

Family Film Festival: Academic and Social Interaction outside the Classroom with Retention Benefits

Rebecca A. Adams
Scott S. Hall
Ball State University

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Direct correspondence to badams@bsu.edu

ABSTRACT. *This article discusses the pedagogical and student retention benefits of a Family Film Festival. The festival is an out-of-classroom campus activity that includes the showing of a popular full-length film, small group discussions, refreshments, and door prizes. The authors provide a detailed chronology of festival planning and discuss how Family Science students can participate in planning and implementing the festival. The authors also discuss the retention and social benefits of involving students in all stages of the Family Film Festival.*

Keywords: Family Science pedagogy; student retention; using feature films to teach

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Finding ways to successfully engage students in the learning process is critical to students' classroom success and ultimately to their completion of degrees. Incorporating clips of feature films in the classroom is a common strategy for engaging students with course content. University educators in numerous disciplines such as business education (Smith, 2009), nursing (Masters, 2005), history (Metzger, 2010), religion (Marshall, 2003), and language education (Seferoglu, 2008) have reported using this strategy. This means of illustrating course concepts is likely to benefit family science students as much as it benefits students in other disciplines. For example, Family Science instructors have used feature films (mostly in the form of movie clips) in the classroom to teach topics such as family and child theory (Smith, 2001), marital communication problems (Adams & Hall, 2009), alcoholism in the family (Seery, Cobb, Harpel & Herzog 2002) and stepfamily adjustments (Leon & Franks, 2005). Moreover, implementation of a "family film festival" has potential to benefit students and the greater community in numerous ways.

Using Film in Teaching Family Science

Incorporating the use of feature films in teaching offers various benefits. Bluestone (2000) suggests that popular films can offer "real world" perspectives and are better at integrating the multiple complexities of life into coursework than are educational films. Leon and Angst (2005) found that films create shared language and increased classroom discussion, while Marshall (2003) discovered that viewing films in communal settings opens student dialogue and increases the likelihood of risk taking. Likewise, Adams and Hall (2009) suggested that students might be more willing to discuss family experiences vicariously through movie characters or situations than they might in other situations. Films can also provide cultural lenses through which to view characters. These lenses can offer a visual means of portraying abstract theories and concepts (Casper et al., 2003) and can help students remember course content (Higgins & Dermer, 2001). Films can be a means to strengthen students' critical thinking and analytical skills because they challenge students to integrate the concepts and theories into the lives of the films' characters. Students can take on the perspectives of various characters and use these

viewpoints to compare and contrast each character's perceptions of the same events or experiences (Adams & Hall, 2009).

Although the use of feature films has numerous benefits in the classroom, this is fraught with pedagogical concerns. The obvious and primary issue is classroom time constraints. For a 50-minute class, three class sessions may be needed to introduce and show a film, while portions of another session may be needed for follow-up discussion. Longer class periods present similar issues. Instructors must decide whether showing an entire film is a wise use of class time. These considerations add to the importance of introducing the film, explaining its relevance to course content, and having a good method for processing the film's theme and characters in relation to course concepts. Another problem with showing films is that stopping at specific places to discuss or explain particular concepts can upset the flow of the films, which might cause some students to lose interest.

For the instructors who authored this paper, it became apparent early on that students enjoyed and learned from short film clips. However, the first author felt that showing full-length films offered a variety of benefits that showing only clips of films could not. For example, full-length films allowed students to gain better understanding of various family processes such as (a) how changes occur over time, (b) how adulthood reflects childhood influences, (c) how family theories attempt to explain nuclear and trans-generational behaviors and interactions in the present and over time, (d) how different parenting styles influence children throughout their lives, and (e) how loving marriages can slowly devolve into distant, poor, uncommunicative relationships. It is possible that students would benefit from the value of feature films if these were given as assignments that students could watch as their time permitted, guided through their viewing with thought-provoking questions and specific concepts for them to find. There would also be benefits for students who process their insights along with other students, gaining insight on diverse perspectives and experiences.

Development of Family Film Festival

Based on her experiences teaching and being a student organization faculty advisor, the first author initially developed the Family Film Festival (FFF) to allow students the pedagogical benefits of viewing feature length films. Main elements of the Family Film Festival include hosting an on-campus evening showing of a feature film, refreshments (generally popcorn and pop or water), small group discussions, and distribution of door prizes. The festival creates opportunities to show the films without facing constraints of the classroom issues described above and can promote leadership development among student organization member volunteers by having them help facilitate these out-of-classroom activities. As described in the Appendix, volunteers are active in every step of developing and implementing the festival. At our university, the Family and Child Student Organization (FCSO) is the organization to which Family Science students belong, and from which we recruit volunteers. FCSO also includes child development and child life specialist majors. For the purpose of this paper, discussion of festival logistics is limited to Family Science. The Family Film Festival has evolved over time and the second author has enhanced its format and suggested important improvements. The festival has eight specific goals (see Table 1). Collectively, these goals were anticipated to help improve

student retention in the discipline and in the university as students create connections with the campus community and, in some cases, engage in campus leadership. The Appendix contains a detailed step-by-step description faculty members can use for planning film festival. Please note that public showings of copyrighted films (i.e., not part of an in-class educational activities) require significant fees (see Appendix, III, 6).

Student Retention

Although using feature films as an educational strategy has its own pedagogical merit (Adams & Hall, 2009; Higgins & Dermer, 2001), state legislators and administrators in higher education have other concerns about students' education. The most important of these is student retention (Hayden, 2010). We propose that there are potential student retention benefits to hosting Family Film Festivals that incorporate enhancement of student involvement and leadership development.

Since their budgets are becoming harder to balance, state legislators are taking closer looks at the costs of higher education (Hayden, 2010). A report from the American Institutes of Research, a well-respected, unbiased, independent research organization, added fuel to legislators' desires to revisit the funding process. The report indicated that between 2003-2008, all 50 U.S. states had collectively appropriated \$6 billion to four-year colleges and universities to help pay for the educations of students who had dropped out of school (Indiana Economic Digest, 2010). College graduation rates provided another impetus for funding changes. In a state-by-state comparison of the latest available graduation statistics, Delaware led the nation in the percentage of students who graduated in four years (55%) and for those who graduated in six years (71%). Kansas ranked near the middle with a four-year graduation rate of 26% and a six-year rate of 54%. Idaho ranked the lowest of the 48 continuous states with rates of 8.2% of students graduating in four years and 27% in six years (College Completion, n.d.). With the poor showing of graduation rates and the knowledge that the enrollment method of funding did not provide any incentive for universities to graduate their students, state legislators across the U.S. have turned to a more performance-based funding model (NCLS). Historically, funding for universities was based on the enrollment model—i.e., how many full-time equivalent students were enrolled at the beginning of a given semester. While most funding formulas continue to include enrollment figures, these figures carry less weight than do four- and six-year graduation rates. Currently, legislators are more interested in how many degrees state universities grant than in how many freshmen matriculate.

Increased pressure for student retention is an outcome of the change in budget funding for universities. Student dropouts cost universities money. The greatest numbers of dropouts occur between freshman and sophomore years; from 2003-2008, states spent \$1.4 billion on students who did not return for their sophomore years (Hayden, 2010). To counter this, university staffs have designed programs specific to freshmen. These include programs such as Freshmen Connections, which mail incoming freshmen copies of a pre-selected book and ask them to read the book by the last Sunday before classes begin. On that Sunday, following Freshmen Convocation, volunteer faculty members lead groups of freshmen in discussions of the book. The book is used in various freshmen classes and is an important component of the learning

community environment that university faculty and staff work to build (Freshmen Connections http://cms.bsu.edu/about/administrativeoffices/~link.aspx?_id=4F3ECD38530B40B59039E3C61045477A&_z=z.)

Since Family Science is a major that many undecided students “find” during their first two years of school, retention of non-freshman may be of greater importance to Family Science faculty and students than to many other majors (Hagenbuch & Hamon, 2011); Hamon & Smith, 2014). Research on student retention finds that students are more likely to stay in school if they gain a sense of self-development and feel integration between their academic and social lives (Bean, 2005). Retention is also enhanced when students experience active learning pedagogy and a curriculum that is relevant to their experiences while they seek to challenge their learning process (Crosling, Tomas & Heagney, 2008). Several studies also discuss the importance of student-faculty interaction (Bean, 2005; O’Keeffe, 2013; Turner & Thompson, 2014; Wimshurst, Bates and Wortley, 2003) and development of a sense of belonging to or a positive attitude toward their university (Glen, 2010; O’Keeffe, 2013) as a means to student retention.

The Family Film Festival fits the above criteria for regular attendees and especially for students involved in festival planning. Most often, regular attendees are current students taking family science classes whose instructors offer extra credit for attending; however, there are efforts to broaden the audience to include the larger campus community. These efforts include posting of signs throughout campus and advertisements in the campus paper. By participating in this informal out-of-classroom experience, these students can gain a sense of integrating their academic world with their social lives. This is especially relevant because students enjoy free refreshments, have opportunities to win door prizes, and can invite their friends or romantic partners. Door prizes are notable because they serve two valuable purposes. First, the prizes attract students to the event and encourage their participation in small group discussions following the film because students must wait until after these discussions for prize distribution. In addition, feature films have been shown previously at theaters across the country and are likely to star actors that appeal to most moviegoers. Along with enjoying entertaining films, the students gain academically because the films are selected for their portrayals of particular family life experiences.

Considerable time and planning are invested in the festivals, from selecting films to cleaning up the facilities after the festivals are over. Student participation in these activities serves the dual purpose of obtaining help for the many tasks associated with the festivals and providing opportunities for members of the student organization to take leadership roles in planning and implementation. The festivals have been prominent among the group’s major activities, with the organization voting to underwrite many festival expenses.

Organization members take leadership roles ranging from the planning stages of the festival to the cleanup afterwards. These include (a) participating in the film selection process, (b) ordering and picking up refreshments, (c) obtaining door prizes from local merchants, (d) attending small group leadership training sessions, (e) publicizing the festival, and (f) leading small group discussions on the nights of film screenings. Through these activities, students gain leadership skills and experiences that advance their self-development. Likewise, since these students work with other Family Science students and the festival takes place outside of class

time, students informally interact with other family science students and earn a sense of connectedness with one another and to their academic discipline. The students' discussion leader roles expand their comfort zones, involve them in active learning processes, and may prepare them professionally for similar tasks. Faculty sponsors provide small group training. These sessions include skills such as (a) establishing a non-judgmental group environment, (b) asking open-ended questions, and (c) keeping individual group members from monopolizing group discussions. Students also interact with Family Science faculty throughout implementation of the festival, which is likely to strengthen a sense of connectedness between students and faculty.

Student Evaluation of the Film Festival

To determine the effectiveness of the Film Festival, the authors passed out brief surveys festival attendees at the end of the activity. Respondents were asked not to include their names on the surveys; a student assistant who was not at the festival entered survey data into a spreadsheet. For each of the eight questions, possible survey responses ranged on a five-point Likert-scale from "strongly agree" (5) to "strongly disagree" (1). Items specifically mentioned students as participants, but it is possible that some students invited non-students to join them for the activity. Table 2 includes the means for two festivals that took place four years apart (making it highly unlikely that any of the same students attended both festivals). All the means were above the neutral response (3), which suggests an overall positive experience. Especially positive items included (a) enjoyment of discussing the film with other students, (b) hearing other students share their thoughts, and (c) the belief that there should be additional similar activities on campus. The university's Internal Review Board approved the survey instrument.

For a second festival, attendees could add suggestions to "improve the festival." A content analysis of the responses identified the most common categories of suggestions. The most common response (12 people) related to "nothing" or "it's great as is" (18 people who completed the quantitative part of the survey left this part blank, which in some cases could reflect that same positive notion, though it is impossible to know for sure). The second most common response (six people) related to having the movie played at a louder volume. Close behind (five people) was the suggestion related to additional or better advertising. Three people suggested having pizza, two suggested a shorter film, two suggested the film be shown at an earlier time (e.g., 6:00 p.m. instead of 7:00 p.m.), and one suggested eliminating the discussion portion of the festival. Overall, the suggestions—especially the lack of negative comments—lead to positive inferences about the festival, especially as a concept (as opposed to the logistics of operation).

For the latter festival, we also surveyed the 10 student organization leaders who helped facilitate the festival (using same survey procedure described above to promote anonymity as much as possible). In response to what was the "most meaningful part of the experience," most responses (five) had to do with learning to lead discussion. As one student in particular articulated, "I really enjoyed talking with other students about the movie. I am usually uncomfortable talking in front of people so I like being challenged in this way." Three student leaders specifically mentioned that insights from the movie and discussion were the most meaningful, and two mentioned the chance to practice leadership and cooperation skills. When

asked to rate their likelihood of participating again as leaders in future festivals, seven responded that they were “very likely” to do so while three responded with “somewhat likely.”

Conclusion and Recommendations

Family Film Festivals have potential to promote retention and leadership of Family Science Students and to serve the greater campus communities. These communities can learn more about the Family Science major and what the study of families has to offer, professionally and personally. Generally, those who attended our festivals found them to be worthwhile experiences; student leaders who helped facilitate the festivals believed they gained valuable experience. However, effective festivals require significant planning and resources, and are not without challenges.

Recruiting people to attend the festival is one of the main challenges. Family Science students are the easiest to recruit because of their connections with Family Science faculty and the ease with which such faculty can offer incentives for attendees (i.e., extra credit). Broadening the base of attendees requires much more effort. We relied on mass email communication, campus newspaper advertising, flyers, and word of mouth, but still, the majority of attendees were Family Science students. We recommend giving campus community members adequate time to plan for attending the festival. Reminding them to attend is also crucial. The availability of door prizes and free refreshments was designed to entice attendees. Maximizing the attractiveness of door prizes—perhaps donated by local companies in exchange for advertising—could be especially enticing. Building collaborative relationships with administrators, advisors, and other faculty members across campus could help ensure that broad groups of students are made aware of and encouraged to attend the festival. However, there is no doubt that offering students extra credit is the most effective method of encouraging their attendance. This incentive is relatively easy for the festival’s faculty sponsors to offer; recruiting faculty from other departments to do so is important.

Another challenge may be finding an appropriate facility for the festival—one where food and beverages are allowed, and one that is conducive to projecting a movie onto a large viewing surface. We experienced some technical difficulty with sound, so it is important to know that some rooms may not be equipped with sufficient sound systems. To repeat a point we made earlier in this paper, remember that showing films outside of classrooms (i.e., as part of educational experiences for registered students) requires significant fees and could take days or weeks to arrange (see Appendix, III, 6). In sum, drawing on the creativity and energy of student helpers can add to the overall effectiveness of film festivals by fostering leadership development and creating entertaining, introspective, and interactive events for college campuses.

Rebecca A. Adams is a retired Associate Professor Emerita in the Department of Family and Consumer Sciences at Ball State University; Muncie, IN 47304.

Scott S. Hall, is a Professor in the Department of Family and Consumer Sciences at Ball State University in Muncie, IN 47306.

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*Appendix***A DETAILED FACULTY GUIDE FOR PLANNING & IMPLEMENTING
A FAMILY FILM FESTIVAL**

- I. What – The Family Film Festival involves the on-campus evening showing of a recent feature film midweek approximately 2/3 to 3/4 of the way into a semester. It is better to show the film during the Spring Semester since plans for it should begin during the Fall Semester. We call it a festival because in addition to seeing a movie, attendees are provided with refreshments, generally popcorn and pop or water; and they have the opportunity to win door prizes.

After the movie, trained student members of the Family and Child Student Organization lead small group discussions about the movie from a list of predetermined questions. The student organization members assist with other leadership responsibilities throughout the planning stages of the festival.

The festival is open to students across campus. This encourages students to invite dates or friends.

II. Procedures for Developing Family Film Festival during semester prior to Showing Film

1. Search for funding from a small local service organization grant or a university teaching grant.
2. Attend Family Science student organization meeting, ask for organizational member support, and possible assistance with funding.
3. Begin movie selection process
 - a. Faculty sponsors explain movie parameters (popular film that has family or couple theme or demonstrates family or couple theories or concepts at numerous points in the film).
 - b. Invite members of student organization, as well as students in faculty sponsors classes to nominate films. (We have also created a FFF e-mail account and requested nominations from students across campus).
 - c. Student organization members and faculty sponsors screen films; student organizations make a final recommendation to faculty sponsors who make the final decision

III. Procedures for On-going Development of Festival during semester in which Festival Occurs

1. Recruit Student Volunteers – A faculty Festival sponsor should attend the first or second student organization meeting of the academic year and assist the president or Film Festival Student Chair in explaining needs for festival and asking for volunteers. Festival needs include student small group leaders, door prizes, popcorn popper and pop/water supplies, volunteers the night of the festival to perform such duties as arranging for sign-in as attendees arrive, getting attendees'

- names to include in door prize drawing, popping corn, and cleaning-up. The President or Student Festival Chair can also e-mail organization members who are not present. (An advantage of working with student majors is they are often easily available because they are in one of our classes or we can talk with them in the hallways between classes. We want the students to do as much of the work as possible, but it is important to follow their progress as time for the festival nears.
2. Students assist in Development of Discussion Questions - Ask students to meet at one of their residences and develop film discussion questions to be used following the showing of the movie. (One of our grants allowed for us to provide pizza and pop for student gatherings).
 3. Faculty sponsors develop movie questions, as well.
 4. Secure Location - Faculty sponsor secures room to show film. (We have always used a classroom that is designed to use technology).
 5. Door Prizes - Students gather door prizes
 - a. Often students may work at a business that will provide free T-shirts, gift certificates or free or discounted meals
 - b. If possible include money in the grant to pay for door prizes (The largest we have given are \$20, \$15, and \$10 certificates)
 - c. Ask students to solicit local businesses for door prizes. (We have provided solicitors with a letter written on departmental stationery, which legitimizes their requests).
 - d. Faculty sponsors need to keep a gift list to make certain the gifts are sufficient and have been collected.
 6. Ordering the Film - A faculty sponsor contacts the library to order the film. (As media evolves, different methods for getting the film will continue to change. Since the film is being shown to a larger group and not as part of a class, it is a violation of copyright laws if rental fees are not paid. University libraries have persons skilled in copyright law, as well as ordering the materials. The university, as well as the faculty members, can be sued if copyright law is ignored). We inform out student volunteers, as well as our film attendees of the copyright issue as a model for ethical behavior. It cost us approximately \$350 to show a film.
 7. Training Small Group Leaders
 - a. The training session lasts approximately one hour and can occur following a student organizational meeting or at a time agreed upon by faculty sponsors and the majority of the group leaders.
 - b. Faculty sponsors have coalesced student film discussion questions and their own to create a list of approximately ten questions. These questions form the basis of the small group discussions and are handed out and discussed at the training session.
 - c. Small group leaders are trained in such areas as the importance of remaining non-judgmental; how to get a small group started, how to ask open-ended questions; how to keep one person from controlling the conversation; and how to keep discussion flowing. (We also provide them with a written guide containing these items).
 8. Verification – at least two weeks before the festival, check to make certain the library has ordered the film AND make certain that the room has been secured.

9. Publicity – Numerous methods exist to advertise the festival
 - a. Various social media
 - b. An ad in the campus newspaper (We included money in our grant for this).
 - c. Posters around campus – posters and ads emphasize free popcorn, pop/water, and door prizes
 - d. Posters in classrooms
 - e. Classroom announcements - Announce in your class sessions and ask colleagues (or student organization member) to do the same in other departmental classes.
 - f. By far the best method for getting students to attend the festival is to provide extra credit for members of your classes. It has been our experience that the extra credit does not need to be much.
10. Student Organization Members and Faculty Member Arrange for Refreshments - A portable popcorn popper, popcorn, and sacks can be rented and purchased from a local rental business. Determine what drinks to have and who is responsible for getting them.
11. Copy small group discussion questions to distribute before at the film is showed.
12. Evaluation of Festival – Create and copy student and small group leader evaluation of festival forms. While this is not a necessity, it can be used to improve a future festival or for purposes. Having separate anonymous surveys for attendees and for student volunteers can yield informative input for future events. .Make certain to gain IRB approval if you plan to survey students.

IV. Procedures Immediately before and during Evening of Festival

1. Place signage at strategic places inside the building to designate where the festival is being held.
2. Make certain methods are in place for recording attendance sign-in (needed for recording extra credit) and names for door prizes.
3. Check with small group leaders to determine if they have any questions.
4. Start popping corn.
5. Distribute popcorn and drinks.

Table 1

Description of Film Festival Goals with Ways Goals Are Accomplished

GOAL	HOW GOAL IS ACCOMPLISHED
1. Create an opportunity for Family Science students to build or strengthen connection within the campus community.	Festival provides opportunities for family science majors to interact with non-majors in an out-side the-classroom setting.
2. Create an opportunity for Family Science students to interact with faculty members in out-of-classroom settings.	Numerous opportunities occur during planning and implementing the Festival, such as discussion group leader training, and getting refreshment items.
3. Create an opportunity for Family Science students to gain personal insight as they reflect upon issues related to family relationships that can be applied to their own circumstances	The small group discussion questions developed by the small group leaders, with input from Festival faculty sponsors, are designed to assist participants in relating film concepts to the “real world.”
4. Create an opportunity to recruit new students to the Family Science major.	As a result of participating in the Festival, students who are not family science majors may discover they like the content the major entails and change to the family science major.
5. Provide leadership responsibilities for Family Science Students to plan and assist with the Film Festival.	Achieved by inviting and training the Family Science students to participate and to lead small-group discussions.
6. Assist Family Science student group leaders in gaining a “professional sense-of-self.”	Achieved by inviting and training family science students to be small group discussion leaders.
7. Demonstrate faculty support for the Family Science students in their student organization, as well as other volunteer Family Science students	Achieved by training student discussion group leaders, as well as other Family Science student volunteers, to participate; mentoring from faculty members in planning and execution of the festival
8. Strengthen awareness of the student organization and strengthen organizations activities	Inviting other students to the festival and having them interact with and get to know members of the organization achieve this.

Table 2

Mean Scores for Survey Items

Survey Items	Family Film Festival 1 (n=29)	Family Film Festival 2 (n=50)
Participating in the Festival helped me get to know some new students.	3.83	3.76
Participating in the Festival provided me the opportunity to interact with professors.	3.93	3.58
Participating in the Festival helped me learn more about student organizations.	3.72	3.18
I enjoyed being able to discuss the film with other students.	4.03	3.92
I enjoyed hearing other students share their thoughts about the film.	4.21	4.00
The Festival helped me look at family relationships in a different way.	4.03	4.10
I am more likely to consider being involved in a student organization.	3.29	3.54
I think there should be more activities like this on campus.	4.17	4.02

Note. 1= strongly disagree, 3=neither agree/disagree, 5=strongly agree