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“I’m Afraid It’s Going to be Awkward”: Students’ Perceived Barriers to Visiting Instructors During Office Hours

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Abstract. Research shows that students benefit from outside-of-class interaction with instructors (Guerrero & Rod, 2013; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) yet rarely take advantage of visiting faculty during office hours (Abdul-Wahab et al., 2019; Bippus et al., 2003; Griffin et al., 2014). We interviewed 39 students in six focus groups to learn more about why this is the case. Our transcribed focus group discussions revealed six barriers students experience interacting with faculty during office hours and six ways students perceive faculty mitigating the barriers. From these data, we note three implications for instructors as they understand and manage their interaction with students outside of class.

Studies have shown that interacting with professors outside of class positively correlates with students’ academic performance (Guerrero & Rod, 2013; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) and intellectual and personal growth (Halawah, 2006; Kim & Sax, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Recognizing the link to retention and graduation success, many universities measure faculty-student interaction as a key indicator of student engagement in college life and have instituted high impact practices to intentionally create opportunities for students to converse with faculty (Kuh, 2008). For example, the National Survey of Student Engagement (2023) asks students how often they engage in discussion with faculty outside of class and talk about career plans and academic progress. In their comprehensive literature review, Kim and Sax (2017) noted that faculty-student interaction is one of the most “frequently-cited institutional practices thought to be linked to array of positive outcomes for college students” (p. 126). Notably, the perceived quality of those interactions is more important than quantity for students’ performance (Dika, 2012).

Colleges and universities commonly require full-time faculty to hold office hours reserved for students. The practice is particularly common in the United States (Smith et al., 2017) and in some higher education contexts around the world (Wu, 2021). Presumably, visiting instructors during office hours is a prime opportunity to reap the benefits of outside-of-class communication (OCC) with faculty; however, research shows that students do not often use office hours (Briody et al., 2019; Cotten & Wilson, 2006; Cox et al., 2010, Nadler & Nadler, 2000). One study showed that two-thirds of the students surveyed never used office hours (Griffin et al., 2014), and two other studies showed fewer than half of the students reported using office hours regularly (Abdul-Wahab et al., 2019; Bippus et al., 2003).

Moreover, students who need interaction with faculty outside of class the most may be least likely to access it (Kuh, 2008). Reeves and Sperling (2015) found that higher-achieving students preferred finding the professor before or after class, while lower-achieving students preferred mediated channels like discussion boards. First-generation college students tend to communicate less frequently with faculty outside of class and are generally less satisfied with their interaction with faculty outside of class (Kim & Sax, 2009).

Research suggests a range of reasons students do not use office hours but often points to the idea that students are intimidated to initiate contact and/or approach faculty (e.g., Bippus et al., 2003; Briody et al., 2019; Dingel & Punt, 2023; Smith et al., 2017). This reticence may be particularly prevalent for Generation Z

students who have grown up with less face-to-face interaction (Twenge et al., 2019) and, thus, may perceive office hours as more threatening. Given the influence that student-faculty interactions can have on students' self-perceived worth and confidence (Kuh & Hu, 2001), understanding students' engagement with professors outside of class is useful in yielding deeper insights into their diverse attitudes and perceptions towards such interactions and the potential role that faculty play in shaping those perceptions.

Literature Review

There are unique dynamics at work in the context of students approaching faculty for OCC. Research shows that students do not want to appear "dumb" or in need of help (Ryan et al., 2005), and this deters them from communicating with instructors outside of class (Reeves & Sperling, 2015; Jaasma & Koper, 1999).

Qualitative studies suggest that students are uncertain about how to talk to professors and may feel intimidated by the power dynamics (Briody et al., 2019; Cotten & Wilson, 2006). Gender and cultural dynamics may also play a role in students' likelihood to engage professors. Kim and Sax (2009) found that white female students were most likely to engage faculty outside of class, and Asian American students were least likely to interact with faculty regarding course-related issues.

Practically speaking, some students view OCC as an imposition on their time. In Griffin et al.'s (2014) study, the perceived convenience of office hour time and location was a leading predictor in use. Despite this finding, modern college students expect to engage interpersonally with instructors. In her dissertation on expectations of Generation Z college students, Hoffman (2022) found that "...this group of students places great value on instructors being compassionate and kind" (p. 126) and they expect "at least a moderate amount of time to developing a relationship with them" (p. 127).

Although research has identified factors that influence students' use of office hours, we know less about the myriad of perceptions and attitudes that govern those choices and the extent to which students experience these barriers. To gain deeper insight into students' perceived barriers to OCC, we offer the following research question:

RQ1: What are the perceived barriers that students describe when approaching faculty for office hours?

Research is somewhat mixed on the degree to which instructors can influence students' likelihood to visit during office hours. Bippus et al. (2003) tested 17 factors and found that career and course mentoring and social accessibility (e.g., an instructor's willingness and desire to be available) were most predictive of a student's perception that OCC will be rewarding, more so than psycho-social mentoring or physical accessibility. In contrast, Griffin et al. (2014) conducted a similar test and found that the factors affecting students' use of office hours were largely beyond the control of individual instructors, such as whether the course is a major requirement, the availability of peer tutors, and class size. However, one exception to this was the instructor's use of feedback, which positively predicted students' use of office hours.

Additional research shows that instructors' subtle verbal and nonverbal behaviors can indeed influence students' impressions of instructors' receptivity to OCC (Dingel & Punti, 2023). For example, Cox et al. (2010) found that rather than instructors' explicit classroom pedagogies or professional activities, more subtle behaviors, such as an instructor's tone of voice, facial expressions, and other nonverbal behaviors, may be more significant in predicting students' use of office hours.

Students in Cotten and Wilson's (2006) qualitative study reported that instructors who self-disclosed and used humor in class were more approachable. Moreover, Nadler and Nadler (2000) surveyed faculty and found that the amount of time they spent in OCC interaction with students correlated with their own empathetic concern and perceptions of equality (mutual respect and cooperation).

Taken together, these studies suggest that students' perceptions of instructor approachability might reside in students' perceptions of subtle verbal and nonverbal interaction. That is, when students perceive empathy and equality being communicated, they are more likely to engage and, thus, perceive the office hours context as less threatening.

Less is known about what faculty intentionally do to make OCC, like office hours, more accessible. Some studies suggest that explicit welcoming language in the syllabus can impact students' perceptions of faculty openness (Cox et al., 2010; Lapiene et al., 2022). Other research shows that the way instructors frame "office hours" can make a difference in students' OCC with faculty, noting that the traditional model of sitting

around for blocks of time waiting for students is outdated and inefficient (Briody et al., 2019; Chung & Hsu, 2006; Joyce, 2017; Rees, 2014; Smith et al., 2017).

Overall, these findings indicate that faculty communication can make OCC, like office hours, less threatening. Given what *The Chronicle of Higher Education* deemed a “crisis of student disengagement” in higher education (“How to Solve the Student-Disengagement Crisis”, 2022, p. 1) it behooves us to examine students’ perceptions of what and how faculty can communicate, be it verbally or non-verbally, to encourage students to engage in interaction with faculty in and out of the classroom. To that end, we pose the following research question:

RQ 2: What are the ways students describe instructors mitigating the barriers to OCC and office hours?

Methodology

To explore students’ perceptions and experiences approaching faculty outside of class, this study used qualitative methodology. Griffin et al.’s (2014) quantitative study of student motivations called for qualitative data to understand student attitudes and perceptions in depth. After receiving approval from the university’s Institutional Review Board, we conducted six semi-structured focus group interviews of three to 12 participants. Similar to past studies that used focus groups (e.g., Cotten & Wilson, 2006) we chose this methodology in order to generate nuanced conversation among students about their perceptions of office hours and OCC with their instructors.

The focus groups took place on Zoom between April and October 2021 and averaged 36 minutes in length with a total time of 3 hours and 39 minutes. One of the four researchers served as facilitator for each focus group with care given that a facilitator was not also serving as an instructor to participants in the assigned focus group.

Each focus group followed a standard set of five open-ended questions asking participants about their previous experience and expectations for office hours. We used probing questions to understand possible mitigating factors as well as participants’ perceived benefits and threats of attending office hours.

The study utilized a convenience nonprobability sample of 39 undergraduate students at a regional university in the southeast region of the United States. We recruited participants from introductory communication and public relations courses serving majors from across the university. Participants received extra credit for their participation. Thirty-one of the participants identified as white, three identified as African American, four identified as Asian, and one identified as other. Twenty-nine of the participants identified as female, nine as male, and two as non-binary. Thirty-five of the students had a GPA over 3.0. Nine were first-year students, 18 were second-year, eight were third-year, and four were fourth-year. Six of the participants reported no visits with faculty in the past semester. Most said they visit one to five times a semester, and four reported 20 or more or “weekly” visits with faculty.

We recorded focus groups in Zoom and transcribed the interviews, resulting in 27,359 words suitable for qualitative analysis. We coded the transcribed data using the constant comparative method consistent with the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1988). This method followed a three-stage process where we identified, compared and contrasted units of analysis and coded them thematically (Strauss & Corbin, 1988). We considered a participant’s expression of an idea as the unit of analysis and used ATLAS software to track and verify our coded themes.

Each transcript was coded separately by each researcher and then verified by subsequent reviews both individually and collaboratively. A final review identified theme resonance and representative emic language for each theme. Through this multi-layered coding approach, themes were identified and verified through multiple individual and collaborative reviews.

Results

The results of our coding revealed six barriers that students perceive in approaching instructors outside of class and six ways students perceived instructors mitigating the threat of office hours in their interaction with students.

Student Perceptions of Barriers to OCC and Office Hours

Participants discussed six barriers they experience when considering an office hour visit: (1) discomfort with the space, (2) the awkwardness of the encounter, (3) the imposition on time, (4) the perception that the teacher doesn't care, (5) feeling intimidated by the teacher, and (6) feeling stupid.

Discomfort with Space: "Formal," "Rigid," "Fluorescent Lights"

In five of the six groups, participants mentioned a negative connotation with the physical space of the office. One participant noted, "I think of office, I think of 'nine-to-five,' like you're here only to pay the bills. That's it. And it's like this, this pressure of being serious and ... stern..." (Group B).

Other participants described the faculty office as "formal" (Groups C & D), a "strict professional setting" (Group D), and "very rigid or just not fun environment." One group noted the "fluorescent lights" (Group F), and two participants contrasted the office with "safe" spaces (Groups C & E).

Participants in Groups B and F observed that the office was for "getting questions answered" and "talking about grades," but mentoring and networking were more appropriate over coffee in a more casual setting. Their perception that the office setting was for more difficult conversations relates to the second theme: their perception of the encounter as awkward.

Awkward Encounter: "I Don't Like Physical Interaction"

The belief that office hours could be "awkward" emerged in 20 comments across five of the six groups. Students perceived synchronous interaction with faculty, whether through a video-mediated channel or in person, to be awkward. One participant explained,

I'm kind of afraid it's going to be awkward. Like we're just going to show up and kind of like stare at each other, and like it's going to be really just uncomfortable... And like what happens at the next class? I feel like they're looking at me weird, or like it's always going to have like that weird awkward tension. Even if they're a very nice person it's just sometimes not worth the awkwardness. (Group E)

Participants elaborated on several factors that made the encounter awkward. Students in two of the groups mentioned the pandemic and the difficulty of transitioning from online and masked learning to on-campus interaction (Groups B & C).

One participant located the awkwardness in the initial encounter with subsequent encounters being less difficult: "... [T]hat first office hours meeting with your professor is always awkward. Always. Because you're like 'Hey,' and they're like 'Hey.' But then, after that, like once you start showing up... it's like a lot more relaxed" (Group A). Another student said that showing up unannounced is awkward: "... sometimes dropping in is awkward because what if they're not there? You know? That's what I'm always nervous about" (Group A).

Two students mentioned the gender dynamics of the interaction as awkward. One said, "I'm coming at this from a female standpoint but, I know some, like, some professors just give you the 'ick' ... I don't want to be alone in a room with them" (Group B). Another said that they identify as nonbinary and were uncertain about how their professor would talk to them (Group E).

Participants in three of the groups talked about office hours through Zoom being "awkward" (Groups A, B, & D). One student described not knowing where to look or when to hang up and said it was particularly awkward if "...the teacher isn't very social" (Group D). In all of these cases, these post-COVID, Generation Z students determined that the benefit they might gain from OCC was not worth a potentially awkward encounter, particularly given the other demands on their time.

Time: "It's a Whole Thing..."

Time was a common barrier mentioned 38 times across the six groups. Accessibility was sub-theme mentioned 14 times in the focus groups. In many cases, students said that the office hours were scheduled during their other classes and at times that were inconvenient for them. Some students attributed the accessibility problem to "scheduling conflicts" (Group C), "other obligations" (Group D), and busy college student schedules (Group F). One participant explained, "the timing is usually off... I like work during the

day. And I have my actual classes so usually I'm doing my homework at like 11 or 12 at night" (Group E). In other cases, students seemed to blame faculty for the lack of accessibility: "...a lot of my professors who have like one to two hours a week scheduled for office hours, and it's like middle of the day when I have classes, and it's like are you serious?" (Group E).

A second sub-theme was students' prioritization wherein they weighed the value of in-person interaction with other things they could be doing. One student observed, "I have 1,000 things that I'm juggling right now. In an ideal world, I would go to office hours for all of them, but there's just no time ... I don't have time to go and chat with somebody" (Group A). Another participant noted that not going to office hours would allow more time to "take a nap... de-stress and watch Netflix, or do a face mask" (Group A). Other groups mentioned class overloads (Group F) and obligations outside of school (Group B).

As students weighed the value of office visits in their schedules, they also noted the inconvenience of actually going to a physical office. As one participant described, "...like you have to go there--the whole thing" (Group E). The student went on to say that students don't want to "get up from their desk and like walk all the way across campus" when they can meet with instructors on Zoom (Group C). Participants in Groups B and F mentioned living off campus and having to drive in and park.

Other participants preferred using other resources like the Math Center (Group D), Khan Academy (Group C), and email (Group E). One student commented, "Usually I try pretty much every other like tool first....I'll go on YouTube and search for, like, videos on it, like I'm always Googling the answer. I guess, it just seems a little bit easier" (Group E).

Teacher Doesn't Care: "This Isn't a Get-to-Know-One-Another Chatting Time"

Twenty-five comments across all six groups conveyed students' perceptions that faculty weren't interested in helping them during office hours. The students largely based their perceptions on previous encounters they had with faculty or their read of the instructors' verbal and nonverbal behaviors. One student said, "...from the way my professors have always said it, or it has come off, is that, like, this isn't a get-to-know-one-another chatting time, like, I'm really busy so just come to me if you have a problem" (Group B).

A participant in Group F provided an example of how this impression could be derived: "You know some professors are like 'if you email me on a Friday, after 3:59 pm I won't answer until Monday' and then I was like, oh, I guess you don't want to help." Similarly, a student in Group D said,

If a professor feels unapproachable in the classroom and says like point blank "don't email me" or "on weekends I'm doing said thing," then in my mind I've already kind of shut that out and it gives me this like general sense...that person is unapproachable.

A participant in Group E described a professor who didn't return emails, and a participant in Group C said that a professor referred to students as "annoying."

These examples convey how quickly students form perceptions of teacher approachability based on teachers' routine comments and behaviors. Related to this perception is the students' feeling that faculty do not have time for them.

In nine comments across five groups, students described their instructors as "rushed" or "distracted" during office hours. One student in Group B explained,

...when someone's disconnected that's a real just a turn-away. Like being on your phone, being on your computer, typing up more emails, while you're doing this. I get it, you have to be efficient, but I'm also still trying to ask for clarification. Um, not allowing me to get my sentence out. That's a real bummer. Like cutting me off, and ... just like a lack of compassion, lack of empathy. Like clearly not caring that I'm also another human being. I get it, I haven't gotten my master's or doctorate yet, but I'm still a person.

In this example, the student interpreted her professor's distraction as a lack of care and attributed it to their difference in academic status.

Several students shared their perception that some faculty conveyed a lack of "empathy" (Group B), "compassion" (Group B), and "care" (Group D). One student in Group D painted the picture of a negative,

profit-driven motive of faculty: "...let's talk it out and like be a team, instead of, well 'You failed. Now come give me your money, and...retake my class.' ... that's kind of how some of my teachers relay it."

Participants in two groups described professors who were evasive in their interaction with students. A professor who "doesn't answer questions very thoroughly in class" (Group D) or who answers questions in "riddles" (Group C) was not seen as helpful to these students. Similarly, two other students perceived that their instructors conveyed "Oh, you should know that already" (Group D) or "Well you figure it out, it's your assignment" (Group E).

These may be inaccurate perceptions or comments taken out of context, but they were offered by the participants as reasons not to attend office hours. When instructors conveyed a lack of interest, were rushed or distracted, or were not empathetic or helpful, students clearly perceived a lack of interest in them personally, which impacted their likelihood to drop by the office.

Teacher is Intimidating: "...Like an Aura... She's Scary!"

In twenty comments across all six groups, participants said that being intimidated by the teacher might keep them from going to office hours. Eight comments revealed participants' perceptions of teachers formed in classroom interaction. A participant in Group C explained, "...if they're not super nice in class, then it can be somewhat expected that they're perhaps even less so during office hours when it's just one on one." Others said they steer clear when a teacher is "strict" or "cold" (Group D), "snarky" (Group A) or "talks down" to students in class (Groups E & F). One participant explained, "I know this is the most unhelpful way to describe it, but it almost feels like an aura sometimes like the professor just walks into the classroom and you can feel something like, she's scary!" (Group A). Another described the "commanding presence" of some professors (Group A) as intimidating.

Six comments linked the students' intimidation directly to the intellect of the professor. One participant said, "If your professor is like really brilliant. And then you're like, oh, my question is like totally like 700 levels ... below their IQ level, like they are not going to be able to even understand what I'm trying to, what I'm confused about because to them it's so simple" (Group A). Another student drew a similar contrast: "...your intellectual ideas, like level is up here and mine's kind of down here. I don't have a doctorate. Like I don't know what you're talking about" (Group D). A third student mentioned not wanting to feel "clueless" and "incompetent" relative to the professor (Group E).

Finally, four of the comments revealed students' fear of the encounter itself. As one student put it, "I'm scared of them...I know they're sweethearts but like they intimidate me sometimes...I don't know if I want to talk to them, one-on-one..." (Group A). Another participant described the threat related to direct, in-person feedback: "the intimidation of having to speak with your professor one on one and having them like directly look at your work... that can be intimidating" (Group B).

Notably, some of these perceptions point to the inherent asymmetry of the professor/student relationship such as the credentials professors hold or the function of providing direct feedback on work. Other perceptions seemed more connected to personality as manifest in verbal and nonverbal behaviors such as "cold," "strict" and "talking down."

Feeling Stupid: The Struggling Kid

In eighteen comments across all six groups, students said the threat of feeling incompetent was a barrier to using office hours. Two-thirds of these comments were about students not wanting to admit that they needed help or be perceived as "struggling." Students imagined this perception through the eyes of themselves, the professor, and their fellow students.

For example, a Group B participant summarized, "...no one really likes to admit they're lost and don't know what they're doing." Another referenced her own self-evaluation and the perceptions of the professor:

I'm, for sure, a perfectionist, so the idea of like going to the professor and like asking a question that I don't understand is hard, but if that professor, I think, is not going to understand why I don't understand, I don't think I would go either. (Group F)

Other groups talked about the threat as solely related to the instructor's perceptions of them. A student in Group E put it bluntly, "What if the professor thinks I'm an idiot? ... I don't want to have that." A participant in Group C framed the threat as related to letting the professor down: "... it takes a lot... to admit that you're struggling like especially to this professor who's like putting in the time every day to be in class. Like...you're disrespecting them."

Students also talked about how they would appear to their classmates. One student recounted a time when the teacher said in front of the class that she had been coming to office hours in order to encourage others to come. She said it made her feel like a spotlight was on her: "Yeah, it's either you're the teacher's pet or the struggling kid and neither one of those is anything that anyone wants to be" (Group A). Several groups discussed the way professors invite students to office hours in class by saying, "If you're struggling, come see me." They agreed that no one wants to be the "struggling kid" in their own self-evaluation, in the eyes of the professor, or in the eyes of their peers.

A second sub-category that emerged related to "feeling stupid" in the actual encounter. Several referenced "anxiety" about the experience, and one participant described the prospect of sitting one on one with a professor as "overwhelming" (Group B). In several comments, the students connected their anxiety to not being able to perform well in the meeting. They worried that their questions might not be "good enough" (Group A) and that they might not "be prepared" (Group F). One student summarized, "...the anxiety also comes from like you're expected to have, like all these questions laid out, but sometimes you don't even know like what you want to talk about; you just know there's an issue..." (Group D). One student in Group E summarized:

I know for me, I'll overthink everything. So, when it comes to an assignment...I will overthink whether I even need to go to office hours. You know, will I just be bothering the professor? ...then, if I actually show up, you know, then I think I worry about the questions I'm asking...Anxiety plays a big role for me in keeping me from going to office hours, I think.

Anxiety emerged throughout the interviews and underscored a number of the aforementioned barriers.

Our interviews revealed that Generation Z, post-pandemic college students experience unique concerns about in-person encounters with faculty. They also revealed a number of ways students perceive faculty breaking through the barriers and making OCC more inviting.

Student Perceptions of How Instructors Mitigate the Threat of OCC and Office Hours

The participants discussed six ways they see faculty mitigate the threat of office hours and make it more likely that students will visit: (1) welcoming spaces, (2) convenience of set-up, (3) efficiency of meeting, (4) incentives, (5) instructor behavior in class, and (6) instructor behavior in the meeting. These parallel the aforementioned barriers and offer practical ways instructors can imagine making office hours more accessible.

Welcoming Spaces: "Let's Go Get Coffee..."

Ten comments referenced the setting in which office hours occur. Five comments referenced going to get coffee or tea with their instructors. As one person said, "you have something to do" and it makes the event "less stressful" (Group A). Five participants said that they would prefer to meet in a public space such as a public seating area, coffee shop, or outside. They indicated that it would "break down that barrier" (Group D) and that there is "not as much pressure" (Group A) as there would be in a formal office setting. Participants in Group E discussed how offering office hours through Zoom affords comfort for some students because they could do it in their "own space" instead of the instructor's space. In all discussions of space, the theme of "comfort" was prominent. Situating office hours in a "low-threat" environment may make them more accessible.

Convenience of Setting-Up Office Hours: "You Schedule Yourself!"

A much more significant category related to accessibility and had to do with scheduling. Twenty-seven comments across all six groups referenced the need to communicate availability and the convenience of online schedulers.

Across four groups, students described how professors can reassure students of their availability. Instead of just including it in the syllabus and mentioning it on the first day of class, students talked about multiple reminders throughout the semester and via multiple channels. For example, one student said, “they’re putting in every space that they can communicate to students-- syllabus, emails, whatever it may be... I think the reinforcement...makes them feel even more welcome to the hours” (Group E). Instructors who were explicit about office hours being time that they valued for interaction with students rather than an “obligation” (Group A) reassured students who were anxious about coming. One student explained, “if a professor is approachable and gives that that sense of feeling like they’re going to...actually listen to what you’re saying, it’s huge” (Group D).

Notably, to counteract the “struggling kid” anxiety, the participants said that professors who invite students in a way that “doesn’t make you feel bad” (Group D) are most likely to be perceived as genuinely desiring to help. They explained that professors who were enthusiastic and positive about office hours could transfer that energy to students: “Like, if a professor is like ‘Oh, you know, you should come to office hours it’ll be great,’ like, their excitement towards it makes me more excited and more comfortable” (Group F). Five comments across four groups referenced how instructors intentionally convey they are available outside of set hours. For example, one student said she likes it when professors say “...Okay, if my set office hours that I have right now don’t work for you, email me and we can figure something out” (Group A).

More than twenty comments referenced the value of using an online scheduling tool where students could electronically schedule an appointment. This topic surfaced in the first two focus groups, and we intentionally asked about it in subsequent groups. Students agreed that an online scheduling tool made going to office hours easier. Several comments noted that it eliminated the “hassle” (Group E) of the “extended email thing” (Group A) and was less “awkward” than dropping in (Group A). One participant explicitly framed the scheduling tool as removing a barrier: “I think it takes the kind of responsibility away from you, for planning and organizing it and just gives you opportunity to just kind of show up and learn, which I think is helpful” (Group F). Participants in Group F talked about how having a designated start and end time allowed them to plan their days.

In terms of the tool itself, one participant noted that it would be even better if instructors across campus used a common tool that sends calendar invitations and reminders (Group C), and another emphasized the need for privacy, which a general Google Doc might not afford (Group D).

Efficiency During Office Hours: “We Knocked It All Out in Like 10 Minutes”

Twenty-two comments across all six focus groups said that efficiency in the encounter makes them more inclined to come. Many described an “ideal” office hour as short and issue-focused: “an ideal office hour for me is just dropping by for maybe about 5 to 15 minutes to discuss the question” (Group B).

Eighteen specifically referenced the convenience of video-mediated office hours. While some said they preferred in-person interaction, many described Zoom as a more convenient option for quick questions about class. One participant likened it to a “virtual doctor visit” appropriate for a “quick problem” (Group D). Another commented, “...when it’s just on my laptop it’s so easy to just join a Zoom link...and work it out within like five minutes” (Group A). Several students referenced “jumping” or “hopping” on Zoom, which seemed to suggest spontaneity and ease of access, particularly in contrast to the “hassle” (Group E) of going in. Two groups observed that video-mediated office hours allow professors to be more flexible with their scheduling because they can do it from home (Group C) or late at night or early in the morning (Group D).

While there was widespread agreement that professors should offer the option of virtual office hours, some said that they preferred one-on-one options as well. One student said that the subject matter influences modality:

In a writing class, it’s easier to share your screen and have them look over like a thesis statement or whatever, but in my math class I feel like I really benefit from like having a paper of my work and then looking exactly like where I went wrong or like how to do it differently. (Group D)

Aside from the virtual option, Group C students discussed other ways faculty made office hours more convenient for students. One mentioned a “15- to 30-minute window before class” where students could show up to talk. Another talked about group study sessions where students were “free to come and go.” Both

of these options allow flexibility in student scheduling and made the prospect of an office hours visit less of an imposition.

Incentives: “You Know, Bonus Points...”

Nine students in four of the groups mentioned specific incentives faculty members used to make office hours less imposing. The most common incentive mentioned in all four groups was extra credit. One student said: “So, like if someone's going to give me a better grade just to go talk to them, like, I’m happy to do that” (Group A). Another student mentioned professors allowing students who visited on office hours to choose their presentation days (Group A).

Other students described professors who made an introductory office hour visit mandatory. One participant said that this was particularly helpful for first-year students and would make it easier for them to “come back and ask for help” (Group F). Another student said that required office hours might be viewed “begrudgingly” (Group A), but that it would be helpful for introductory students to normalize the practice. If time and convenience are primary barriers for accessing office hours, incentives afford students a different calculation. In addition, the initial visit may serve to desensitize them to some of the anxiety they anticipate in the encounter.

Teacher Classroom Behavior: “He’s Very Chill About It. He’s Not Intimidating...”

In fourteen comments across four of the focus groups, participants talked about a teacher’s behavior in the classroom making it more likely that they would visit during office hours. Two sub-categories emerged in this discussion: teacher immediacy and invitation. Groups D and F had robust discussion about the “vibes” teachers give off in class. The behaviors they described are related to well-documented (e.g., Jaasma & Koper, 1999) verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors including self-disclosure, positivity, and humor. One participant summarized:

...the conversation that a professor has like at the very beginning of class like when people are coming in and instead of just like sitting there on their phone or just getting things ready like they're personally talking to you individually, or like the class in general and, like sharing personal things about themselves of things that are happening, asking about your life...and like verbally expressing how much they like the class or...like teaching... (Group F)

Participants in Group D mentioned “a little humor or icebreaker” and “fun photos” on Blackboard made a class more personable which, in turn, made them more likely to engage outside of class.

The behaviors translated into personal traits in the minds of the participants, and adjectives they used to describe professors they would likely visit were “chill” (Group D), “personable” and “realistic” (Group F). As one student noted,

With my foreign language professor, I would absolutely go to her office hours 1,000% because I’m just obsessed with her. But if my bio teacher was ‘like come to my office hours,’ I wouldn't go. I'd rather, you know, struggle. (Group F)

In-Session Behavior: “It’s Just a Chat”

Similar to the in-class verbal and nonverbal immediacy, eight participants talked about the demeanor of faculty during the visit. Participants in Group D used words like “welcoming,” “friendly” and “relaxed” which teachers cultivated nonverbally and through small talk. Group E also referenced “friendly” encounters and mentioned professors who were “easy-going” and whose “attention is on helping you.” One participant in Group F said that her professor offered food as a way of being welcoming.

The friendly demeanor of faculty naturally leads to a more relaxed encounter in general. This seemed to be an antidote to the awkwardness the students associated with OCC. Several students in Group E said that their “ideal” office hours visit would be “just a chat,” where they “hang out” with faculty and converse one-on-one. Similarly, a participant said that an easy conversation “...makes it feel more like a colleague sort of thing than a professor and someone in authority” (Group C). This seemed in sharp contrast to the asymmetry they previously described as threatening.

In fourteen comments across five of the groups, students talked about connecting with faculty on a personal level during the office hour visit. In a few cases, students talked about a professional mentoring role and getting “future career advice” (Group F), but mostly students talked about a personal relationship outside of the context of class. One student explained:

I’ve had a few professors and like these last four years that I have really connected with and like they got to know me as a student very, very well and, as a person as well. So sometimes I honestly just go to the office because, like, life might be a lot! (Group E)

A student in Group D said that the pandemic made everything “more personal,” and several students said that their professors would ask about their mental health in addition to offering class help. One student described a teacher who combined class support with what she perceived as care: “she helped me like look over my thesis statement and then she also asked sort of about my mental health that was happening so, um, just knowing that she cared about that was also very helpful” (Group D).

The belief that instructors cared beyond the transactional nature of the class and office hours visit was meaningful to the participants. A personal “vibe” in class, reassuring students of their availability, and being friendly and “chill” in the actual encounter are ways that teachers can diffuse the power dynamic and resulting anxiety of OCC.

Discussion

The focus group interviews yielded rich, nuanced discussion of participants’ reasons they do or do not use office hours. Consistent with previous studies (e.g., Bippus et al., 2003; Briody et al., 2019; Cotten & Wilson, 2006; Dingel & Punt, 2023; Smith et al., 2017), students identified both practical and relational barriers to OCC with their instructors. Our study revealed unique themes related to Generation Z students’ anxiety about the relational and power dynamics at play in their OCC with instructors. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Kim & Sax, 2017; Kuh & Hu, 2001), these findings suggest that students may miss the potential rewards of building a positive mentoring relationship with faculty because they are afraid to connect and/or don’t view it as a priority. In our analysis of the results, three overarching implications for instructors looking to re-engage their students emerged.

First, this study highlights the anxiety Generation Z, post-COVID students have about in-person encounters with their professors. Consistent with Hoffman’s (2022) findings, our participants said they expect kindness and compassion from their instructors, and they desire a relational connection with them. However, they also negatively associated the office space with rigidity and formality, they perceived that in-person interaction was “awkward,” and ultimately concluded that they often do not have time for it.

For the students who would benefit from OCC with faculty and do not seek it out, instructors might look to new technology such as online schedulers and video-mediated meetings to help mitigate those threats for students. Moreover, they should be mindful of the power dynamics of the space in which they meet with students and consider offering group study sessions in common areas and incentivizing low-stakes introductory meetings that might alleviate the threat of visiting the office.

Second, students talked about time and convenience as barriers to OCC with their instructors. Their conversation sometimes characterized OCC as transactional (i.e., getting a question answered) and sometimes as relational (i.e., career advice, mentoring, etc.). In order to protect the students’ and their own time, instructors might publish resources for students to use independently. If students can answer their question with a YouTube video, that frees up office hours for relational mentoring of students. Additionally, mediated channels can make it more convenient for students to access faculty for quick questions. Previous studies have shown that office hours offered through text-mediated channels can increase students’ interaction with faculty (Cifuentes & Lents, 2010) or their perception of faculty availability (Li & Pitts, 2009). Future research might explore the effectiveness of more modern technological tools to meet the transactional needs of students.

Finally, participants were candid about their fear of appearing “stupid” and the various ways they perceive instructors communicate intimidation or a lack of care. Some of the participants contextualized their anxiety as “post-COVID” or typical of Generation Z, and that is consistent with research on perceptions of modern college students (Hoffman, 2022; Twenge et al., 2019). Instructors’ small, likely unintentional

behaviors like being distracted in a meeting, framing office hours for “those who are struggling,” or clarifying weekend availability can deter students from coming. Previous studies show that kindness (Hoffman, 2022),

...offering extra assurance and conveying welcome and attentiveness, both in class and in the meeting itself, can incentivize students to get the help they need.

immediacy (Jaasma & Koper, 1999), and equality (Nadler & Nadler, 2000) are important for relational connection with students, but this study offers new insight on how students interpret those characteristics. Our findings also show that offering extra assurance and conveying welcome and attentiveness, both in class and in the meeting itself, can

incentivize students to get the help they need. Future research might explore the role of social anxiety in fueling the threatening teacher-student dynamics between Generation Z college students and teachers.

Our focus group methodology yielded an in-depth look at students’ perceptions, but it comes with inherent limitations. This study took place at a relatively small, teaching-centered university in the southern United States where the average class size is 21 students, and faculty serve as advisers to students. Future research might examine university contexts with larger class sizes and teaching assistants to see how perceptions and roles vary with volume. The participants of this study were also predominantly white, female students who were motivated by extra credit to participate. These factors may limit the generalizability of the results to a larger population.

Despite these limitations, this study offers in-depth understanding of why students may resist engaging faculty outside of class. In an increasingly-mediated world where students are questioning the value of their degree, OCC may be one of the most important things faculty do to re-engage students in the university. Communication with a professor outside of class, whether by video, in the office, or over coffee, could make a significant difference in the life of a student. This study offers new insight on why students are not dropping by, and what might make them start.

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