

Lack of High-Quality, Frequent Feedback Contributes to Low Success Rates for Community College Students

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ABSTRACT

Most students who enter a community college never finish. In fact, “fewer than four of every ten complete any type of degree or certificate within six years” (Bailey et al., 2015). One reason for low success rates is the lack of high-quality, frequent feedback provided to students. Feedback has been shown to improve student learning and success. The purpose of this systematic literature review was to understand the root causes for the lack of productive, consistent feedback. To this end, traditional peer-reviewed research, public scholarship sources, and faculty perspectives were included in this literature review. One cause identified was the lack of comprehensive faculty training in pedagogy in general and in how to provide high-quality feedback specifically. Another reason was lack of time. Faculty who teach in community colleges typically have heavy teaching loads, along with service and other responsibilities that make it difficult to provide regular, high-quality feedback to students. Finally, many students have a negative perception of feedback and therefore, often ignore it. When students do not use feedback, faculty can determine that providing feedback is not a good use of their time. There is ample evidence in the literature that supporting faculty to provide high-quality feedback is effective for promoting students’ academic success.

KEYWORDS

feedback, professional development, student success, teaching strategies

Community colleges are open access, providing an educational path for people from all socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, and as a result, the student population is exceptionally diverse (Bailey et al., 2015). Unfortunately, most students who begin their education at a community college never reach their long-term educational goals. Fewer than four of every ten complete any type of degree or certificate within six years (Bailey et al., 2015). When the data are disaggregated, the completion rates are even lower for students of color. For instance, national statistics show that community colleges enroll 52 percent of all Black students and 57 percent of all Hispanic students in higher education (Baime & Baum, 2016), yet only 1 percent of Black students and 4 percent of Hispanic students graduate in two years (Complete College America, n.d.). This is problematic on so many levels. For one, educational achievement gaps of this magnitude point to a disparity of educational attainment for minorities in the United States. Persistent and increasing income inequity is a result of these achievement gaps (Hanushek et al., 2016). Unfortunately, Hanushek et al. (2016) found that the achievement gaps have remained essentially unchanged over almost half a century.

Although many factors contribute to student success, a significant factor is the learning experience. Achievement of the stated course learning outcomes and successful completion of the

course is imperative for a student to move forward towards degree attainment. Seminal research from Adelman (2005, 2006) suggested that if a student does not successfully complete a course, their academic momentum is hindered. Furthermore, Adelman (2006) stated that his studies indicated students’ excessive course withdrawal was “one of the most degree crippling features of undergraduate histories” (p. xxii) preventing students from finishing college.

Pedagogical practices have an undeniable impact on community college students’ success. Feedback, in particular, has been shown to be a powerful educational tool, and if used correctly, it is one of the main predictors of student success. Seminal research conducted by Hattie et al. (2014) stated that effective feedback from an instructor could be “one of the most effective instructional strategies for improving student performance and closing achievement gaps” (p.17). Hattie and Timperley (2007) reported a synthesis of over 500 meta-analyses involving hundreds of thousands of studies and effect sizes and millions of students. Over 100 factors that might influence achievement were cited, including attributes of the schools, students, instructors, and curricula. The average effect size was 0.40 (achievement improved 40% of a standard deviation), but the effect size for feedback was 0.79, which,



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at about twice the average effect size, further supports the hypothesis that feedback ranks among the top influencers on student performance (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Feedback is an important component of student learning; Hattie and Yates's findings in 2014 suggested that effective feedback can double the rate of learning. If used incorrectly, however, feedback can drastically harm students' motivation and success (Hattie & Yates, 2014).

Literature on feedback reflects significant concerns regarding the quality of feedback and the manner in which instructional feedback is provided to students. For instance, some of the identified issues in the literature included the timeliness of the feedback, the clarity of the feedback, and the lack of opportunities for students to work with feedback (Brooks et al., 2019; Hattie & Yates, 2014; Hounsell et al., 2008; Scott, 2005). For example, Hounsell et al. (2008) researched student perceptions of feedback. The dataset was comprised of 782 completed student questionnaires and 23 group interviews with a total of 69 students (Hounsell et al., 2008); students' overall perceptions included that feedback had not helped improve their ways of learning or studying. Specific concerns identified in this study echo the aforementioned concerns: the variance in quantity, quality, and timeliness of the feedback (Hounsell et al., 2008).

Another established issue regarding feedback is that of a gap between students' perception of feedback when compared to the perceptions of their instructors. Hattie and Yates (2014) reported instructors "allege they dispense much helpful feedback to their students at relatively high levels and they claim they do so routinely" (p. 52); yet, students reported otherwise. In a classroom observation, researchers found the amount of feedback students received was, in fact, much less than the instructors said they provided (Hattie & Yates, 2014). These findings of a significant variance in students' and faculty's perceptions about feedback have been echoed in numerous other studies (Lizzio & Wilson, 2008; Mulliner & Tucker, 2017; Robinson et al., 2013). For instance, first-year students reported dissatisfaction with timeliness and the meaningfulness of feedback, yet faculty asserted they disseminated quality, timely, and constructive feedback (Robinson et al., 2013).

The fact that there have been concerns with the quality of feedback in higher education has been well-established in the literature (Mulliner and Tucker, 2017; Robinson et al., 2013; Scott, 2005). It is a complex issue, however, given the powerful outcomes effective feedback can have to either foster or hinder student success, it is judicious to suggest community college students need more opportunities to learn from quality feedback to aid in their success. There is a clear discord between what faculty believe was being provided and how students reported the learning opportunities from that feedback (Lizzio & Wilson, 2008; Mulliner & Tucker, 2017; Robinson et al., 2013).

The purpose of this literature review was to deepen educators' understanding of the reasons why college students have not received high-quality feedback on a regular basis. Discovering the root causes for this lack of consistent, productive feedback would enable community colleges to determine how to best increase and improve feedback for community college students. Specifically, these data can inform and guide faculty development efforts aimed at improving student success outcomes and reducing equity gaps. For example, if one of the reasons for the lack of high-quality feedback is a lack of time, professional development efforts can focus on how faculty can use class time or technology tools to decrease time needed to provide meaningful feedback.

METHOD

A comprehensive search approach was used to investigate why students have not been getting enough quality feedback consisted of gathering three different types of data. First, I gathered information via conversations with faculty. These conversations were conducted to gain an understanding of practitioner experiences, values, beliefs, and perspectives related to teaching and learning. Next, I reviewed peer-reviewed research found using the library databases. Finally, I explored gray literature that was accessible via public scholarship.

Practitioner Conversations

In the first round of investigations, ten community college instructors were interviewed during the Fall of 2019 to elicit information about their experiences with faculty development and their perceived impact on students' success in the classroom. The interviewee pool included full-time instructors from different disciplines. Nine were faculty teaching at a large community college in the Midwest, and one was an instructor who taught at a community college in New Jersey. To gather more specific information about feedback, a second round of interviews was conducted during the Spring of 2020. This round of interviews included seven full-time community college faculty in the Communications Department at a large community college in the Midwest.

Peer-Reviewed Research

The peer-reviewed literature search was performed in a manner loosely based on upon the methods of Petticrew and Roberts (2006) as detailed in their *Systematic Reviews in the Social Sciences: A Practical Guide*. Although I employed some flexibility rather than strictly following Petticrew and Roberts's (2006) steps, the elements of rigor, transparency, and replicability (Mallett et al., 2012) were paramount throughout the process.

The search terms used were: feedback AND issues OR problems OR challenges OR difficulties AND community colleges OR technical colleges OR two-year colleges OR junior colleges. The databases selected in EBSCOhost were: Academic Search Premier, Education Research Complete, Educational Administration Abstracts, ERIC, the Education Resource Information Center, MasterFILE Complete, Newspaper Source Plus, OmniFILE Full Text, Select Edition (H.W. Wilson), OpenDissertations, Primary Search, Professional Development Collection, Teacher Reference Center, and EBSCO's Web News.

This revealed 445 results at which point inclusion and exclusion criteria were used. The following limiters were then applied: full text; peer-reviewed academic journals; articles published between 1990 and 2020. Only articles addressing factors of feedback quality and quantity for college students were included. Articles were excluded if they were not related to student feedback in a higher education setting and were not written in English. Although dissertations were not retained due to the fact that these were not peer-reviewed and the authors may not be recognized experts in the field, I utilized the snowball method and referred to dissertations' comprehensive lists of references. This resulted with 147 peer-reviewed publications for further screening. Finally, I narrowed the literature publications down to 50 results by employing the inclusion and exclusion criteria as I engaged in deep dive abstract reviews. I retained two publications that were older than 15 years due to their significant impact on the

field. I then examined the references pages for titles related specifically to feedback in community colleges to ensure essential seminal works were not being overlooked. With these 50, I created annotations for the sources and a synthesis matrix to determine factors that have contributed to the lack of feedback.

Gray Literature and Public Scholarship

To further the understanding of feedback in education, reliable gray literature and public scholarship resources were located. This included academic and government articles and reports, conference materials, and other relevant data found in open-access academic journals and on professional organization websites. These sources included the American Association of Community Colleges; the Association of American Colleges and Universities; The Chronicle of Higher Education, the CIRT Network: Center for the Integration of Research, Teaching, Learning Education Research Complete; Educational Testing Service (ETS); Inside Higher Education; the W.K. Kellogg Foundation; and the National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity. Many of these sources provided current, relevant data. All of the gray literature and public scholarship sources collected were then subject to the same exclusion and inclusion criteria as the peer-reviewed research. Overall, 15 gray literature and publicly available scholarship resources were retained.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As a result of the literature research process, three major themes were revealed as major contributing factors related to issues surrounding the feedback students receive on their assignments. First, faculty in higher education, though experts in their own field, have not had training in pedagogical practices before they begin teaching (Beach et al., 2006; Eddy, 2010; Levin, 2006; Townsend & Twombly, 2007.) Therefore, they often begin their careers unaware of how to provide effective, quality feedback to support their students' learning. Second, even if community college faculty did receive training in how to give quality feedback, faculty reported not having enough time to provide feedback due to teaching loads and other institutional duties and expectations. Finally, studies (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Martinez, 2019) suggested that students have a negative perception of feedback. Often, students have not perceived feedback as a positive opportunity for learning, and therefore, they have not frequently used the feedback to revise work (Ackerman & Gross, 2010; Fiock & Garcia, 2019; Mulliner & Tucker, 2017; Sambell, 2016).

Lack of Training in Pedagogical Practices Prior to Teaching

Instructors in higher education are recognized experts or masters in their disciplines; however, this does not mean they are masters of teaching and learning, nor does it mean they have had training in pedagogical practices before they began teaching. Very few faculty have had prior training in teaching before entering the classroom to teach for the first time. Research by Beach et al. (2006) revealed that community college instructors "come to their positions with training in their profession, but not always training to teach" (as cited in Eddy, 2010, p. 22). Community colleges have been touted as teaching colleges, yet, faculty have learned most often to teach by "observation, trial and error, and reading on areas of interest" (Eddy,

2010, p.16). Furthermore, Levin (2006) acknowledged that rigorous preparation for teaching in the classroom is essential for student achievement. This lack of prior training in pedagogical practice is especially troubling for the disadvantaged community college student population who need expert teachers—not just experts in a particular subject area (Cox, 2010; Harrington, 2020).

In 2006, Levin studied the educational training of over 2,000 university and college faculty and compared that data to the subsequent achievement of their students. Levin (2006) reported that "Qualitatively, teacher skills and knowledge have to be raised if we are to substantially increase students' achievement to the levels needed" (p.11). He stated that most of America's college educators are underprepared to teach (Levin, 2006).

Data gathered from practitioner interviews revealed that only one of the ten faculty had training in teaching and learning prior to teaching at the college level and that was due to the fact that he began teaching in the K-12 levels where teaching and learning training was a requirement (Psychology Faculty, personal communication, October 10, 2019). One nursing instructor who had been teaching at the same community college for nineteen years said she was "hired without having taught a day in her life." When she asked her supervisor how to teach the class, the supervisor gave her a stack of videos to show her nursing students. "I was apprehensive," the nursing instructor said in the interview. "I had no background in academia. It was like trial and error for me. I walked into the classroom, gave the students tests, showed a video. That was it. I didn't know how to grade. I knew nothing, nothing, nothing" (Nursing Faculty, personal communication, October 8, 2019). Morest's (2015) publication pointed to the fact that adjunct faculty are also often hired without having to demonstrate any teaching techniques, and neither full-time nor part-time faculty are being assessed on their teaching skills until their evaluation period.

Another faculty member who was interviewed shared her story about the absence of training in pedagogy. She stated: "I basically did everything by instinct when I started teaching. When I was getting my Ph.D., I accepted a teaching graduate assistantship. There was a 1-hour a week class for us about how to write a syllabus, enter grades, and use course calendars but not about actual pedagogy. I didn't learn about any of that stuff. From there, I just learned from observations. I paid attention to what worked when I did it and what didn't" (Communications Faculty, personal communication, October 16, 2019).

Rather than relying on formal training, faculty have typically learned to teach by trial and error (Eddy, 2010; Townsend & Twombly, 2007). Regarding feedback, in particular, the absence of faculty's training in feedback can result in missed opportunities for student learning, engagement, and may hinder students' completion of courses (Brooks et al., 2019; Frey et al., 2018; Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Lack of Time Available to Provide Feedback

Literature and interviews with community college faculty on the topic of feedback revealed another one of the major issues is that faculty have reported not having enough time to give quality feedback in a timely manner. Heavy teaching loads and other institutional duties and expectations have made giving frequent, productive feedback very challenging (Martinez, 2019; Morest, 2015). This is a major concern given that feedback is one of the most powerful influences on student learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).



Teaching Load

Regarding the instructional workload for full-time community college instructors, it is common for faculty to teach 30 instructional units per academic year, or 15 units per semester (Martinez, 2019). Unlike faculty at four-year institutions, community college faculty are primarily focused on teaching. The National Center for Education reported that full-time community college faculty members spend 89 percent of their time on teaching-related responsibilities (National Study of Postsecondary Faculty, 2005). According to Morest (2015), 48 percent of full-time faculty typically spend 13 to 20 hours teaching in class each week. Warner (2017) indicated that the average time it takes to grade a college student's paper is 40 minutes. This means that in one week, if a class of 20 students turned in one paper, the instructor would spend over 13 hours grading for just that class alone (Warner, 2017). Utilizing Warner's (2017) numbers and the national average of teaching load at a community college, with five writing classes, a full-time community college instructor could be grading over 66 hours a week. Thus, faculty would need to work a total of 81 hours (15 for class, 66 for grading) per week if they needed to grade papers every week, and this does not include preparing for class, advising and tutoring students, or other responsibilities.

Service Responsibilities

Community college instructors have other obligations such as participating in curriculum development, serving on committees, professional development, student advising, and new-faculty advising (Morest, 2015). At community colleges, about 33 percent of instructional faculty are full-time (Bickerstaff & Chavarin, 2018). This means there are very few faculty to do all the work needed, and committee work can take up a significant amount of time as well. "Among full-time faculty, 88% report spending 1 or more hours a week on committee work and 73% spend 1 or more hours on coordination or administrative work" (Morest, 2015, p.25). Furthermore, Martinez (2019) noted that community college faculty are increasingly involved in the college's governance which can include "faculty hiring, budget committees, and long-range planning committees" (p. 115). In some instances, community college faculty also engage in research, though only 0.1% of community college faculty reported conducting research as their main activity (National Study of Postsecondary Faculty, 2005).

Work-Life Balance

Given the evidence presented thus far, it is not surprising that the findings from Sallee's (2008) study on the work-life balance of community college faculty suggested that community college faculty do not feel like they have a work-life balance. In fact, 84 percent of faculty felt undervalued and overworked at their college (Sallee, 2008). Morest (2015) stated that the "internal structures of community colleges make it difficult for faculty to engage in [the]scholarship" of teaching and learning because of the teaching load (p. 21). Community college faculty are stretched incredibly thin on time.

Students' Negative Perceptions of Feedback

Another theme that emerged during the literature review was students' perceptions of feedback. Unfortunately, despite the powerful positive outcomes on student success when students receive effective feedback, there are ongoing issues surrounding this important process—some of which are directly connected to

students' perception of feedback. Students continually report perceiving feedback as negative, authoritarian, or judgmental (Ackerman & Gross, 2010; Fiock & Garcia, 2019; Mulliner & Tucker, 2017; Sambell, 2016). In fact, students have perceived feedback as punitive (Hattie & Yates, 2014). Sambell (2016) stated that feedback could result in the student feeling alienated, and it can provoke general feelings of "compliance, powerlessness and subservience rather than a sense of belonging, enthusiasm, enjoyment, and ownership of the learning process" (p. 1). Feedback in higher education is considered central to student learning, yet students' negative experiences with feedback can result in students not using—or even looking at—feedback (Ackerman & Gross, 2010). Furthermore, students' negative perceptions of feedback may reduce their self-efficacy (Sambell, 2016).

As stated by Soilemetzidis et al. (2014), "Large scale surveys of student opinion still consistently identify assessment and feedback as the source of greatest student dissatisfaction" (as cited in Sambell, 2016, p. 1). Scott (2005) surveyed over 95,000 students about their perceptions of higher education. Of the 3,068 students who answered questions about how assessment impacted their learning, only 10 percent of them had anything positive to report about feedback. Over 90 percent of students selected the "Needs Improvement" (NI) category in reference to feedback.

Timeliness and Amount of Feedback

One issue related to timeliness is that students reported not getting feedback from their instructors with enough time to make improvements (Sambell, 2016). Students also reported not getting any feedback on assignments, and some reported never receiving their assignments back at all (Scott, 2005). On the other hand, findings from a study conducted by Ackerman and Gross (2010) illustrated that the more feedback students received on their returned assignments, the more likely the students were to feel that their instructor did not like them. Student participants who received a high level of feedback believed the instructor had a more negative impression of them than did students who either received few comments or no comments (Ackerman & Gross, 2010).

Quality of Feedback

Students have expressed frustrations with the quality of feedback (Ackerman & Gross, 2010; Sambell, 2016). Researchers (Hattie & Timperley, 2007) have evaluated both what feedback is (i.e., how it is defined) and what makes it effective or "quality." However, there is no debate that there are ongoing student complaints about feedback. One of the reported issues relating to the quality of feedback centers around the types of comments instructors leave students on their work. For instance, praise is a common form of feedback; however, without specific and actionable comments, it can lead to negative student perceptions regarding the quality of the feedback (Hattie & Yates, 2014; Taylor, 2011; Wiggins, 2012). In their study, Mulliner and Tucker (2017) reported that praise as feedback, instead of comments about the students' work itself, was confusing for more than half of the students in their study ($n=194$).

Some examples of quality feedback which have been reiterated throughout the literature include "directive comments (such as edits and commands) about content or mechanics, comments that include explanations of the comment's reason, minimal marking of mechanics, and readerly and coaching comments about development of ideas" (Taylor, 2011, p.161).

Lack of Use of Feedback

Given the dissatisfaction and overall malaise students have reported feeling about feedback, it may not come as a surprise that studies have indicated that it is common for students to not read their instructor's feedback (Jonsson, 2012). There is "ample evidence of both anecdotal and scientific nature that a number of students do not use the feedback they receive, and therefore do not realize the potential of feedback for learning" (Jonsson, 2012, p. 64). Interview data from faculty at a large community college reported that one of their main concerns is that students are not using feedback when it is provided. Molloy and Boud (2013) stated that feedback commonly has "no effect because information from teachers is not taken up by students and sometimes it is not even read" (p. 4). Acknowledged experts in the study of feedback asserted that students will sometimes accept the comments on their work which they perceive to be positive but studies suggest students will "defensively reject negative comments" (Hattie et al., 2016, p.7). Another related issue is whether students understand the feedback provided. Research has found students do not often understand the feedback they receive (Carless & Boud, 2018; Taras, 2006; Taylor, 2011). It is essential that students comprehend why and what an instructor is communicating about their work for feedback to work as the powerful educational tool it has been shown it can be (Ackerman & Gross, 2016; Hattie & Yates, 2014).

Given that students are not using the feedback provided, it is not surprising that faculty may feel devoting their time to this activity is often fruitless. If a faculty member spends a significant amount of time providing feedback to students, and this feedback is perceived as ignored or not well-utilized, this can be incredibly discouraging (Cohan, 2020; Stern & Solomon, 2006). As was indicated by many of the faculty who I interviewed, this lack of student use of feedback results in a reduced desire to exert significant time and effort on this task and also disappointment that an important learning opportunity for students is being lost (Personal communications, October 8, 10, 16, 2019).

CONCLUSION

Community colleges, as open-access colleges, are available as educational benefits to millions of non-traditional students regardless of their socioeconomic or academic background (Bailey et al., 2015; Mellow & Heelan, 2015). In fact, more than 40 percent of the community college student population are students of color (Mellow & Heelan, 2015). According to the Community College Research Center (2020), only 39% of those attending community college are walking away with degrees. One especially important way to support student learning and achievement is through effective feedback (Hattie et al., 2016).

Unfortunately, college students are not provided with frequent, productive feedback (Ackerman & Gross, 2010; Brooks et al. 2019; Hattie & Yates, 2014; Hounsell et al., 2008; Scott, 2005). Findings from this literature review indicated that there were three main reasons why college students are not provided with high-quality, regular feedback. First, faculty have not been trained on effective teaching strategies in general and on feedback strategies specifically (Eddy, 2010; Levin, 2006). Faculty are also incredibly stretched in terms of time, and feedback is an extremely time-consuming task (Martinez, 2019; Morest, 2015). Finally, faculty get discouraged when students' perceptions of feedback are negative, and when

students do not read and use the feedback provided to improve their work and learning (Cohan, 2020; Stern & Solomon, 2006).

To address the lack of training, colleges can provide professional development that specifically focuses on why feedback is a powerful learning tool and how to use it in the classroom to support their students' learning and success. For example, colleges could consider having a faculty learning community (FLC) to allow faculty an opportunity to learn effective feedback practices—like the importance of implementing scheduled opportunities for their students to engage with formative feedback (Brooks et al., 2019). Through initiatives like feedback-focused faculty learning communities, faculty can also learn how to incorporate opportunities within assignments for students to read feedback, make revisions as needed, and resubmit work.

Time was identified as barrier to faculty providing meaningful feedback to students. Thus, one approach can be to assist faculty with developing more time-efficient feedback strategies. For instance, encouraging faculty to use class time for this purpose or to provide targeted, formative feedback throughout the semester (Harrington, 2022). Offering training programs during already scheduled department, division, or college-wide meeting times is another way to address the time barrier (Harrington, 2020).

The final barrier of student perception can also be a challenge (Ackerman & Gross, 2010; Fiock & Garcia, 2019; Mulliner & Tucker, 2017; Sambell, 2016). Through faculty development, faculty can learn ways to better communicate the importance of feedback to their students. In essence, students need to understand why feedback is a positive and productive part of learning. "For feedback processes to be enhanced, students need both appreciation of how feedback can operate effectively and opportunities to use feedback within the curriculum" (Carless & Boud, 2018, p. 1315). Carless and Boud (2018) refer to this as feedback literacy, and they assert the importance of communicating feedback literacy to students early in the course, so students are mentally prepared for feedback. Explaining why feedback is powerful, what kind of feedback they can expect, and giving students clear expectations about the formative feedback loop are essential in setting the stage for more positive student interactions with the feedback (Carless & Boud, 2018; Gonzalez, 2020; Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Based on these findings, professional development for faculty is clearly needed. Innovative professional development programs where community college instructors can learn about the characteristics of effective feedback, be taught time-efficient strategies to provide feedback, and learn how to provide feedback in a manner that students will be more likely to act upon is essential. Community colleges that want to support student success can invest in teaching and learning centers and offer professional development on effective feedback practices. Students need and deserve frequent, high-quality feedback (Taras, 2006).

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