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Caring and the College Professor

James N. Olson, PhD
Professor
Department of Psychology
College of Arts and Sciences
The University of Texas of the Permian Basin
Odessa, TX

Janet A. Carter, PhD
Assistant Professor
Department of Leadership, Foundations, and Counseling
College of Education
The University of Texas of the Permian Basin
Odessa, TX

Abstract

Student retention and graduation rates, commonly referred to as student success rates, are a growing concern among administrators in higher education. Several faculty variables such as faculty engagement, faculty availability, faculty approachability, faculty concern, and faculty caring have been positively correlated with student success. In this article, we suggest that these faculty behaviors may be subsumed under one variable, "caring." Several examples of faculty caring behaviors are described, such as unconditional positive regard and extended office hours, to name a few.

Keywords: caring, positive regard, teaching, college retention

"These are challenging times . . . . enrollment is up, funding is unreliable, and colleges are increasingly held responsible for learning outcomes of an ever more diverse student population" (Schuetz, 2005, p. 60). States demand that institutions of higher education show evidence of greater accountability, demonstrate efficient use of resources, graduate more undergraduate students in a shorter period, and still offer a high-quality education. Public colleges and universities are increasingly evaluated on outcome measures such freshman-to-sophomore retention, bachelorette degree production, and graduation rates. Such outcome measures of retention and degree productivity have been collectively referred to as measures of "persistence" or student "success."

In attempts to improve retention and graduation rates, administrators and researchers have extensively examined various and sundry factors affecting retention and graduation rates. These factors typically fall into two general categories: (a) student-based variables and (b) institution-based variables. Researchers have identified student variables associated with

successful retention and graduation rates. Some of the identified student variables include age, commitment to earn a degree, distance from permanent home, educational aspirations and career goals, financial resources, first-generation to attend college, mental health, motivation to succeed, and personal coping skills. Other identified student variables include physical health, preparation for college, socio-economic advantage/disadvantage, student involvement, study skills, support from significant others, dependent children (or adults), marital status, and work demands (i.e., Kahn & Nauta, 2001; Murtaugh, Burns, & Schuster, 1999; Roberts & Styron, 2010; Titus, 2006).

Some of the institutional variables that have been explored in retention research include academic advising, academic support services or learning centers, attitude of faculty/staff toward students, career exploration services, centralized versus decentralized academic support services, and class size and student-faculty ratio. Other identified institutional variables include extracurricular programs, financial aid availability, first year seminars/orientation courses, general expenditures per full-time student, library services, number of enrolled full-time students, on-campus housing, and percentages of students between the ages of 17 and 23 years (the "traditional" aged student). Additional institutional variables identified in the extant literature include personal contact between students and faculty, personal counseling services, public versus public institutions, revenue and expenditure of the institution, size of the institution, student-faculty ratio, student-institution fit, student involvement in campus life, social environment, teaching quality, and tutoring services (i.e., Blackburn, 2010; Boylan, Bliss, & Bonham, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Roberts & Styron, 2010).

This myriad of complex variables may interact to support or hinder student retention and persistence to the degree. Isolating one or two factors that are most important to retention and persistence is not even possible. Each student brings with him/her a unique history, and each campus is unique in tradition and student support systems. For example, Schuetz (2005) reported that graduation rates varied significantly between colleges for students sharing similar demographics and curricula. Clearly, retention and persistence involves a constellation of variables, and more often the case, subtle variables unique to each student and campus.

Vincent Tinto, one of the early scholars on college retention in the United States, recently said:

> For over 40 years, access to higher education has improved, and college enrollments swelled from nearly 9 million in 1980 to over 20 million today. However, while enrollments have more than doubled, overall college completion rates have increased only slightly. Only about half of all college students in the U.S. earn a degree or certificate within six years . . . . The facts are clear. Despite our success in improving access to college, we have been unable to convert these gains into higher completion rates . . . . It is not for lack of effort. Over the past 20 years, if not more, colleges, universities, states and private foundations have all invested considerable resources in the development and implementation of a range of improvement programs. Though several of these efforts have achieved some degree of success, most have not made a significant impact on college completion rates for two reasons. First, most of the innovations have failed to reach a significant scale . . . it means little if we do not expand the program to reach a critical mass of students. Second, most innovations fail to improve the classroom

> experience—the one place where students connect with faculty and students engage in learning. (2011, pp. 1 – 2)

Roberts and Styron (2010) found that faculty approachability was a key factor in retention. Heverly (1999) found that compared to non-returning students, returning students had a much more favorable attitude toward their faculty interactions, stating, "Instructors know when students do not know the material," "My instructors seem to show respect for me as an individual," and "My instructors are concerned with my success" (p. 10). In a survey involving 313 students of all ranks in a 4-year university, Patti, Tarpley, Goree, and Tice (1993) conducted a regression analysis and found that, in general, student perceptions that administration, faculty, and staff had a genuine concern for them as individuals accounted for a significant proportion of the retention rate variance. Clearly, students detect the general attitude that administrators, faculty, and staff show, and that attitude is important in retention. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) asserted, the more positive student-faculty contacts, the greater the likelihood of retention/persistence.

Muraskin, Lee, Wilner, and Swail (2004) selected public and private 4-year institutions based on their high graduation rates and contrasted these with comparable institutions with low graduation rates. They reported that a caring, accessible, and dedicated full-time faculty was very important to retention. Previous research (i.e., Goldstein, 2002; Kohl, 1984; Noddings, 1986, 1992; O'Brien, 2010) has highlighted the importance of caring in the classroom. Kohl stated that, "a teacher has an obligation to care about every student" (1984, p. 66).

College and university administrators typically report that their faculty consists of a "caring" faculty, but caring (or concern) is a difficult trait to measure, to say the least, and hence equally difficult to teach to new and established faculty. Faculty in higher education rarely receives training in effective pedagogical strategies, much less training on how to be caring instructors. Any form of quality control of classroom teaching is nominal at best, and often *pro forma*, especially for tenured faculty. End-of-semester student course evaluations tend to be the standard measure of something—effectiveness, it is often said, or quality—but these come with legitimate criticisms about their validity and reliability. Given that retention and persistence to the degree are so important, and given that a caring and dedicated full-time faculty help retention and persistence, it would be fruitful to better understand specific caring behaviors and traits and then to teach these to both new and established faculty. Thus, the purpose of the article is to offer examples of caring behaviors and traits in professor-student interactions with the aim of enhancing, in part, student retention and persistence to the degree.

Caring refers to "showing concern for others" (Martin, 2007, p. 2). There are many definitions of caring like this, equally vague and without context. Professors come to the classroom with diverse interpretations of words such as caring and concern. We call such words "buzz" words. Although the words sound good, what do they mean, exactly? While such words may communicate general concepts, our communication could be more accurate if these words were linked to the behavior and the context in which observations are made—the language of observables, or "data language" (Greenspoon & Simkins, 1968). This leads one to ask, "What do caring professors do—what are they doing behaviorally in the classroom, office, or online environment to be perceived as caring? We have compiled a list of behaviors below which we provide as examples of caring in professor-student interactions. This is by no means an exhaustive list.

Caring Behaviors

Project a Welcoming Demeanor

Students frequently preface after-class or in-office interactions with professors with questions such as "Am I interrupting?" or "Can I ask you a question?" Alternatively, students begin a meeting with statements like "I hate to bother you" or "I hope you are not too busy." Something similar can occur when students send emails beginning with statements such as, "I'm sorry to be a pest, but …." It is as if students feel obligated to apologize for intruding on our time. During such student/professor interactions, unspoken communication can convey as much or more than spoken words. The student may read a facial grimace or a deep sigh as, "What do you want?" or "I'm through for the day." Emails can take on a rushed and harried tone, giving the student the impression that he/she has intruded in our busy schedule.

Offset the tension that comes with the teaching profession by smiling, and smiling often. Smiling projects more relaxation, less stress, and fewer burdens. Smiling also conveys enjoyment. Smiling in the presence of students, whether in the classroom, in the hallway, in the office, or on Skype, invites the student to join you and to be more expressive. In order to convey caring, adopt a stance that serving students is always a pleasure and never a burden. Behaviorally, we convey our caring stance by suspending other activities while conversing with the student, physically orienting toward the student, making culturally-considerate eye contact, offering a warm smile, and inviting the student to share his or her concern or news. We believe that giving the student one's undivided attention in the moment is a very powerful way to demonstrate that we value that individual and that he/she is our first concern. Making a student feel valued fosters open communication.

Foster Openness and Accessibility

Professors can also demonstrate caring for students by considering physical factors such as office arrangement. While research regarding office arrangement and furnishings is fairly limited, Haase and DiMattia (1970) noted that clients in dyadic counseling situations preferred seating arrangements where the client and counselor worked with each other across the corner of a desk instead of a seating arrangement that placed a table between the client and counselor. In higher education settings, it is not unusual to see room arrangements that create visual, physical, and psychological barriers. In our faculty offices, we have tried to create a more open atmosphere in an effort to make students comfortable during visits. One author has a large office where students can sit at the end of a table and he can swivel his chair to sit across the corner of the table from the student. The other author inverted her L-shaped desk so the desk faced the wall and left the center of the office open. Visiting students can choose a seat at the corner of the desk or another seat set on a diagonal from the professor's chair. Both office arrangements provide enough seating for multiple students.

Demonstrate Unconditional, Positive Regard

There is a difference between a student's competence and a student's performance. A student must manifest her/his competence by producing written work, providing oral

presentations, or demonstrating some other form of behavior that is publically observable. We assume that each incoming college student possesses the competence to do the work, competence to succeed, competence to earn the degree, and competence to make a living. However, there are barriers for many students. If a test or a paper is due, and a student's performance is substandard, a caring professor assumes it is a performance issue rather than a competence issue. In other words, something legitimate interfered with the translation of competence into performance: lack of sleep, work issues, family issues, drugs, lack of confidence, or other factors. The student is competent and, therefore, always merits the instructor's unconditional, positive regard. With acceptance and regard in place, both the professor and the student can focus on identifying barriers to performance so the student can make appropriate adjustments. Caring professors assume competence and actively support problem-solving efforts in order to optimize every student's performance. Behaviorally, we take the time to do this with and for any student. Rogers (1961) said it best in referring to unconditional, positive regard as ". . . . a caring which is not possessive, which demands no personal satisfaction" (p. 283).

Set High but Achievable Expectations

Course expectations should be set high but, at the same time, the levels for A, B, C, and D course grades should be specific, consistently applied, realistic, and achievable. Professors cannot teach a competent student how to literally fly an airplane, but one can teach the competent student to read better, to write clearer and more precisely, to employ logical reasoning, and to meet other academic demands. Caring for students includes careful consideration of desired learning outcomes and development of manageable academic tasks that gradually move the students toward successful completion of those learning outcomes. For example, the first author developed his online career-counseling course based on several learning objectives: helping students familiarize themselves with online research resources, connect research with theories and issues in career counseling and career development, develop analytical skills, acquire proficiency in writing using APA format, and foster between-student communication and discussion. Each chapter includes a specific topic that helps the students narrow their research focus, and students are tasked with finding research related to the topic. Each chapter also includes sample papers that provide models of excellent and good papers, along with an explanation of what differentiates the two writing levels. Upon completion of the writing assignments, the professor provides constructive feedback related to writing mechanics and content, and peers provide additional comments in a discussion forum. The course includes other supports for students such as links to helpful websites and step-by-step instructions for accessing research online. Students typically take the career-counseling course early in their graduate program, and they can use the acquired research skills in later courses and in other research efforts. The structure of the course makes the first steps of learning attainable, so that students can succeed in their efforts.

Instill Confidence

We also want to instill confidence in the student's own ability to think and write critically, and to solve methodological and applied problems. One way professors can instill confidence is to make a special effort to provide positive feedback, to encourage creative and

freethinking by being open to new ideas and providing constructive criticism, rather than criticism that would deflate a student's confidence and thereby dissuade further curiosity and thought. The second way professors can instill confidence is to identify and reinforce successes. To have confidence, the student must have a history of success. Successes, of course, can be small, little victories. Consequently, we recommend multiple measures of performance so the student may obtain reinforcing feedback on what he or she is doing right, which allows the student to build on the right steps.

Be Interesting and Organized

Professors ask students to engage in performance activities (i.e., exams, written papers, participation), and those activities are unambiguously linked to the lectures, textbooks, and readings. Course objectives and expectations are clearly spelled out, including all due dates, beginning with the syllabus. Naturally, one should have a detailed syllabus. The syllabus is the student's contract, and it implies that every enrolled student will be treated consistently and fairly. Evaluative techniques should be delineated such that anytime throughout the duration of the course the student should be able to know the level at which he or she is performing and what he or she needs to do to in order to meet performance expectations.
The students should not have to guess.

One often hears that one should use a variety of mixed media and other technologies in the classroom, but we do not necessarily agree. The voice, chalkboard, or white board are sufficient as long as students are engaged in the subject matter. Lecturing as you present PowerPoint slides does not necessarily engage students. Adding group discussion, class contests, applied problems, practice vignettes, artistic presentations, or other activities makes presented information relevant and more interesting. It is our experience that all students benefit from active engagement, which makes subjects more interesting and helps the student understand how to relate or apply the subject matter.

Show Interest in the Student

One can demonstrate interest by empathic listening, such that the instructor is in no doubt about what the student means and needs. Listening implies eye contact as well, of course, both inside and outside of the classroom. Discussion outside of the classroom is vital and conveys not only the instructor's interest in the student but in the subject matter as well. Naturally, engaging in student organization activities and so forth outside of the classroom goes a long way to show interest. All activities under the umbrella of "student engagement" fit in here, such as research activities, independent study, field trips, and so on.

Act as an Appropriate Adult Model

While effective traditional and online teaching is important to us, we believe that a very important role of a university teacher is that of being an appropriate model of adulthood. As university teachers, our behavior and language are always at the forefront, and we like to say that we are models to the students in terms of professional boundaries, ethical responsibilities, honesty (i.e., "do what you say you're going to do"), and a solid work effort. Here, we note the

value of treating everyone fairly and appreciating the unique histories and cultural backgrounds our students afford us when we take the time to engage with them.

Keep the Office Door Open

Closed office doors send a loud and clear message—"Don't bother me." Our office doors are open, literally. Not open just a crack but open enough that students or others walking the hallways can see that we are present. Knocking is not needed.

Office hours are cast in stone. When the posted times reveal that professor should be in his or her office, then the instructor needs to be present for the duration. We hear instructors report to students that if no one shows during the first ten minutes of office hours, then they leave. The message here is, "Catch me if you can." At our institution, the minimum office hours per week is five, and we spread those hours over three days. Additionally, we schedule office hours to fit the needs of the students, which includes scheduling in the evening for working students. One can guarantee we are in our office during posted hours, but we are actually in the office with the door open much more than the posted times. Any student may pop in and gain our undivided attention. We do not ask them to come back during posted office hours. We operate like a retail chain store; we are open for business and consistently available, which boosts our credibility.

Keep Response Time to Inquiries Short

We return phone calls within 24 hours, and we respond to emails generally within 12 hours. Even on weekends, we check email in the morning and evening and immediately respond. Interestingly, although we both teach at least half of our courses online, we are not stay-at-home instructors. We work primarily in our campus offices, so any student who desires face-to-face attention may have it, and we frequently work at the computer so when an email comes in, we can respond. Many students are appreciative of fast response time and connect it to caring.

Provide Rapid Evaluative Feedback

Rapid feedback to students is a key aspect of course integrity and a critical component of learning and retention. The evidence has been clear for over 75 years. The quicker one receives feedback about his or her performance, the better the retention and recall of that information. In online courses that have quizzes, of course, grading of those quizzes occurs automatically and immediately. Papers are graded within the first 24 hours of the due date as well. The first author teaches an online statistics course, a course that is traditionally taught face to face. He grades exams within 30 minutes after submission. In terms of feedback, the motto "strike while the iron is hot" really comes into play.

Course integrity also means acknowledging that the instructor, textbook, or reading can be ambiguous or outright wrong. When we hear a student question the veracity of a test item or an aspect of an assignment, we congratulate that student for critical thinking. We express appreciation and make course corrections based on student feedback if needed.

Conclusions

Call it "accessibility," "approachability," "respect," "enthusiasm", and so forth, but the bottom line is, "What students still want most is us" (Groth, 2007, p. 41). Moreover, students need "us" to display unconditional positive regard and the multitude of other behaviors one categorizes as "caring." If we are to make a difference, and promote retention and success, students need to know that we care about them, both inside and outside of the classroom.

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