

Student Use of Faculty Office Hours

An Analysis for the Professional Standards Committee | August 22, 2016

In March 2012 the Academic Senate updated the office-hours policy for faculty (S12-1). The adopted policy acknowledged that student-faculty interaction had changed by becoming much more reliant on electronically mediated methods of communication. The new policy allowed faculty to potentially reduce the number of in-person office hours as they supported students at other times through electronic communications.

The new policy also recognized that educational technologies were changing rapidly and the policy should be revisited periodically to ensure it was effective and workable. This report is the first review of how S12-1 affects students.

Methods

In spring 2016, two student focus groups were held to get an in-depth understanding of the current state of faculty availability and student-faculty interaction outside the classroom. The Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Analytics (IEA) invited a simple random sample of SJSU undergraduates to be part of the groups, which followed a protocol of questions developed by IEA. A total of ten students participated in the focus groups between the two sessions. Below is a demographic summary of the participants.

Gender: 6 Female; 4 Male

Student Level: 1 Sophomore; 4 Juniors; 5 Seniors

Colleges: 3 CASA; 1 Education; 2 Engineering; 1 Humanities & Arts; 3 Social Sciences

Finding 1: Students see faculty as welcoming, responsive, and available

Overall, participants were satisfied with current faculty office hours. When the scheduled office hours were inconvenient for the student, faculty made themselves available at other times or by other means. Generally, faculty response time for e-mail correspondence was expected and experienced to be within 24 hours. However, students did note that the larger the class size, the longer faculty took to respond. Below are a few representative comments from students on their experiences with office hours.

- faculty were “happy to see students”
- understanding and helpful
- respond “right away”
- faculty “makes it work”
- “in general [faculty] have always been available”
- encourage students to attend office hours

Finding 2: Student needs are being met

Students expressed having their needs met effectively through faculty contact outside the classroom. They noted that faculty provide a multitude of services to students. Students seek faculty outside the classroom for help with coursework, academic and career resources and opportunities, logistics, and relationship building. Other examples of needs that motivated a student to reach out to faculty are listed below.

- clarification of material
- add classes, turn in/pick up papers, feedback on exams/assignments
- discuss paper topic and receive guidance
- career, research, internship, and study abroad opportunities and advice

- “Sometimes if you ask it in class, it would just take forever to explain the specific thing, so it’s better to go to ... office hours and ask the thing that you’re interested in.”
- “I’ll get work back and I’ll like see that, like, oh, I did it right but the teacher kind of graded it weird, like I’ll go in and just ask about that.”
- “I contact my professor for, like, letter of recommendation, help with like scholarship application or job application.”
- “Talking to your professor more on a personal level kind of makes learning, the learning part a little easier.”

Finding 3: E-mail is used most often to ask/answer questions outside class

Outside office hours, e-mail was the most frequent way that participants contacted faculty. Using e-mail had many advantages as stated by students: professors normally respond to e-mail within reasonable time; e-mail allows students to track their conversations with faculty and can serve as a source of evidence that work was completed e-mail works best for quick questions. However, for complicated questions, they said, e-mail may not be optimal.

Below are additional modes of contact with faculty that were mentioned but used less frequently.

- phone
- text
- Canvas
- casual hallway run-ins
- non-office hour drop-ins
- clubrooms

Occasionally, faculty may opt to hold virtual office hours via Skype, Canvas, or similar platforms. The focus group participants generally did not embrace the idea of virtual office hours. They felt virtual office hours were not a productive use of their or the professor’s time.

Finding 4: Congestion at peak times in the semester is an area for improvement

Although students are generally satisfied with their communication with faculty, they did mention several areas that were working less well for them and that faculty could improve on:

- Inconvenience of time and location: The time of office hours sometimes was not convenient for students, and locations of faculty offices were a frustration because they were scattered across the campus.
- Too crowded: Several students complained that during office hours, the offices were too crowded, especially at the end of the semester or before big assignments or projects are due.
- Unwelcoming and inconsistent: A couple of students mentioned that some of their professors appeared intimidating and not welcoming. Also some instructors’ office hours were not consistent, which caused confusion among students.

Recommendations and limitations

We found little evidence overall that students are not being served well under the current policy. Students in the focus groups believed that faculty availability is generally sufficient and they appreciated the ability to communicate electronically with their instructors outside class, with some reporting that electronic contact enhanced rather than detracted from student-faculty interaction. Based on these findings, we recommend that the policy on faculty office hours (S12-1) does not require modification at this time. In addition, student responses were consistent enough that we do not believe that this issue warrants further study in the near term.

The present study had several limitations. As in any qualitative study, the focus group participants were not necessarily representative of the student body as a whole; there is a chance that a different set of participants would have expressed very different views. The study also did not attempt to collect direct comparisons of experiences before and after the policy change.