

Walking With Students to Increase Satisfaction and Retention

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The Walking Office Hours exercise was originally instituted as a requirement in an introductory health topics class. Students were required, in pairs, to walk with the instructor for one-half hour on campus. This activity was seen so positively by students that it was repeated as a requirement for a human resources management class. In both courses, students unanimously reported a higher "comfort level" with the instructor following the walk and believed Walking Office Hours should be repeated in future classes. Although this classroom research project involved students walking with a professor, the activity could easily be adapted so advisors could walk with students.

Recent conversations and activities on many college campuses have focused on the need for improved student retention. Students have been referred to as "customers" and efforts have been made to increase "customer satisfaction." Because faculty involvement with students is known to improve both student satisfaction with education and student retention (Pascarella, Terenzini, & Wolfe, 1986), professors have been urged to make contact with students outside the classroom. Interaction between students and faculty members has a stronger relationship to student satisfaction with the college experience than any other researched variable (Sydow & Sandel, 1998). Several studies have shown that student involvement in the institution and regular faculty-student interaction increase student satisfaction, academic success, and retention (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1987). Student-faculty interaction has even been shown to have positive correlations with all areas of intellectual and personal growth and with many personality, attitude, and behavior outcomes (Astin, 1993).

Interactions with faculty members that occur outside the classroom and that integrate classroom and nonclassroom experience are significant to freshman-sophomore persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Faculty advising can stimulate a shared, positive, and active approach to student intellectual and interpersonal learning. Crookston (1972) saw academic advising as a teaching function, and many universities require faculty members to advise students. If

professors are not expected to advise students in a formal sense, they should still make as many connections with students as possible; these relationships will help students succeed and encourage their retention.

With this research in mind and in an effort to try a "new and different" approach to an introductory health class taught in the fall, I instituted an activity called "Walking Office Hours." Enrollments in this course included 13 males and 20 females. The class was offered for general education credit and included 9 freshmen, 6 sophomores, 9 juniors, and 9 seniors. Students were required, in pairs, to walk with me for one-half hour on the Indiana University–Purdue University, Fort Wayne, campus. This project was included in the syllabus as a requirement and was worth five course points. As 1 of 16 class assignments—one of which could be dropped without penalty—students completed a questionnaire (Figure 1) on Walking Office Hours.

I teach at a commuter campus, where students generally attend classes and leave as soon as possible. Once a week in class, I pointed out times that I would be available to walk. Most students were able to volunteer at times I had suggested and often paired with another student whom they had not met. Toward the end of the semester, I adjusted my schedule to meet the needs of two or three students who were unavailable during previously proposed times.

During our walks, I discovered that most of them had never been to the newer campus buildings, and almost none of them had ever been in the physical fitness center. We generally walked to those places, toured the physical fitness center, and informally discussed exercise plans and other course-related topics.

All students chose to participate in the activity and turn in the questionnaire, and I was pleased to see that they unanimously thought I should require this activity in future offerings of my health class. However, the most surprising result was the high number of comments stating that this activity had increased student comfort level with me in and out of the classroom. Twenty of the students mentioned this aspect of the exercise specifically. Our walks made them more comfortable about asking questions and participating in class discussions. I have a very open, informal

Figure 1 Walking Office Hours class survey

Class ID Number _____	Name _____
Due Date _____	
H120 Contemporary Health Issues CRG #16-Walking Office Hours	
1. Date and time of walk _____ 2. Name of fellow student who walked at same time _____ 3. In general terms, where did we walk? 4. List three things you learned as a result of this experience. 5. List three things you learned about the professor as a result of this experience. 6. Based on this experience, do you think walking each day or at least 3 times a week would be a good exercise plan for you? Why or why not? 7. Do you know anyone who walks regularly? If so, what do they say is the main benefit of regular walking? 8. Using either yourself or your parents as subjects, what do you think you would need to do to make walking a routine part of your life? (What do your parents think they would need to do to make walking a routine part of their lives?) 9. In your opinion, is this activity something that Dr. Steinhaus should continue in future offerings of this course? Why or why not? (There is no penalty for negative answers—I really want to know what you think!)	

Note. Layout edited to fit; students were given ample space to adequately answer the questions.

style and generally receive student evaluations that comment about my approachability and openness to student comments and discussions. Therefore, I found this type of feedback more surprising than others with a more formal style might have.

With this history of success, I decided to modify the activity for use in my spring semester human resources management class. This course also required weekly written assignments of which this activity became one. The main focus of the questionnaire was student opinion, based on walking with me in pairs, about the appropriateness of implementing a walking program at a workplace. See Figure 2 to see the specific questions raised about employee relationships, informal networking, and potential problems with Walking "Work" Hours.

Because of the feedback from the health class, I specifically asked "What did doing this activity with Dr. Steinhaus do to your relationship with or attitude towards Dr. Steinhaus?" To help them transfer the outcomes of paired walking to the workplace, I then asked, "Would similar changes occur if you walked with someone at work?"

Attending this class were 12 males and 19 females. Thirteen students were juniors and 18 were seniors. Eight of the students in this class had been in other classes with me, including 4 who had taken the health class the previous semester in which we had walked. My former students reported little or no change in our relation-

ship. They reported that they already felt comfortable with my style and that the relationship probably could not be improved since it was already positive. The 4 students who had walked in the health class were impressed with how well the modified focus fit the human resources course.

However, all the remaining students reported a positive change in the teacher-student relationship, and most believed that this activity would usually benefit the workplace. Comments such as the following were typical: "It made the relationship more personal. Yes, similar changes would occur at work." "Increased my relationship very positively . . . it is a good way to understand people you hardly know." "It made me feel that she was willing to listen and help out on any problems that may arise (such as scheduling of classes). It also put me at ease, that she is an easy person to talk to and not to be afraid to talk and ask questions in class. I feel a work situation would have similar effects." "It showed a sense of appreciation and interest to the students' attitudes and comments that she'd take 'time off' to do this. Possibly, similar changes of attitude, ideas, or people might be affected." "I feel a little more relaxed and see Dr. Steinhaus as a person as well as a professor." "It allowed me to feel more free to participate in class and give my opinions because the walking office hour made me more comfortable with you." "I think what it does is that it places a face/personality on someone."

Figure 2 Walking Office Hours class survey

WALKING OFFICE HOURS—CRITICAL READING GUIDE SPEA V373/H371 SPRING, 1999
Name _____
Date and Time of Walk _____
In general terms, where did we walk?
In general terms, what did we talk about?
Based on this experience, what advantages/disadvantages can you see to doing these activities while walking? Please comment on general issues of walking at work, and then speak to walking while doing these specific activities.
Interviewing job applicants
Orientation of new employees
Routine meetings of 2 or 3 employees
Routine meeting between 1 subordinate and 1 supervisor
Performance appraisal discussions
Walking as a part of an organized employee health program
If a company institutes a short paid walking break, what would it imply to the employees?
Based on this experience, is it logical to you that walking with various people in an organization would increase productivity due to increased informal networking?
Walking outdoors on company grounds is a very public event. Would there be implications of a woman always walking with the same man?
List three things you learned as a result of this experience.
What did doing this activity with Dr. Steinhaus do to your relationship with or attitude towards Dr. Steinhaus? Would similar changes occur if you walked with someone at work?
In your opinion, is this activity something that Dr. Steinhaus should continue in future offerings of this course? Why or why not? (There is no penalty for negative answers—I really want to know what you think!)

Note. Layout edited to fit; students were given ample space to adequately answer the questions.

Even though I stressed in both class discussions and on the questionnaire that I would not penalize participants who reported negative feelings about this activity, these students, just like those in the health class, were unified in their support for applying Walking Office Hours in subsequent courses. Statements of support included the following: "Yes, do this again." "Yes, it allows the students a chance to just talk to the teacher outside of a classroom setting, which changes many things." "Yes, many students don't talk to their professors outside of class, or even in class. I think it provides for a more open student-professor relationship, where students aren't afraid to speak up." "I would think this project would be very time-consuming for Dr. Steinhaus. I am led to believe that she does this because she takes an interest in her students and on that basis alone I think it

should be continued. It also gives the students an opportunity to get to know Dr. Steinhaus on a more personal basis out of the classroom atmosphere." Perhaps my favorite comment is "When you first mentioned this in class, I thought you were nuts and this was the stupidest thing I'd ever heard of. Now after having done it, I see what a wonderful idea it was."

Conclusions

Students who participate in Walking Office Hours benefit in several ways. Following the activity, they know more about their fellow student, the professor, and the campus. They have a chance for individual time with the professor and can experience her or him as "a real person." This activity increases students' comfort zones both in and out of the classroom, and by walking in tan-

dem with another student, the activity itself is not threatening. They experience the power and benefit of informal networking, leading to increased confidence in the classroom.

They became more aware of campus buildings and history. This increased familiarity made them feel more of a member of the campus community, which may be especially important at a commuter college. Student comments included: "The science building is gorgeous; I hadn't been there before" and "I entered the Fine Arts Building for the first time and saw what talented artists this campus has." They also gained the opportunity for a small amount of exercise and could realize how refreshing a "walking break" can be. The main disadvantage, other than a small amount of initial awkwardness for some, is the time required for this activity.

Because students were signing their names to the required questionnaires, a slight positive bias may be found in their responses. However, I stressed that although I enjoyed getting to know each of them better, this activity takes a lot of my time and I would not continue it in either course if students did not find it to be beneficial. Also, if a student was concerned about this activity or its results, he or she had the opportunity to drop it without penalty. My impression of class discussions, conducted on this activity after the forms were turned in, was that everyone had sincerely enjoyed Walking Office Hours and found the activity appropriate to the content of both courses. Many students were impressed that I had taken the time to meet with them outside of the classroom and office. I do not believe that students were simply providing the answers they assumed I'd like to hear; their enthusiasm was evident in their chosen words. In addition, students in courses I teach which did not have a walking component mentioned to me that they had heard about Walking Office Hours and thought it was an unusual and interesting opportunity. If the students who participated in walking with me had thought the activity was coerced or not worthwhile, they would not have discussed it in a positive manner with friends.

From the professor's point of view, I found several positive benefits to walking with students. I created an unusual activity from which students were able to experience nonclassroom learning opportunities. Students applied course-related knowledge to a practical situation. While it caused them to think critically, it also showed them the importance of informal networking. In

both courses, this experience positively affected student behavior in class discussions and improved students' attitudes toward me as a professor. Walking Office Hours increased student awareness of my concern for them as individuals, and it increased their respect for me. Many expressed a new appreciation for my creativity. In addition, I was able to walk for almost 20 hours during the semester, time which I probably would not have spent exercising otherwise.

The disadvantage was the time I needed to devote to walking. I also discovered that I needed to modify my apparel for walking; as the weather got warmer, I was compelled to bring a change of clothes to work.

Though no student with disabilities had attended either class, I was prepared to modify the activity to include students with limited mobility. I would have privately discussed with the student the best means of accompanying him or her around campus.

This unique activity would best be undertaken by professors who will not mind the initial reactions about this "strange" approach to instruction. Not all professors want to be this open to discussions with students and some would likely be uncomfortable with Walking Office Hours.

Student feedback from this experiment underscores research findings that student-professor interaction increases student satisfaction. As long as the experience is perceived positively by students, any informal activity that promotes faculty member contact with students will help retention efforts. Education professionals often forget that to some students professors are intimidating, whether by their style or by the power of the grades they bestow. Particularly for courses that rely on discussion, breaking down barriers between students and the instructor can only serve to benefit student learning.

Advisors who do not teach in the classroom might be able to adapt this idea as an informal get-to-know-you opportunity. This experiment confirms that taking the time to "walk and talk" will pay dividends of improved communication and relationships between educators and students.

I intend to continue this program in both courses, and I urge other faculty members to modify it according to their classes and needs. In both courses, I was able to meet several goals with the same activity, applying it to course content and determining the effect on student perceptions at the same time. Use of an interaction program, such as Walking Office Hours,

increased student satisfaction and provided learning opportunities on many levels, which made it a meaningful and valuable exercise.

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