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**Revisiting Teacher Immediacy in the HBCU and PWI Context:  
Do Teacher Immediacy and Interpersonal Communication  
Satisfaction Influence Student Retention?**

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the influence verbal and nonverbal teacher immediacy and interpersonal communication satisfaction have on student retention in two historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and a predominantly white (PWI). Two hundred seventy four students (140 HBCU students, 134 PWI students) participated in this study. The results indicated that verbal and nonverbal immediacy were not significant predictors of student retention. Hypotheses 1 and 2 were not supported. The paired t-test for the combined sample produced some significant results between interpersonal communication satisfaction and student retention.

**Revisiting Teacher Immediacy in the HBCU and PWI Context:  
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Satisfaction Influence Student Retention?**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relative influence verbal and nonverbal teacher immediacy and interpersonal communication satisfaction have on student retention in both predominantly white and historically black universities. In particular, four communication constructs were the focus of this study: 1) verbal teacher immediacy, 2) nonverbal teacher immediacy, 3) interpersonal communication satisfaction, and 4) student retention.

**Teacher Immediacy**

Extant literature extends our understanding of the different factors that influence communication satisfaction, and there is a growing demand in higher education to investigate and address issues of student retention and faculty-student communication satisfaction. Even though research has addressed teacher immediacy in both the HBCU and PWI context (Gendrin & Rucker, 2002, 2004), it has not addressed the relationships between teacher immediacy and interpersonal communication satisfaction and student retention. Rucker and Gendrin (2003) assert that affective and cognitive behaviors of instructors influence interactions between teachers and students, and the importance for instructors to know the impact their communication behaviors have on students.

Communication theory and research suggest that verbal and nonverbal messages function differently in social interactions. Verbal messages function to convey the content of the message, whereas nonverbal messages function to establish the relationship. Thus, verbal messages appear to have their primary impact on cognitive responses, whereas nonverbal messages have their primary impact on affective responses. (Mottet, Beebe, Raffeld, & Paulsel, 2004, p. 2)

Teacher verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors and students' reactions to them can influence relationships (Paulsel & Chory-Assad, 2004).

Verbal immediacy focuses on speech that provides "feedback, uses humor, gives personal examples in discussions, and addresses the individual student by name" (Gorham, 1988 as cited in Mottet, Beebe, Raffeld, & Paulsel, 2004, p.2). Nonverbal immediacy includes using eye contact, smiling, body positioning and movement or lack thereof, and instructors' use of a variety of vocal expressions while talking to the class (Arbaugh, 2001; Gorham, 1988).

Beyond this, some studies have reported that "communicators who engage in nonverbally immediate behaviors with others are seen by those others in a more positive way than they see people who do not engage in those communication behaviors" (Richmond, McCroskey, & Johnson, 2003, p.1). Immediacy is therefore conceptualized by Mehrabian (1966) as a behavior that communicates approachability and closeness between interactants (Mottet & Richmond, 1998), where the interactants construe the meaning of the interaction. Simonds (2001) contends that teacher immediacy, noted as behavior that can signal approachability and warmth, is relative to student communication satisfaction initiated in the cognitive and affective behaviors.

In a classroom context, teacher immediacy is evident in the verbal and nonverbal processes by which teacher-student relationships begin to form, which suggests that communication satisfaction can begin to be realized when interactants' verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors are accepted. Overall, this research determines that teacher immediacy underscores the vital premise for understanding the behaviors that create and maintain teacher/student relationships. As interpersonal communication satisfaction is inherent in the communication

event or activity and the social interactions in which teachers and students are engaged, this research adheres to the concept of interpersonal communication satisfaction to provide orientation into the messages that devise relationships.

### **Interpersonal Communication Satisfaction**

Hecht (1978) “conceptualized [interpersonal] communication satisfaction as the positive reinforcement provided by a communication event that fulfills positive expectations” (p. 217) and argues that interpersonal satisfaction is a communication outcome. Hecht goes on to say that immediacy is a contributing factor to liking. Other scholars’ studies make a similar claim. That is, Hess and Smythe (2001) claim that immediacy is the causal mediator of relationship development between teachers and students. Graham (2004) contributes to this line of thinking and contends that teacher immediacy positively correlates with student satisfaction. She also argues that “instructors who help students feel good about themselves . . . contribute to the communication satisfaction of their students” (Graham, 2004, p. 217). By doing so, instructor interpersonal communication satisfaction provides the landscape for predetermining positive immediacy.

Furthermore, positive immediacy is implicit in behaviors that engage satisfying communication. Congruent with this view, Hecht devised the Interpersonal Communication Satisfaction Inventory (Com-Sat Inventory) to assess one’s communication satisfaction in actual and recalled conversations. While the Com-Sat Inventory ascertains the verbal behavioral perspective of communication satisfaction, Proctor II & Wilcox (1993) assert the importance of understanding that we express our awareness of meanings in messages. They further argue that communication satisfaction is reflected in our thoughts and statements.

Overall, Hecht developed an important point connecting the circumstances surrounding communication satisfaction that attends to the continuum of immediacy behavior and meanings in messages and notes that communication satisfaction is embedded in the “communication event” also known as the social interaction. Therefore, the social interactions between teachers and students facilitate relationship development.

### **Student Retention**

Student retention is a major problem for the academic community (Lau, 2003). Instructors do not necessarily bear understanding of affective behaviors relative to students’ communication satisfaction and immediacy needs. Both faculty and student interactions and relationships are very significant to student retention (Schulte, Franklin, Hayes, Noble, & Jacobs, 2001). Pruitt (2005) defines retention as “retaining a student for consecutive regular semesters [and quarters]. Retention refers to students who enroll at a college or university and stay there until they graduate. Retention rates are generally measured by the percentage of first-time, full-time students who return for the following semester [or quarter]” (p. 50). Speaking to the issue of retention performance indicators for institutions, Pruitt also informs us that retention is Everything the institution undertakes to improve the quality of student life and learning for its students. It is a measure of how much student growth and learning occurs. It is a measure of how valued and respected students feel on your campus. It is a measure of how effectively your campus delivers what students expect, need, and want. (p. 53)

Retention is important to institutional image, faculty/student morale, improved recruitment and retention of faculty and staff, and improved learning outcomes for students. Beyond this, retention is a contributing factor to students’ satisfaction with a school’s responsiveness to diverse populations, computer technology, campus life, support services, campus climate,

concern for the student, registration effectiveness, instructional effectiveness, academic advising, and students' overall college experience (Noel-Levitz, 2004).

Lau's (2003) research on factors affecting student retention suggests that teacher/student relationships can significantly motivate students to stay in school. Conversely, Tinto's (1987) dynamic "Model of Institutional Departure maintains that retention is dependent on student satisfaction" (as cited in Lau, 2003, p.1). While documented research validates that student communication satisfaction and learning correlate with faculty interaction (Cascarilla & Terenzini, 1991), this research determines that teacher immediacy and interpersonal communication satisfaction are useful constructs in depicting factors that contribute to student retention.

Classroom interaction and social interaction between instructors and students are important correlates to student retention. Communication scholars have examined that verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors are instrumental to facilitating positive interpersonal relationships between faculty and students, but they have not focused their research on whether teacher immediacy and interpersonal communication satisfaction influence student retention. This study extends the literature to include and/write in student retention in the teacher immediacy and interpersonal communication satisfaction literature. Therefore, the following hypotheses constitute this study:

- H<sub>1</sub>:** African American students will report that verbal and nonverbal teacher immediacy influences student retention at HBCUs.
- H<sub>2</sub>:** Euro-American students will report that verbal and nonverbal teacher immediacy influence student retention at PWIs.
- RQ<sub>1</sub>:** What is the relationship between verbal and nonverbal teacher immediacy and interpersonal communication satisfaction for both African American and Euro-American students?
- RQ<sub>2</sub>:** What is the relationship between interpersonal communication satisfaction and student retention for both African American and Euro-American students?

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

Two hundred seventy four students (140 African American students attending two HBCUs in the Midwest, 134 Euro-American students attending a PWI located in the Midwest) participated in this study. Ages ranged from 17 to 38 ( $m = 19.9$ ,  $sd = 2.79$ ). Student participation in this study was one means of receiving extra credit from their professors.

#### **Procedure**

During the last two weeks of the 2006 Summer Session B at the predominantly white institution and the end of the first week during Fall Semester 2006 at the historically black universities, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire asking their perceptions of verbal and nonverbal teacher immediacy, interpersonal communication satisfaction, and student retention. The authors asked their fellow colleagues' permission to survey students in 10 different classes at both HBCUs and the PWI. One of the authors teaches at one of the HBCUs and the other author teaches at the PWI. The authors collected 422 survey questionnaires, 200 from the two HBCUs and 222 from the PWI. Data was collected from two HBCUs located in the Midwest because each school has a small population of students. After the data were collected, the authors entered the gender and race of the HBCU and PWI students into separate SPSS file and ran a random sample procedure. If a number 2 appeared after the student's name, then that

student's survey data was used for this study. As a result, 140 African American students and 134 Euro American students' names were drawn from the sample.

### Measures

**Teacher Immediacy Scales:** Teacher immediacy was measured using Gorham's (1988) 20-item measure of verbal immediacy such as "My instructor ask questions that solicit view points or opinions" and "My instructor asks questions or encourages students to talk," and Richmond et al.'s (1987) 14-item measure of nonverbal immediacy such as "My instructor sits behind the desk while teaching" and "My instructor smiles at individual students in the class." Participants were asked to evaluate the frequency with which the instructor teaching the course immediately preceding the one for which they were filling the questionnaire used the immediacy behaviors. Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 = never to 4 = very often. The reliability estimates for the verbal and nonverbal immediacy scales were:  $\alpha = .81$  and  $\alpha = .92$ , respectively.

**Interpersonal Communication Satisfaction Scale:** Communication satisfaction was measured using Hecht's (1978) 16-item measure of interpersonal communication satisfaction such as "The other person let me know that I was communicating effectively" and "I was very satisfied with the conversation." Each item was rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = disagree to 7 = agree. The reliability estimate for the interpersonal communication satisfaction scale was:  $\alpha = .87$ .

**Student Retention Scale:** Student retention was measured using Noel-Levitz (2004) national conference on student retention materials 11-item measure of retention such as "I am satisfied with the school's responsiveness to diverse populations," "I am satisfied with academic advising," and "I am satisfied with my overall college experience." Each item was measured using a 5-point likert scale ranging from 1 = not satisfied at all to 5 = very satisfied. The reliability estimate for the scale was  $\alpha = .90$ .

### Data Analysis

Hypotheses 1 and 2 were tested using simple regression analyses. The first research question was answered using a simple regression analysis, and the second research question was answered using t-tests.

## Results

### Regression Analyses

Hypothesis 1 predicted that African American Students will report that verbal teacher immediacy influences student retention at the two historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), and hypothesis 2 predicted that Euro-Americans will report that verbal and nonverbal teacher immediacy influences student retention at the predominantly white institution (PWI). To explore the relative influence of verbal and nonverbal teacher immediacy on student retention, simple regression analyses were conducted. Verbal immediacy and nonverbal immediacy were the explanatory variables (independent) and student retention was the response variable (dependent). The results of the analyses are presented in Table 1 for the African American sample and Table 2 for the Euro-American sample.

For the African American sample, the results indicated that verbal immediacy (standardized  $b = .24$ ,  $t = 1.764$ ,  $p > .05$ ) and nonverbal immediacy (standardized  $b = -.25$ ,  $t = -1.847$ ,  $p > .05$ ) were not significant predictors of student retention at the two HBCUs, and explained three percent of the variance. The hypothesis was not supported (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Regression Analysis: Verbal and Nonverbal Immediacy and Student Retention: African American Sample**

Variables	Beta	<i>t</i>	Sig.	<i>Adj. R</i> <sup>2</sup>	Model Sig.	<i>F</i>
Student Retention			.12	.03	<i>p.</i> > .05	2.193
Verbal Immediacy	.24	1.764	<i>p.</i> > .05			
Nonverbal Immediacy	-.25	-1.847	<i>p.</i> > .05			

For the Euro-American sample, the results indicated that verbal immediacy (standardized  $b = .09$ ,  $t = .669$ ,  $p. > .05$ ) and nonverbal immediacy (standardized  $b = .08$ ,  $t = .580$ ,  $p. > .05$ ) were not significant predictors of student retention at the PWI, and explained less than one percent of the variance. The hypothesis was not supported (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Regression Analysis: Verbal and Nonverbal Immediacy and Student Retention: Euro-American Sample**

Variables	Beta	<i>t</i>	Sig.	<i>Adj. R</i> <sup>2</sup>	Model Sig.	<i>F</i>
Student Retention			.48	-.008	<i>p.</i> > .05	.750
Verbal Immediacy	.09	.669	<i>p.</i> > .05			
Nonverbal Immediacy	.08	.580	<i>p.</i> > .05			

The first research question investigated the relationship between verbal and nonverbal teacher immediacy and interpersonal communication satisfaction for both African American and Euro-American students. The results are indicated in Table 3. For the African American sample, the results indicated that instructor verbal immediacy (standardized  $b = -.05$ ,  $t = -.326$ ,  $p. > .05$ ) and nonverbal immediacy (standardized  $b = -.10$ ,  $t = -.683$ ,  $p. > .05$ ) behaviors were not significant predictors of interpersonal communication satisfaction for students attending the two HBCUs. However, for the Euro-American sample, the results indicated that instructor verbal immediacy (standardized  $b = .61$ ,  $t = 5.804$ ,  $p. < .01$ ) and nonverbal immediacy (standardized  $b = -.386$ ,  $t = -3.320$ ,  $p. < .01$ ) behaviors were significant predictors of interpersonal communication satisfaction for students attending the PWI. The results are indicated in Table 4.

**Table 3: Regression Analysis: Verbal and Nonverbal Immediacy and Interpersonal Communication Satisfaction: African-American Sample**

Variables	Beta	<i>t</i>	Sig.	<i>Adj. R</i> <sup>2</sup>	Model Sig.	<i>F</i>
Interpersonal Communication Satisfaction			.48	-.01	<i>p</i> > .05	.519
Verbal Immediacy	-.05	-.326	<i>p</i> > .05			
Nonverbal Immediacy	-.10	-.683	<i>p</i> > .05			

**Table 4: Regression Analysis: Verbal and Nonverbal Immediacy and Interpersonal Communication Satisfaction: Euro-American Sample**

Variables	Beta	<i>t</i>	Sig.	<i>Adj. R</i> <sup>2</sup>	Model Sig.	<i>F</i>
Interpersonal Communication Satisfaction			.000	.27	<i>p</i> < .01	13.33
Verbal Immediacy	.61	5.084	<i>p</i> < .01			
Nonverbal Immediacy	-.39	-3.230	<i>p</i> < .01			

***Paired T-tests***

The *second research question* investigated the relationship between interpersonal communication satisfaction (ICSI) and student retention for both African American and Euro-American students. Paired *t*-tests were used to answer this question for the combined sample. The results of the analyses are presented in Tables 5.

**Table 5: Paired *t*-tests between Interpersonal Communication Satisfaction and Student Retention**

Student Retention	African Americans			Euro-Americans		
	M	SD	n	M	SD	n
1. The other person let me know that I was communicating effectively	3.29	1.009	140	3.37	.813	134
2. Nothing was accomplished	2.03	1.103	140	2.06	.625	134
3. I would like to have another conversation like this one**	3.71	.950	140	3.55	.840	134
4. The other person genuinely wanted to get to know me***	4.83	6.833	140	3.52	.877	134
5. I was very dissatisfied with the Conversation***	2.20	1.211	140	3.74	1.099	134
6. I felt that during the conversation	3.74	1.099	140	3.87	.757	134
7. I felt that during the conversation I was able to present myself as I wanted the other person to view me	3.83	.884	140	3.82	.695	134
8. I was very satisfied with the conversation.	3.80	.910	140	3.84	.828	134
9. The other person expressed a lot of interest in what I had to say.	2.06	1.062	140	2.13	1.057	134
10. I did <i>not</i> enjoy the conversation*	2.56	1.137	140	2.46	1.020	134
11. The other person did <i>not</i> provide support for what he/she was saying*	3.96	3.308	140	3.66	.993	134
12. I felt that we could laugh easily together.	3.87	.833	140	3.85	.783	134
13. We each got what we wanted.	4.01	.843	140	4.01	.707	134
14. The conversation flowed smoothly	3.90	3.90	140	3.70	.888	134
15. The other person frequently said things which added little to the conversation	2.81	1.195	140	2.76	1.129	134
16. We talked about something I was not interested in.	2.26	.988	140	2.24	.854	134

\* $p < .01$ , \*\* $p < .001$ , \*\*\*  $p < .0001$

The results indicated that ICSI3 [I would like to have another conversation like this one with my instructor] ( $t = 7.153, p < .001$ ); ICSI 4 [The instructor genuinely wanted to get to know me] ( $t = 2.856, p < .01$ ); ICSI5 [I was very *dissatisfied* with the conversation with my instructor] ( $t = -1.693, p < .001$ ); ICSI6 [I had something else to do besides personally communicating with my instructor after class] ( $t = 7.330, p < .001$ ); and ICSI10 [The instructor expressed a lot of interest in what I had to say] ( $t = -4.418, p < .001$ ) produced significant results between

interpersonal communication satisfaction and student retention.

### Discussion

This study investigated the perceptions of African American students in two HBCUs and Euro-American students in a PWI on verbal and nonverbal teacher immediacy and student retention, the relationship between verbal and nonverbal immediacy and interpersonal communication satisfaction, and the relationship between interpersonal communication satisfaction and interpersonal communication satisfaction and student retention.

To test the *first hypothesis*, regression analyses indicated that instructor verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors did not influence student retention. Specifically, instructor verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors were not predictive of African American or Euro-American students' retention in college, and only a small amount of the variance in student retention was accounted for by instructor verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors (3 percent for the African American sample, and less than one percent for the Euro-American sample). As a result, it will be important for future research to consider other variables such as students' motives for communicating with their instructors in both HBCUs and PWI contexts, which may contribute to African American and Euro-American students' self perceptions of their academic performance and interpersonal communication satisfaction with their instructors, since these variables are important constructs to student retention. Perhaps the results were not significant for both samples because the study used a matched-race method, which delimits students' interpersonal experiences with instructors, in most case, who might share the same ethnicity. That is, when African American students attend an HBCU and Euro Americans attend a PWI, students have certain expectations of their instructors. For example, Gendrin and Rucker (2006, in press) conducted a matched-race study and their results indicated that African American students, in particular, have certain expectations of their instructors in the HBCU context than their Euro counterparts. Therefore, the results are not surprising. Gendrin and Rucker's study also indicated no significant results for Euro-American students attending a PWI.

To test the *second hypothesis*, regression analyses did not predict a link between instructor verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors and African American students' perceptions of interpersonal communication satisfaction, but predicted a link between these constructs for Euro-American students. Woodside, Wong, and Wiest (1999) claim that "a possible explanation for [these] result may be that out-of-class self-concept domains such as social acceptance, intellectual ability, and [student] overall self-worth cannot be predicted by in-class instructor behavior" (p. 730) for African Americans. A second possible result may be that institutional structures and classroom interpersonal communication satisfaction based on interpersonal relations play an important part in shaping Euro-American students' roles, feelings, attitudes, norms, and societal expectations toward learning (Giroux, 1997).

The *first research question* investigated the relationship between verbal and nonverbal teacher immediacy and interpersonal communication satisfaction for both African American and Euro-American students. The results indicated no relationship between these two constructs. According to research, "Euro American students attending PWIs and African American students enrolled in HBCUs apply different sets of formal and informal rules to interact successfully with instructors" (Gendrin & Rucker, 2002, 2004; Neuliep, 1995; Rucker & Gendrin, 2003, as cited in Gendrin & Rucker 2006, in press), "to manage academic and social expectations effectively, and to take advantage of educational opportunities" (Brower & Ketterhagen, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, as cited in Gendrin & Rucker, 2006, in press).

The *second research question* investigated the relationship between interpersonal

communication satisfaction and student retention for both African American and Euro-American students. The *t*-tests indicated that interpersonal communication satisfaction for the combined sample produced significant results between interpersonal communication satisfaction and student retention. When students say “I would like to have another conversation like this one” or “The other person wanted to genuinely get to know me,” the results indicated that both African American and Euro-American students perceived having positive interpersonal communication satisfaction which influenced their retention at their respective universities. One possible explanation for students’ interpersonal satisfaction is that Chen (2002) argues that derived “communication satisfaction . . . [is] an affective construct that reflects [individuals’] emotional reaction toward their interaction in terms of the degree it had met or failed to meet their expectations. The more [an individual’s] communicative expectations were met in an interaction, the more the person reports feeling satisfied” (p. 134).

The results of this study are consistent with previous work that highlights the importance of faculty-student relationships with respect to interpersonal communication satisfaction. This study also provides some evidence that faculty-student interpersonal communication satisfaction is significantly associated with students’ overall college experience. The approaches to using these communication constructs was first to discern instructor verbal and nonverbal immediacy with respect to overall interpersonal interactions with students. Second, the interpersonal communication satisfaction scale delineates how meaning derives from the interactions initiated from an interpersonal context between instructors and students. Third, this study suggests that when students are satisfied with teachers’ communication practices and behavior toward them, then relationships develop. Therefore, as student satisfaction is determined in the development of interpersonal communication relationships with instructors, interpersonal communication satisfaction becomes the core contributor to student retention.

Future research should investigate out-of-class interpersonal relational communication between faculty and student and how it influences student retention. If scholars examine both in-class and out-of-class interactions between instructors and students, perhaps a comprehensive understanding of how instructor-student interactions affect student retention. Moreover, future work should examine traditional and non-traditional students individually since student retention may differ significantly between these two groups at HBCUs and PWIs (c.f., Donohue & Wong, 1997).

Since this study appears to be the first direct study on the influence of instructor verbal and nonverbal immediacy and interpersonal communication satisfaction and their relative influence on student retention in both HBCU and PWI settings, these results should be interpreted with caution. Even though extant literature has addressed instructor verbal and nonverbal immediacy in both the HBCU and PWI contexts, but have yet to address these constructs in relation to student retention, these research findings will need to be confirmed or disconfirmed.

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