trying to prove their point. Their point doesn't even resonate within their teaching. They are just focused on letting you see both sides of whatever situation it is. We're looking at work and then we're debating it in class and then going on the opposite side. I've also had some teachers who simply—I can't, it's hard to even describe, but—read the text and explain what it is, instead of just throwing it out there. It seems like they're almost doing the critical thinking themselves instead of allowing the students to do it.*

### Conclusions

From these focus group data, it is possible to identify several major factors affecting student engagement. The campus and campus community as a whole can lay a foundation of comfort and support that sustain engagement in academics, as well as co-curricular activities. The support and inspiration of an advisor, formally assigned or informally chosen, can be seen as both sustaining during the undergraduate experience and likely to persist into the unknown future of soon-to-be graduates. Professorial ability in the areas of interpersonal relationships and instructional competence—in that order—can engage students in any course during any year of their undergraduate education. Participants elaborated upon numerous methods of catching their interest and

involvement. All methods were subordinate to the desire for a sense of the professor as a person and the desire to be seen by the professor as persons.

Other professorial characteristics that were seen as engaging included enthusiasm for subject matter and teaching, providing challenge along with how details fit into a big picture, checking for student understanding, and reteaching when necessary.

Participants responded to professor expectations—and had their own expectations of professors. The opportunity to influence classes through interaction with professors and among students was valued. Acknowledgement of and support for challenges faced by students was also appreciated. Teaching with a variety of well-implemented styles and fostering thought through opportunities to analyze and even openly criticize positions was recognized as engaging. Participants were aware, though, of pressure to cover content and seemed to assume that coverage meant lecturing. Participant statements about the habits of engaging professors can be found in much of the literature about effective teaching of any subject at any level. Participants' sometimes vivid descriptions of classes that did engage their minds might serve as a guide to those of us confronting the challenges of the classroom and trying to figure out what might matter for the students in our charge.

Participant commentary points, in many respects, to the obvious. If student engagement is an educational goal, then passivity and the conditions that foster passivity are to be avoided. Class size—and even daily schedules (classes from eight until four, for example)—were mentioned by participants as inhibiting ability and willingness to interact with professors or seek interactions outside of class. Present conditions seem to place course content as the primary driver of academic activity (what students do),

followed by class size and scheduling, then relationship of professor to student, and—finally—the particulars of pedagogy as a less salient background factor.

Participant commentary suggests that the driver of academic engagement (how students respond to what they do) is relationships with professors and among students, followed by the presence or absence of active learning pedagogy, and class size (possibly along with whether or not daily schedules are “packed”). Finally, students clearly articulated the sense that their ability to master content at levels beyond memorization and basic understanding (toward analysis, synthesis, judgment—or thinking) rests substantially on these conditions.

Returning to the National Survey of Student Engagement and the issues raised by the Outcomes Assessment Task Force, students at Springfield College discussed engagement in terms of whether they had been able to form collegial relationships with faculty. These relationships tended to be described as, at least, civil and professional and, at best, respectful and stimulating—not necessarily close and personal. The actual experiences of the classroom (or lecture hall) and whether those experiences called for students to be actively engaged or passively mute were important, yet teaching styles (their term) were characterized as being less important than were the perceptions of the professor in relationship to the students and the class. These factors, however, are inter-related. Teaching style, or pedagogy, determines whether there are opportunities for students to interact (have learning-oriented relationships) and to influence how the experience of the class unfolds. Engagement as described by these participants rests on a four-legged foundation: relationship, active learning, class size, and the academic challenge to think, not just learn.

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