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## Suggestions for SUNY Geneseo Faculty to Improve Students' Experiences in Office Hours

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## Suggestions for SUNY Geneseo Faculty to Improve Students' Experiences in Office Hours

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# Suggestions for SUNY Geneseo Faculty to Improve Students' Experiences in Office Hours

Tyler Grasso

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores undergraduate students' experiences in and attitudes towards faculty office hours at the State University of New York (SUNY) at Geneseo. In semi-structured interviews, students were asked to reflect on five key items, including (a) the purpose of office hours, (b) practices that they receive well, (c) practices that they do not receive well, (d) the effects of negative experiences in office hours, and (e) their suggestions to improve office hours. The study recommends that faculty members consult these findings in order to improve students' academic experiences and strengthen student-faculty communication.

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To better understand undergraduate students' perceptions of faculty office hours at the State University of New York at Geneseo, the present study synthesizes information obtained in semi-structured interviews with eight students of the institution. In the interviews, which were conducted in-person and via Zoom during the fall 2021 semester, students were asked to recall their positive and negative experiences in faculty office hours; they were also asked to speak about their perceptions of office hours, their reasons for interacting with faculty members, and their suggestions for improving students' experiences in those one-on-one settings. Faculty members should consider these findings in order to improve students' academic experiences.

## BACKGROUND

Office hours have become a mainstay in higher education, providing a designated time and location for students and faculty members to converse outside of the classroom context. Scholarly interest in office hours as a site for research has existed at least since the 1980s (e.g., Chickering & Gamson, 1986), and scholars have maintained their interest to the present day. The office hours literature encompasses a wide range of inquiries, including the perceived role of office hours, the academic outcomes of student-faculty interaction, and students' motivations for attending office hours.

Scholars have investigated the apparent disconnect between students' and institutions' perceptions of the purpose of office hours. For example, in their survey-based study, Smith et al. (2017) found "a mismatch between the institutional intention for office hours and student perceptions of them," in which institutions intend for office hours to be the site of "fruitful interactions" between faculty members and students, and students view office hours as "the last resort they can turn to when an academic crisis...is on the horizon" (p. 15). Likewise, Guerro & Rod (2013) argue that both students and professors "have different and negative perceptions about the use and benefits of office hours," which "may undermine office-hour attendance rates and the potential subsequent academic benefits" (p. 404).

Scholars also have an interest in the academic outcomes associated with office hour attendance. Guerro & Rod (2013) identify a positive correlation between students' visits to office hours and their increased academic performance (p. 403). Guerro & Rod (2013) argue that "the interaction that occurs within office hours engages students in their own education" (p. 411). Their data support this, demonstrating that students who attend office hours more often are likely to receive a higher grade in a given course.

Finally, scholars maintain an interest in the motivating factors for student attendance in office hours. Interested in students' perceptions of office hours, Griffin et al. (2014) found that students are more likely to attend office hours when they perceive the time and location of office hours to be more convenient (p. 98). The authors (Griffin et al., 2014) further note that faculty possess few tools to address student participation, though they encourage faculty members to provide increased feedback to students, as "students who perceive the instructor's feedback as useful are more likely to attend office hours" (p. 98).

## RESEARCH METHODS

### Participant Recruitment and Demographics

While previous researchers (e.g., Griffin et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2013) have investigated student perception of office hours through the use of surveys, this study collects its data from semi-structured interviews with interested student participants, with the intention of accurately promoting the attitudes of SUNY Geneseo students. Interviewees were recruited on a rolling basis throughout the fall 2021 semester. Most often, interviewees were made aware of this study through departmental email lists, as well as word of mouth. Interviews were conducted in-person or via Zoom, depending on interviewees' preferences. In total, eight students agreed to participate in interviews for the study. Of these students, seven identify as female, and one identifies as gender non-conforming; six identify as white, while one identifies as South Asian, and one identifies as Hispanic. This study utilizes pseudonyms to conceal the names of interviewees.

## Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, where the researcher approached interviewees with several pre-planned questions and also asked follow-up questions to obtain additional information.<sup>1</sup> Each interview lasted anywhere between 20-45 minutes in length.

## RESULTS

The eight interviewees revealed much about their perceptions of faculty office hours at SUNY Geneseo. This study focuses on five categories of information presented by students: the perceived purpose of office hours, what students receive well, what students do not receive well, the effects of negative experiences in office hours, and students' suggestions for faculty.

### The Purpose of Office Hours

Students volunteered their varying perspectives on the purpose of office hours. Most commonly, interviewees cite office hours as a setting for students to receive academic help from faculty; they also point to office hours as a time to foster relationships with faculty members.

Some interviewees define office hours by their academic benefits. Participant Ashley, a senior anthropology major, lists some of these benefits: "Advisement, schedule planning...to catch up on work...You definitely get one-on-one time to work with professors on things that you're struggling with." Although Ashley enjoys the opportunity to speak with professors who are "really cool," academic assistance is, to her, the true purpose of office hours. Likewise, participant Makenna, a junior communication major, claims that office hours "are to help [students] learn the information [they] didn't understand the first time around." She continues, asserting that office hours serve an important function in ensuring student success.

While acknowledging the academic benefits of office hours, other interviewees acknowledge other benefits of attendance, such as building relationships with faculty with the purpose of receiving a letter of recommendation. For example, participant Liz, a senior psychology major, points to what she sees as the dual purpose of office hours:

I've been using [office hours] for clarity and making sure that I'm on the right path with things... Maybe to have something explained a little better. It's also, I've been going because I've been connecting with my professor on a more personal note, because he's also trying to get to know me since he's writing me my letter [of recommendation].

Concurring with Liz, participant Natalie, a senior sociomedical sciences major, offers three examples of when she would attend office hours:

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<sup>1</sup> For the full list of semi-structured interview questions, see the appendix.

If I'm clueless. I had a professor write me a letter of [recommendation] and I went to her office hours in person to ask her that. If there's a test coming up, I'm more likely to go to office hours.

## **What Students Receive Well**

Students note several practices by faculty that have a positive effect on office hours. Namely, students appreciate when faculty members attempt to connect with students, building relationships with them before jumping into the “real” (i.e., academic) reason for the office hours visit. Students also note that feeling respected by faculty members while in one-on-one settings is vastly important to them.

## **Connections Before Content**

Harkening back to students' ideas that the purpose of office hours is in part to promote student-faculty communication, students describe feeling welcome in office hours when faculty attempt to converse with students about non-academic topics before discussing course content. Interviewees note that conversing with faculty fulfills several purposes, including easing students' nerves, building relationships with future value, and satisfying students' general curiosity.

To illustrate the importance of open communication, participant Alice, a sophomore majoring in political science, describes her ideal office hours as feeling “like you're just sitting there chatting, instead of going in to be critiqued or something;” she prefers it when office hours “feel like an actual conversation.” This interviewee vastly prefers a relaxed dialogue and notes her inclination for when faculty treat her as an equal. Meanwhile, participant Ashley recalls a visit to a professor whose field of study she values. Similar to Alice, participant Ashley is fond of being perceived as somewhat of an equal to her professor—a fellow academic. She expresses, “Just, being able to talk with another academic person about, like, my interests and then have them give me all this information, that was a really cool experience.” These interviewees cite interactions that were perceived as being more casual in nature, helping to relax students and build relationships with faculty; as participant Makenna described, positive office hours experiences, therefore, are “full of open communication.” Some students note that conversing with faculty is valuable, especially later in their academic careers, when students begin to seek letters of recommendation for graduate school or employment.

## **Being Treated with Respect**

Several interviewees hold respect to be an important component of student-faculty interaction in office hours. For example, participant Alice welcomes faculty who treat her as an adult. Alice asserts, “Being treated like an adult [is important] because college is that weird time when some people still treat you like a child, and others expect you to act like an adult.”

Being respected is a common desire amongst interviewees. Participant Cecilia, a sophomore sociomedical sciences major, questions the strict boundaries of authority between themselves and their professors, preferring to be treated as an equal:

I guess just like [when professors] treat me with respect instead of, like, having that secure boundary of student/professor. Like, that's good to have, but sometimes it's like, please turn down the authority. Talk to me like you respect me and we're on the same level.

As participant Alice mentions and Cecilia echoes, students (who are at an uncertain period of time in their lives) desire to be treated with respect and as capable adults, rather than as children.

### **Other Well-Received Practices**

In addition to the above two practices that students receive well, interviewees mention other practices by faculty that they enjoy. Participant Natalie, for example, says that "Leaving the door open is always a good start...when you're walking by, that way you don't feel like you're intruding." Participant Cecilia echoes this comment on leaving the door open, noting:

I feel like one good thing is to not have their door completely closed, because that at least shows students that, "Hey, I am here and I'm available." To me, at least, it kind of feels like that. Like, if their door is closed it just feels a little like they expect to be disturbed or something.

Both students mention the anxiety surrounding "disturbing" faculty members, even during a time period designated for student-faculty interaction. This connects to data collected but not featured in this study, in which students report feelings of stress, nervousness, and anxiety before making a visit to office hours.

Other students mention that they have a significant appreciation for the feedback they receive in office hours. Participant Liz, for example, says, "if [a professor's feedback] is something that I can learn and can use then it's pretty good." Meanwhile, participant Paige, a senior communication major, references a specific time when she visited office hours as a freshman and received feedback on formatting and citations, which in her words "set me up for my whole college career."

### **What Students Do Not Receive Well**

A common complaint by interviewees is that professors' attitudes strongly influence how welcome or unwelcome students feel during their visits to office hours. Interviewees report occasions of feeling rushed, dismissed, and disrespected. Participant Cecilia summarizes this, saying that a visit to office hours is unsatisfying when a "professor's tone is off, or they seem annoyed...or [they act like] I'm disturbing them," among other indicators. Interviewees reveal some mistakes made by faculty members which discourage students from attending office hours in the future.

## Time Slots and Feeling Rushed

A significant concern that interviewees recall is feeling rushed while meeting with faculty. Rush is apparent in two forms: rush that comes from professors themselves, and rush created by time slots. Interviewees note that feeling rushed hampers the effectiveness of office hours and the comfort that students feel while in attendance.

Participant Alice comments on feeling rushed by the language that faculty members use, and the effects that rush has on students:

I would say the only thing that would make me feel unwelcome in office hours is if [a professor] was like, “I actually have to run to something after this.” And it’s not like they’re making me feel like I shouldn’t be there, it’s that they’re making me feel a little rushed. So, I’m like, “Oh, I don’t want to take up too much of your time.”

To combat rush and accommodate her professors, Alice notes that she “will try to make my questions more brief, or I’ll skip over some things that I would’ve preferred to have answered.” Overall, Alice receives less academic assistance than she would prefer, with rush to blame.

Participant Dee, a senior majoring in sociomedical sciences, relates her story of attending virtual office hours for a statistics course. She notes that the short timeslots in place prevented her from obtaining the help that she sought, leading to frustration and further confusion. She reveals:

One thing that I would say is negative was when, in stats, . . . we had time slots, so it was like, five minutes, because everyone in that class was struggling. And so, sometimes I felt that I didn’t understand the way that [the professor] was explaining it to me. . . . And also, the pressure of the five-minute time slot that we had. So, if I didn’t understand [the material] then, it was either a chain series of emails afterwards, which can get confusing and messy and unorganized, or it was that I had to wait until his next opening time slot to talk about it, which usually, that was either like two days later or the following week, if I was lucky.

Dee’s account is a clear example of an unsuccessful office hours visit which heightened the potential for the student’s academic failure. Overall, students take issue with being rushed by faculty members, and they explain how this rush can contribute to endangering students’ academic successes.

## Forgetting (Or Not Asking For) Students’ Names

At least two students explicitly take issue with instances when faculty members fail to recall students’ names. One interviewee, participant Cecilia, lists this as the first and foremost aspect of a visit that contributes to feeling unwelcome in office hours; making matters worse, they mention that professors forget their name “a lot.”



Participant Makenna also speaks about a faculty member who failed to ask for her name at the start of an office hours interaction. She explains that the visit was motivated by her trouble understanding the course content, and that the interaction was soured by the professor's demeanor and disinterest in interacting with their student:

I have a professor that literally does not [ask for students' names]...like, my biology professor did not ask for my name, and I know that he doesn't know my name...so, like, that's one thing. Just being, like, cold and not trying to make a connection and then also rushing through the content.

The interviewee explained her certainty that the professor did not know her name, saying that the course was a general education course with enrollment nearing the triple digits. Makenna admits that she does not have an inherent issue with professors not remembering students' names but is disappointed to know that some faculty members fail to make an effort to connect with students on such a basic level. She further describes the faculty member as being unwelcoming, saying that they demonstrated frustration with their students for not understanding the course material.

### **The Effects of Negative Experiences in Office Hours**

One question that interviewees were asked was “Would a professor's welcomeness or unwelcomeness in office hours influence whether or not you would recommend that professor to a fellow student? If so, why is that?” In general, students report that yes, welcomeness and unwelcomeness would affect whether or not they would refer that professor to their peers.

One student who believes that welcomeness and unwelcomeness matter is participant Dee, whose thoughts do well to summarize the opinions of other interviewees:

I would say that if a teaching assistant or professor is super friendly and super welcoming and—especially if the meeting or office hours end and they're like, “Oh, please come back...” Like, if they're reassuring me, then of course I'm going to tell my peers and my other friends, like, “Hey, you should go to this person, 'cause they know what's up...” But if it's not—if everything I just said is the opposite, I would tell people and warn people not to even take the class, and if you do [take the class], work with the students. Because the professor is not going to help you as much as you might need them to.

Dee addresses both prongs of the question, first noting that positive reinforcement from a faculty member would make her feel more comfortable with (a) attending office hours, and (b) recommending the professor to others. She also warns that feeling unwelcome in office hours will not lead her to recommending that professor.

While participant Dee is the most ardent respondent to this question, she is not alone in her thinking. Participant Alice concurs, stating, “if I felt unwelcome, I'd probably seek out [other] resources and encourage others to first” before attending that profes-

sor's office hours in the future. Meanwhile, participant Makenna explains that "if [a professor] isn't welcoming in their office hours, they're just kind of not welcoming to questions from students, and it's a display of arrogance almost." Between participants Dee and Makenna, students' opinions are clear—whether or not a student will make return visits to a professor's office hours is highly dependent on how the student interprets their previous visits.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Finally, interviewees were asked to provide suggestions for faculty members that would help to improve students' experiences in office hours. Their responses range. For example, some students encourage faculty members to emphasize that office hours are open to all students and that they are not strictly for academic assistance—an act that should likely take place outside of office hours, during class time. Speaking on this, participant Liz comments that professors should emphasize:

that office hours don't necessarily have to be for academic help, just help in general...that is showing that [professors] want to build a more personal relationship, and that all doesn't have to revolve around an academic teacher/student relationship.

Other suggestions reference the above findings, with interviewees like participant Cecelia suggesting that office hours could be more welcoming if faculty members actively avoid pitfalls such as forgetting students' names while instead "receiving students warmly." Meanwhile, participant Ashley applauds faculty who are fully engaged with visiting students, when they "don't have their email or their phone open. They're just, like, fully attentive on you; you're not feeling like they're rushing to get to the next thing, it's just time for you." Ashley encourages faculty to silence distractions, be present, and focus on the students who are there in front of them.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study has presented some students' perceptions of office hours at SUNY Geneseo, as well as their suggestions for improving students' experiences during visits. As in other literature on the subject, Geneseo students maintain the belief that office hours are largely an academic resource, sometimes used in moments of stress or panic. At the same time, though, enjoy making personal connections with faculty members; they also appreciate it when they are respected, when the office door is left open for them, and when they receive valuable feedback. Students' dislikes include time slots/feeling rushed, as well as having their names forgotten. Interviewees also provided suggestions for faculty, in the hopes that office hours can be improved.

Ultimately, the present study seeks to promote the voices of its interviewees and calls on faculty members and administrators alike to work towards increasing student satisfaction with office hours at SUNY Geneseo, using the above findings as a guide. A significant focus on improving office hours is essential to improving student-faculty

engagement and relationship building, in addition to improved academic outcomes for students. This is especially important, as interviewees warn that negative experiences in office hours may discourage them from returning or recommending a given professor to a fellow student.

This study has investigated students' perceptions of office hours as according to their experiences in office hours. It has not gathered, however, the attitudes of students who do not attend office hours. Nor has it investigated the attitudes held by SUNY Geneseo faculty members. Curious students (or faculty) may find that these blind spots are worthy of future inquiries and would act as meaningful companions to the present study.

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## APPENDIX

1. What is your class year and major?
  - a. Are you a transfer student?
2. If you are comfortable with sharing:
  - a. What is your gender identity?
  - b. How do you identify in terms of race and ethnicity?
  - c. If you are comfortable with sharing, where are you from?
3. About how often do you attend faculty office hours?
  - a. This semester, how often are you going?
4. Whose office hours do you generally attend?
  - a. Which kinds of classes do you tend to go to office hours for?
5. Are there any activities that you would do in place of attending office hours that fulfill a similar purpose as attending them?
6. To you, what is the purpose of faculty office hours?
  - a. What roles do office hours serve on campus?
7. In what ways can office hours be valuable to students' academic experiences?
8. What are some reasons that motivate you to attend office hours?
9. Have you ever attended office hours virtually (e.g., via Zoom, Google Hangouts, Skype, etc.)? Which do you prefer and why?
10. What are some things that you feel before you enter office hours?
11. Can you tell me about an experience that you had in office hours that was positive or negative?
  - a. What about the interaction made the experience positive or negative?
  - b. Did this experience influence your willingness to attend the office hours of that faculty member and others in the future?
12. What do you think makes a visit to office hours satisfying or unsatisfying?
13. Can you tell me about a time when you attended office hours with a specific purpose in mind, and that purpose was/was not fulfilled?

14. Are there some things that faculty members do in their office hours that have made you feel welcome?

a. If so, could you tell me about them?

15. Are there some things that faculty members do in their office hours that have made you feel unwelcome?

a. If so, could you tell me about them?

16. In your opinion, what can faculty members do to make office hours more welcoming to their students?

17. Would a professor's welcome or unwelcomeness in office hours influence whether or not you would recommend that professor to a fellow student? If so, why is that?

18. Can you tell me the story of the last time that you went to office hours, and can you tell me everything that you remember about that interaction?

19. Have you ever attended a teaching assistant's office hours?

a. If so, how do TA office hours compare to professor office hours?

20. Is there something that you'd like to add about the topics that we've talked about that I haven't asked you yet?