DO YOUR STUDENTS CARE WHETHER YOU CARE ABOUT THEM?

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Abstract. The author integrates research and theory to suggest that caring is an important dimension of effective college teaching. Despite the fact that students are acutely aware of whether their professors care about them, professors do not necessarily prioritize this aspect of teaching to the same extent. This article provides concrete suggestions about how professors can develop such rapport with their students, addresses common criticisms and concerns about professors expressing care, and offer avenues for future inquiry.

Keywords: classroom climate, instructor-student relationship, rapport

Do you remember your favorite college professor? Why was this person such an effective instructor? What makes this person stand out in your mind, and how would you describe his or her teaching style?

I supervise doctoral students who are teaching undergraduates for the first time. I ask them to answer these questions so they can reflect on exemplary teaching and crystallize their aspirations for their own performance. One of my students recently wrote:

During my undergraduate career, I took Core Composition with Professor McPherson. He had a knack for clarity. I knew exactly what to expect out of the class... Although he was well organized and prepared, he was also approachable. He easily established rapport with his students and worked very hard to build personal relationships with each of us. He had a very kind voice and open demeanor.

Prof. McPherson didn't sit behind a desk or stand behind a podium during class. Rather, he walked around the classroom and invited all of his students to comment... He was very enthusiastic about writing and I found his energy to be quite contagious! He collaborated with each student to ensure they chose a topic they were passionate about for each essay. What really made this professor stand out was his sincere interest in personally assisting his students with their writing skills...

Students invariably highlight many traits of effective instruction in these essays. Their favorite professors are knowledgeable, articulate, and have clear and high expectations for students’ performance. However, a second and different set of traits often is apparent: these professors genuinely care about their students.

In this article, I integrate research and theory to suggest that caring is an important dimension of effective college teaching. Despite the fact that students are acutely aware of whether their professors care about them, professors do not necessarily prioritize this aspect of teaching to the same extent. I provide concrete suggestions about how professors can develop rapport with their students, address common criticisms and concerns about professors expressing care, synthesize the literature, and offer suggestions for future inquiry.

The Caring Dimension

Several lines of research emphasize that interpersonal relationships in the college classroom are an integral part of teaching and learning. The first source of information in this area comes from examinations of student rating instruments. There are many different types of evaluation forms, and Abrami, d’Apollina, and Rosenfield (1997) conducted a large-scale factor analysis to determine whether a common core of traits exists across these varied questionnaires. The authors found that effective instruction can be reduced to two main factors or roles. The most important factor describes professors’ “instructional role” and focuses on their knowledge, preparation, and clarity. However, the “personal role” is almost as important and addresses professors’ concern for students, availability, respectfulness, and...
willingness to answer questions and foster interaction.

Other analyses of student rating instruments reinforce the conclusion that there are two overarching aspects of skillful college teaching. Joseph Lowman (1995) referred to the first dimension as “intellectual excitement,” or professors’ presentation clarity, organization, and ability to stimulate student interest. The second dimension, professors’ “interpersonal rapport” relates to their tendency to welcome students’ questions, encourage students, acknowledge their input and feelings about the class, and express interest in students as individuals.

**The Great Divide**

Although the instructional role and the personal role are both important, professors generally focus on the former, whereas students focus more on the latter. In other words, students and faculties describe effective college teaching in different ways. Bill Buskist and his colleagues (2002) asked a sample of psychology undergraduates and another sample of faculty members across disciplines to list characteristics of master teachers. In order of importance, the undergraduates described the top five traits as professors (1) having realistic expectations of students and being fair; (2) being knowledgeable about the topic; (3) displaying understanding; (4) being approachable and personable; and (5) being respectful toward students. Faculty prioritized (1) being knowledgeable about the topic, (2) being enthusiastic about teaching, (3) promoting critical thinking, (4) being well prepared, and (5) being approachable and personable. These two lists do overlap at points; however, the students’ list places greater emphasis on rapport.

Other studies similarly indicate that professors and students have different priorities when they appraise teaching. Feldman (1988) compared how faculty and students judged 22 aspects of effective college instruction by compiling data across 31 studies. Students valued the following dimensions significantly more than professors: stimulation of interest in the course, the professor’s availability and helpfulness, and the professor’s speaking skills. On the other hand, professors prioritized these characteristics more than students: encouragement of self-initiated learning, intellectual challenge, and high standards of performance.

Simply stated, students care if we care about them. They candidly express these sentiments in forums such as RateMyProfessors.com:

> Awesome teacher! She was very helpful, good at explaining things in class, and enjoyed her job to the max. I loved this class. She made psychology even more interesting than I thought it was. She was also willing to help you get better on your papers. Definitely would recommend her.

Students are also attuned to when professors do not appear to care, as evident in these two excerpts:

> This is by far the worst professor in the entire history of [X] professors. She is unhelpful, un-clear, and extremely obious. She does not like her students at all and had no business in a teaching capacity. I am so glad she is gone; as a matter of fact I think we should all celebrate her leaving.

If given the option of having Prof. [X] for this class or Satan, I would definitely choose Satan. Satan probably has more of an interest in seeing you succeed in [this class] than X does. He most likely has a better personality as well.

**The Effects of Care**

Caring affects more than students’ evaluations of their professors. Rapport impacts students’ attitudes toward the class, their academic behavior, and the extent of their learning. Benson, Cohen, and Buskist (2005) reported that increases in instructor-student rapport are associated with greater student enjoyment of the class, improved attendance and attention, increased study time, and additional course enrollment in the discipline. Similarly, Wilson (2006) found that students’ perceptions of their professors’ positive attitudes toward them (e.g. concern, desire for students to succeed) accounted for 58 percent of the variability in student motivation, 42 percent of the variance in course appreciation, and 60 percent of their attitude about the instructor.

Expressing care toward their students, communicating respect, behaving sensitively, and remaining warm and engaged not only enhance individual relationships, but also affect the broader climate and reduce classroom conflicts (Meyers, Bender, Hill, and Thomas 2006). In fact, the most effective strategies to reduce conflicts when they occur with students center on improving rapport, such as (1) communicating respect, interest, and warmth toward the student; (2) speaking with the student outside of class; and (3) focusing on the student’s feelings. In contrast, administrative strategies that do not address the bond with students (e.g. changing the course requirements/deadlines, changing grading criteria, ignoring the problem) work much less often.

Research about teacher “immediacy” provides the firmest foundation for the idea that caring makes a difference in students’ educational experiences. Immediacy refers to overt forms of communication that enhance the closeness between students and faculty. Examples of nonverbal immediacy include maintaining eye contact, displaying an open body posture, smiling, and respectful listening; whereas illustrations of verbal immediacy include instructors expressing interest in the lives of students, remembering students’ names, and communicating availability (Kearney and Plax 1992). A meta-analysis of 81 studies involving nearly 25,000 students indicated strong and reliable associations between immediacy and both students’ perceived learning and their positive attitudes toward the instructor and course (Witt, Wheless, and Allen 2004). Instructors’ verbal and nonverbal immediacy are also related to students’ retention of course material, but these correlations are smaller.

**Criticisms and Cautions About Caring**

Caring for students is not necessarily an easy task. Some faculty members do care, but feel as though their students do not notice or appreciate their efforts. Other professors feel that it can be too difficult to create caring relationships in large classes or fear that they will be too permissive if they connect with their students. Still others believe that caring is not part of their job and that focusing on interpersonal relationships at the college level is “soft” or gratuitous.

**My Students Don’t Appreciate How Much I Care**

There are several reasons why students may not perceive professors as caring
between faculty and friend: lives can potentially blur the distinction investment and involvement in students’ intent. This is important because increased rating supportive relationships with stu-
tons. Questionnaires used in immedi-
cacy research are helpful for this reason because they provide a list of concrete and specific behaviors that, if implemented, allow students to see what instructors actually feel. See tables 1 and 2 for specific suggestions.

I Don’t Want to Get Too Close or I Can’t Get Close

Faculty must maintain an awareness of interpersonal boundaries when creating supportive relationships with students. This is important because increased investment and involvement in students’ lives can potentially blur the distinction between faculty and friend:

You can study in her fabulous house! She takes you on interesting field trips! She lets me drive her car! The [X] class was too big, and I wasn’t that into the subject, but as a person and a professor, she’s fabulous.

Effective, caring faculty members balance their connection with students by setting limits as needed, by enforcing classroom policies in consistent and equitable ways, and by maintaining democratic and respectful authority in the college classroom. Regardless of the amount of care students receive, their misbehavior increases when instructors are highly permissive (Plax and Kearney 1998). Thus, professors’ warmth and involvement need to be coupled with effective control.

Excessive distance is actually a greater challenge for professors who want to express care toward their students. Large undergraduate classes or Internet instruction seem to create boundaries that are difficult to traverse. Research nevertheless suggests that people report feeling close to and cared for by others even in low-contact relationships. For example, psychologists have documented that people form enduring impressions of others quickly and make inferences about their personalities without substantive interactions (Funder 1999). These “perceived relationships” have an impact. Wohlford, Lochman, and Barry (2004) found that undergraduates readily identified well-known figures (e.g., authors, politicians, and celebrities) as their role models, compared their behavior with these figures, and even had lower self-esteem when they judged themselves as discrepant.

These and other findings have implications for college teaching. First, regardless of the size of the class, undergraduates use the information they have to form impressions about their instructors. They attend to observable immediacy behaviors, and then generalize this data to make inferences about professors’ personalities and how much they care about students. Consequently, highly caring and skillful professors can have an effect on students that is disproportional to the depth of their actual relationship because “perceived relationships” can be unexpectedly influential. The impact of a caring and responsive professor-student relationship even extends into online teaching environments that completely lack face-to-face contact (Richardson and Swan 2003).

My Job is to Teach, Not to Care

Other faculty members doubt that caring has a place in college-level instruction, and instead believe that it is more appropriate for younger children. They
suggest that caring implies the absence of academic rigor or lowered expectations for students. For example, one professor rebutted the claim on RateMyProfessors.com that he was a “rude, disrespectful, pretentious snob.” In his video response appearing on the same site, he captures this sentiment when he states: “We’re not there to babysit. We’re there to train professionals. If you can’t take it, you’re in the wrong place. You don’t deserve to be in university. Grow up.” Another faculty member responded to student postings stating that he was egotistical by sarcastically remarking: “What I should do instead is not have an ego, be nice and agree with everyone and make sure that there’s no critical edge given to anything I say, and that will make people feel better.”

Although these sentiments may be commonly held, they undermine instructional effectiveness. In his research on the topic, Bob Boice (1996, 2000) found that when professors are uncaring (i.e. disparage students, seem cold), students typically respond in suit. Instructors’ apathy or hostility leads to increased student classroom disruptiveness and decreased constructive course engagement.

Importantly, attending to the personal role in college teaching is most effective when it is coupled with a focus on the instructional role (Lowman 1995). In other words, caring is a part of effective college teaching, but not the totality. Supportive relationships between faculty and students are not a potential detriment to instructional rigor, but instead function as a conduit for students to master difficult material. Constructivist perspectives (e.g. Vygotsky) assert that students’ social interactions with a more knowledgeable person enable learning and development. This relationship is an important facilitator of learning because it provides the support, encouragement, and assistance for students to develop higher-order learning skills and to integrate new information with their current understanding and past experiences (Daniels, Cole, and Wertsch 2007).

Other writers emphasize the value of these social relationships even more directly. Nel Noddings (1992) affirmed that one responsibility of teachers is to model and display caring in the classroom to provide a foundation for later ethical decision-making and to promote the development of a caring society. Although Noddings writes about primary and secondary education, college faculty can have a similar impact on students’ development. Professors have the potential to be influential professional and personal role models (Erkut and Mokros 1984). Even in large university settings, many students hope that their professors will assume this role in their college experience (Kavina and Pedras 1986). Thus, students may not only remember subject material at the conclusion of courses, but they also may internalize professors’ values, views, and dispositions about learning and life. This becomes even more likely when professors become more involved and mentor undergraduates (Ferrari 2004).

Implicit in this notion is that part of professors’ work involves emotional labor (Hochschild 1983). This process entails managing and changing instructors’ own feelings to create an emotional display that furthers their teaching objectives. People expect, for example, health care workers to perform emotional labor to exhibit warmth and compassion in their jobs as an integral element in helping and healing others. In a similar vein, instructors’ purposeful demonstration of care can increase students’ motivation and engagement and ultimately can advance their education.

**Evaluation and Future Directions**

In sum, the literature indicates that students are attuned to the relationships that they have with their professors. Student ratings of instructional effectiveness reliably identify rapport as an important and discrete dimension of college teaching. Observable expressions of instructors’ care significantly correlate with students’ perceptions of faculty members, their academic engagement, their enjoyment of coursework, and even their learning. There are impediments to expressing care that stem from personal and institutional factors, however: widespread suspicion about focusing on the social and emotional dimensions of teaching at the college level, difficulties connecting with large classes of undergraduates and challenges maintaining appropriate boundaries, and risks involved in students misinterpreting or devaluing professors’ efforts to build supportive relationships with them. Nevertheless, many questions remain unanswered despite this foundational knowledge.

The first set of questions focuses on whether the importance of caring varies as a function of professors’ attributes. For example, are female faculty members expected to care more about students than are men, and are they consequently held to a higher standard? Does the need to express care differ by professors’ race and ethnicity? Some students challenge the competence and question the authority of female professors and faculty of color more often than they do for white male faculty (Harlow 2003). It remains unclear whether women who display the gender-stereotypical behavior of communicating nurturance maximize their teaching effectiveness, and whether their students disproportionately disparage them if they do not. Similarly, does rapport building by faculty of color encourage greater student trust and respect, or does it unintentionally undermine their credibility and authority given societal prejudices?

Moreover, the priority that professors place on rapport has been shown to differ between disciplines. Hoyt and Lee (2002) reported that professors from some fields generally assign relatively low importance to developing rapport in their instruction (e.g. chemistry, computer science, history), others endorse moderate importance (e.g. biology, mathematics, psychology), and some greatly value rapport building (e.g. communications, education, English literature). Do students consequently expect more or less care depending on the discipline? Do they compare instructors within a particular field against each other, or do they compare professors across disciplines? Does this suggest that students within particular majors systematically have more distant relationships with faculty members throughout their education?

The role of caring in the classroom may also vary as a function of student...
characteristics. Is it more important for professors to establish supportive relationships with first-year students or graduate students? Is there a greater impact of expressing care for students of color compared to non-minority students? These questions are important not only for performance in a particular class, but may ultimately impact retention rates for groups of students who are at greater risk for not completing college (Kuh, Kinzie, Cruce, Shoup, and Gonyea 2006).

Beyond demographics, other student traits may influence instructors’ ability to establish rapport. Many professors readily acknowledge that it is easy to connect with students who perform well in classes, appear invested in their college education, and display positive behaviors toward faculty members. However, it is unclear whether these successful students need warmth the most. Which group presents a greater return on professors’ investment of care: these students or others who seem less engaged and perform marginally in their coursework? Research has established that students who are highly motivated to complete a particular course will express significantly greater satisfaction with the class, the instructor, and the field of study (Hoyt and Lee 2003). Can enhanced rapport building help close this gap for students who are less motivated? Alternatively, does care have its limits and does a “law of diminishing returns” apply? Rapport may have a linear relation with positive student outcomes (such that greater personal involvement consistently has a positive effect) or its beneficial effects may plateau after a certain point is reached.

Conclusion

Although professors may not always recognize it, caring is a powerful teaching tool. As Parker Palmer (1998) suggested, “Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves” (11). Supportive relationships in the classroom can encourage students to become more invested in learning, enable them to extend beyond their current abilities, and form a bridge for mentorship. Caring does require additional effort on the part of college faculty. Louis Schmier (1997) explained that professors must persist despite frustrations and setbacks, tolerate feelings of vulnerability that sometimes occur when emotion is evident or addressed, and focus more on students than on subject matter at times. But caring has rewards as well. A cycle often emerges in which students reciprocate the care that they receive from their professors in ways that renew purpose and give faculty a sense that they are making a difference in students’ lives in important ways.

NOTE

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REFERENCES


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