



# Students' out of the classroom communication with instructors and campus services: Exploring social integration and academic involvement



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## ABSTRACT

Framed by Tinto's interactionist theory (1975), this study explored students' academic skills and social integration to illuminate students' communication with faculty and campus services. Participants reported on instructor rapport, self-regulated learning, self-management, out-of-class communication, and support seeking from campus resources. Results revealed that instructor rapport predicted out-of-class communication with instructors and student services, while self-regulated learning and self-management functioned differently to predict interactions with faculty and student services. The results offer insight into factors important to enhancing student academic success and persistence.

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Tinto (1993) asserted that although students come to the college classroom with varying levels of commitment to academic success, effective instructor-student relationships can achieve intellectual synergy. Using interactionist theory, Tinto (1975) noted academic commitment level is bolstered or diminished depending on how well students become academically and socially integrated on the college campus. Furthermore, if there is an increase in a student's level of commitment to the school, there is a greater likelihood of the student's persistence in college (Berger & Braxton, 1998). In part, instructors play a role in facilitating integration.

The crux of interactionist theory is that effective classroom interactions enhance student learning and persistence. Tinto (1997) stated that greater involvement in the social and academic life of college leads to greater acquisition of knowledge and skills. Moreover, students who meaningfully interact with instructors demonstrate greater educational development (Astin, 1993) and learning gains (Endo & Harpel, 1982). Thus, when students are involved with faculty they succeed (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2005; Kuh, 2007). Using interactionist theory as a lens, we investigated the effects of social integration (i.e., instructor rapport) and academic preparedness (i.e., students' academic self-regulation and self-management) as critical factors in understanding students' out-of-class communication with instructors and campus services.

## 1. Academic preparedness

Tinto (1975) argued that academically involved students are committed to attaining educational goals. Students' academic skills and abilities lend insight into the relative ease of academic integration, leading to satisfaction and persistence in college (Borglum & Kubala, 2000). Students' ability to self-regulate and manage their learning, academic demands, and campus participation may have different influences on overall efforts and out-of-class communication. Self-regulated learning focuses on specific courses and includes reviewing notes and studying for an exam. Self-regulated learning represents active participation in one's own learning (McCombs & Marzano, 1990). Self-regulated learners effectively control learning experiences and have positive perceptions about learning capabilities (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1998), leading to academic success (Naumann, Bandalos, & Gutkin, 2003).

Self-management represents general management of academic-related activities. According to Ackermann and Morrow (2008), self-management represents students' ability to cope with the academic side of college life and manage their time effectively (e.g., prioritizing assignments). In addition, self-managing students are more likely to persist and succeed in college (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012). Self-management offers the ability to cope with college stress and reduce feelings of isolation on campus (Ackermann & Morrow, 2008; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012). Employing a variety of coping strategies is useful for students who experience a range of stresses including balancing school and work (Booth-Butterfield, Booth-Butterfield, & Wanzer, 2007). Taken together, students who self-regulate and self-manage

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likely behave very differently outside of the classroom compared to other students. However, out-of-class behaviors are often linked to in-class social integration (Sidelinger, Bolen, McMullen, & Nyeste, 2015).

## 2. Social integration and instructor rapport

Similar to interactionist theory, Bean (2005) said social factors are a primary component of students' persistence in college and include feeling connected with peers and instructors (Milem & Berger, 1997), and lead to perceptions of integration and affiliation within the campus community (Oseguera & Rhee, 2009). Braxton, Jones, Hirschy, and Hartley (2008) stated faculty members were critical in creating feelings of social integration for students. In turn, students who were fully engaged with instructors through collaborative interactions about course-related material reported an enriched college experience (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). Indeed, instructors' goals work toward enhancing affective, cognitive, and behavioral learning while trying to establish positive in-class relationships (e.g., rapport) (Booth-Butterfield, 1992).

Rapport represents as an overall feeling between people comprised of trust, personal involvement, and a prosocial bond (Catt, Miller, & Schallenkamp, 2007). In this context, instructors who build rapport with students may facilitate social integration and enhance perceptions of their commitment to students. Further, building rapport can encourage social interaction by reducing anxiety (Jorgenson, 1992). Strage (2000) found that students who had positive rapport with their instructors more likely to persist in college. For example, Trotter and Roberts (2006) said faculty who instill attendance policies and use activities to build relationships with students bolster student persistence. Similarly, students who perceived faculty members were committed to them reported a higher commitment to college (Braxton et al., 2008). Thus, rapport may be a tactic used to help students fully integrate into college life (Sidelinger et al., 2015). Students' perceptions of instructor rapport, and their reports of self-regulation and self-management have important implications for student communication inside the classroom and may act as a gateway to effective student communication and academic behaviors outside the classroom.

## 3. Student help seeking behaviors

Colleges and universities spend a considerable amount of money and energy to provide student services and support, with the goal of increasing students' social and academic integration. Robbins et al. (2009) classified student resources into four categories: social, academic, recreational, and advising. Although substantial student support exists and employing these services is related to retention and higher GPAs, many services go underutilized or are only utilized by particular students (Robbins et al., 2009). Instead, students may seek support via informal communication interactions with instructors during out-of-class communication (OCC). Thus, this study examined how social and academic integration influences both informal OCC and formal campus support seeking.

OCC with instructors include discussion before or after class, meeting during office hours, and e-mails (Fusani, 1994). Although Cotten and Wilson (2006) reported that students do not engage in frequent OCC, students did find that these interactions beneficial. Students who use OCC with instructors report a greater sense of belonging, career specific knowledge, networking, enhanced academic performance, and persistence in college (Cotten & Wilson, 2006; Dobransky & Frymier, 2004; Keeshan, 2000). Students are more likely to seek OCC when instructors are credible, seek affinity, demonstrate supportiveness, and are immediate (Fusani, 1994; Myers, 2004; Myers, Martin, & Knapp, 2005). Taken together, students who experience rapport with their instructors may feel comfortable interacting with them outside of class, and may seek that instructor to help with academic-related issues.

**H1.** Students reports of rapport with an instructor, self-regulation, and self-management will predict students' OCC with their instructors.

Students may also seek support from institutional resources and student services. Students who demonstrate self-regulation are more likely to seek academic support and help on campus (Zimmerman, 1994, 2002). Ackermann and Morrow (2008) found positive associations between seeking support from institutional resources (e.g., joining a study group, and talking with an advisor) and students' perceptions of coping with college and developing a sense of belonging, as well as, a negative relationship between seeking support from institutional resources and feelings of isolation on campus. Hence, students who feel a sense of connection with their instructors may be more likely to seek help and support from a variety of institutional resources on campus.

Students who self-regulate and self-manage to cope with the academic challenges may be more likely to commit to college life and email their instructors or attend office hours to ask clarifying questions, or present drafts of their work. Indeed, when students become integrated they "develop habits that promise to stand them in good stead for a lifetime of continuous learning" (Kuh, 2007, p. B12). Following interactionist theory, instructor rapport may also offer a sense of social integration within the college classroom and strengthen students' OCC with instructors and support seeking from institutional resources. Therefore we predict the following:

**H2.** Students' reports of rapport with an instructor, self-regulation, and self-management will predict students' support seeking behaviors with institutional resources.

## 4. Method

### 4.1. Participants and procedures

Participants ( $N = 193$ ;  $n = 105$  females,  $n = 88$  males) were undergraduates ( $n = 44$  first years,  $n = 45$  sophomores,  $n = 47$  juniors,  $n = 53$  seniors), in introductory communication courses at a mid-western public university in the United States, who ranged in age from 18 to 52 ( $M = 23.72$ ,  $SD = 7.11$ ). Participants reported on a variety of traditional, face-to-face course subjects ( $N = 37$ ), and 110 students reported on a female instructor and 82 reported on a male instructor. After receiving IRB approval, instrument administration took place during the 13th week of a 15-week course during normal class time. Students completed the instruments (see Table 1 for scale reliabilities, means, and standard deviations) in reference to the class that they attended immediately prior to the research session to ensure that they reported on a variety of courses and instructors – each course had only one assigned instructor of record.

## 5. Instrumentation

### 5.1. Instructor rapport

Rapport was measured following Frisby and Myers (2008) adaptation of Gremler and Gwinner's (2000) 11-item scale measuring enjoyable interaction (six items; e.g., I look forward to seeing my instructor

**Table 1**  
Scale reliabilities, means, and standard deviations.

Variable	$\alpha$	$M$	$SD$
1. Instructor Rapport	.97	45.21	18.84
2. Self-management	.74	19.00	3.41
3. Self-regulation	.77	52.50	11.36
4. OCC	.87	24.57	7.72
5. Institutional Resources	.76	9.98	4.38

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