Who Cares? Developing a Pedagogy of Caring in Higher Education

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WHO CARES? DEVELOPING A PEDAGOGY OF CARING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

by

Andrew Shayne Larsen

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY in Education (Curriculum and Instruction)

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ABSTRACT

Who Cares? Developing a Pedagogy of Caring in Higher Education

by

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Utah State University, 2015

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When students are asked about their motivation to succeed in a course, about whether they enjoyed their instructor, and about their overall satisfaction with the class, answers can often be traced back to an educator who was perceived by the student as caring. Perceived caring occurs when a student feels that a teacher’s positive behaviors directed toward the student are motivated by good intentions and good will.

Research in the area of teacher care has almost exclusively focused on elementary and secondary classrooms, and has advanced the theory that caring teachers and caring classroom environments prompt many positive educational outcomes. Noticeably lacking from the caring literature is research focusing on the application of caring theory in post-secondary classrooms. Does caring have as large an impact on college students?

A pilot study was conducted in which four students at a major university were invited to document their thoughts and perceptions of care by their professors, and were asked to pay particular attention to what caring behaviors their professors took. As a
result of the qualitative analysis, five caring behaviors were discovered: efforts by professors to know student names, efforts to display care and concern during office hours, efforts in knowing and understanding students, efforts to create interesting and applicable lessons, and efforts to address student concerns during class.

The current study sought through further qualitative inquiry to validate these five caring behaviors and attempted to identify others that may strengthen an atmosphere of perceived care in the college classroom. Twenty students were interviewed and invited to chronicle impressions of caring principles in their classrooms, with the objective of shedding insight into those caring behaviors that are most meaningful. Ten professors were also interviewed regarding their perceptions of extending care to students.

Eight factors were found to influence the perception of care in college classrooms. These included verbal expressions of care, nonverbal expressions of care, knowing student names, displaying care and concern during office hours, making an effort to get to know students, creating interesting and applicable lessons, addressing student concerns during class, and the existence of a “feeling of care.”
Student motivation to succeed in a course and their overall satisfaction with a class can often be traced back to an educator who was perceived by the student as caring. Perceived caring occurs when a student feels that a teacher’s positive behaviors directed toward the student are motivated by good intentions and good will. Research in the area of teacher care has almost exclusively focused on elementary and secondary classrooms. However, does caring have an impact on college students? Do these students value efforts by their professors to care? Which caring behaviors are most meaningful to them? The current study sought to answer these questions.

Twenty students were interviewed and invited to chronicle impressions of caring principles in their classrooms, with the objective of shedding insight into those caring behaviors that are most meaningful. Ten professors were also interviewed regarding their perceptions of extending care to students.

Eight factors were found to influence the perception of care in college classrooms. These included verbal expressions of care, nonverbal expressions of care, knowing student names, displaying care and concern during office hours, making an effort to get to
know students, creating interesting and applicable lessons, addressing student concerns during class, and the existence of a “feeling of care.”
I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge those who have played an important role in my life during this journey to pursue my degree and accomplish my research. I extend thanks to my major professor, Dr. Brian Warnick, whose patience and goodness have affected me for good during my entire study. I would also like to thank the members of my committee, Dr. Jeffery Dew, Dr. Michael Freeman, Dr. Steven Laing, and Dr. Susan Turner, for their goodness, concern, and assistance that has guided my studies and research.

I would like also like to thank my children and my parents for their love and continued support. This study is dedicated to my dear mother, Kathy, who passed away near the conclusion of this study. Her love of teaching influenced this research, and her love and example to me have influenced and impacted my entire life.

I extend special thanks to my colleagues at School Improvement Network. Their friendship and collegial advice about this study and about our profession have proved invaluable.

Most of all, I would like to thank my wonderful wife, Leigh. Her loving support and patience, from studying complex statistical problems while I was doing my course work to the giving of needed advice and strength during the research that comprises this study, have been the inspiration I needed to complete this work.

Andrew Shayne Larsen
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

What behaviors of college teachers seem to have the greatest impact upon those they teach? Research has shown (Oliner & Oliner, 1995; Valenzuela, 1999; Wentzel, 1997) that care exhibited by instructors has a great impact upon students in elementary and secondary classrooms, but is the same true in college classroom settings? In a singular study of its kind, Meyers (2009) explored the question of college students’ perceptions of their professors and if it mattered to those students that their professors cared about them. By qualitatively seeking student input, he concluded that a need for research of attitudes about caring in college settings was needed.

One type of evidence Meyers cited were sentiments shared on RateMyProfessors.com. Two remarks, which described two different professors at one university, captured his attention. The first comment was:

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 interesting, and also willing to help you get better on your papers. Definitely would recommend her. (Meyers, 2009, p. 206)

In contrast, a second comment was:

This is by far the worst professor in the entire history of professors. She does not like her students at all and has no business in a teaching capacity. If given the option of having this professor or Satan, I would definitely choose Satan. Satan probably has more of an interest in seeing you succeed, and most likely has a better personality as well. (Meyers, 2009, p. 206)

Meyers, using this data and his own experience, concluded and recommended that more research on the impact of caring behaviors in college settings was needed.
Does Caring Matter? Positive Educational Outcomes Associated with Caring

The impact of caring behaviors on behalf of educators, though long studied in elementary and secondary classrooms, has remained mostly unstudied in its application to college classrooms. Notable studies have examined the construct of caring on the part of educators and the positive impact that caring can have on the learning experience of students (Oliner & Oliner, 1995; Valenzuela, 1999; Wentzel, 1997). Researchers have sought to highlight the benefits of caring behaviors by educators and show the positive impact a caring teacher can have upon students (Noddings, 1992; Valenzuela, 1999).

When a caring relationship exists between teacher and student, student motivation increases and students desire to succeed in the course being taught (Gibson, 1993). New learning is easier when students are taught in a caring environment (McNeil, 1988). Schools successful in meeting academic and other goals have been found to be led by administrators who were considered to be caring (Irmsher, 1997). Increases in instructor care are associated with greater student enjoyment of classes, improved attendance and attention, increased study time, and additional course enrollment (Benson, Cohen, & Buskist, 2005). Caring teachers can have great impact upon their students, yet one of the concerns in modern education is the shift toward schools being centered merely on academic goals, neglecting the importance of relationships (Noddings, 1994).

When asked to describe what behaviors indicate a teacher is effective, a sample of preservice and experienced teachers mentioned teacher care more than any other variable (Perry & Rog, 1989).
The research shows that motivation increases as the perception of a caring teacher increases in classrooms. The presence of teacher care is strongly linked to motivation, and motivation has been linked to positive educational outcomes throughout the literature. When students are motivated, research has shown, higher quality learning occurs and students display greater conceptual understanding, demonstrate enhanced adjustment to new situations, and report greater personal growth (Wentzel, 1997).

Several studies have shown that motivation by students is linked to their staying in school and accomplishing more school work while there (Daoust, Vallerand, & Blais, 1988). Gottfried (1990) measured motivation in students and reported significant positive correlations between motivation and achievement in school. And still other studies positively connect student motivation with quality of school work (Lloyd & Barenblatt, 1984; Ryan & Connell, 1989).

When students feel motivated in school, they expend greater academic effort (Maehr, 1989). In addition, increases in motivation are positively linked and are a predictor of grades and test scores (Wentzel, Weinberger, Ford, & Felman, 1990).

Motivation exists in students when they display an interest in learning, place great value in their education, and have a confidence in their own capacities and abilities (Wentzel, 1997). When motivated, students also display greater enthusiasm for their education, a greater sense of accomplishment, greater flexibility in problem solving, more efficient knowledge acquisition, and heightened feelings of worth and responsibility (Weiner, 1992).

Therefore, current research suggests that the greatest quality of learning takes
place under motivated conditions. Researchers in education have sought for years to isolate the factors that increase motivation in students. Many researchers have focused on variables such as goal orientations, beliefs about internal versus external control, self-perceptions about ability, classroom reward structures, curriculum aspects, and classroom organization (Maehr, 1989).

Additional research suggests that motivated conditions are most likely to occur in social contexts where students perceive they are cared for (Wentzel, 1997). Indeed, several studies have indicated a strong link between interpersonal student/teacher relationships and motivation (Birch & Ladd, 1996; Pianta, 1997; Wentzel & Asher, 1995). In addition, students who feel support and relation from their teachers show greater motivation and academic achievement (Felner, Aber, Primavera, & Cauce, 1985; Goodenow, 1993; Wentzel & Asher, 1995). Wilson (2006) found that students’ perceptions of their professors’ positive attitudes toward them (e.g., concern, desire for students to succeed) accounted for 58% of the variability in student motivation, 42% of the variance in course appreciation, and 60% of the variance in their attitude about their instructor.

In a longitudinal study conducted with 248 middle school students, Wentzel (1997) found significant correlation between students’ perceptions of their teacher as caring and positive motivational outcomes. These correlations existed even when other contributing factors to motivation were taken into account and controlled for. Wentzel summarized her study by declaring that “perceptions of caring from teachers might be a critical factor that motivates middle school students to engage in the social and academic
activities of the classroom” (p. 411).

Therefore, as theorized by Noddings (1992) and supported by additional research, academic motivation outcomes are more likely when teachers provide students with a caring and supportive classroom environment.

Teven and McCroskey (1997) found that behavior patterns of educators heavily influence behavior patterns of students and that the more students perceive that their teacher cares about them, the more likely they are to care about the class and consequently attend more regularly. Teven and McCroskey also indicated that students who perceive their teacher as caring report they learned more in the courses they were enrolled in.

When teachers are perceived as caring, students are more likely to esteem their teachers as credible and qualified to teach, and to attach positive feelings with the course being taught (Teven, 2007). In addition, perceived caring is strongly correlated with a student giving a teacher a positive course end evaluation, and students’ perceptions that they learned more in the class.

**Problem Statement**

Research in the area of teacher care has made great strides over the past couple of decades in improving connections between teachers and students in K-12 classrooms (Wentzel, 1997) but has remained nearly silent in applying this base of literature to university classrooms. Most college professors recognize that caring should be a part of effective university instruction (Meyers, 2009), but a professor who seeks to care for
students has little evidence-based information available to decide which caring behaviors will show the strongest impact in improving learning.

While educational experts have posited that caring is an important construct in educator success (Noddings, 1992; Owens & Ennis, 2005; Rogers & Webb, 1991), very few research studies have looked at what behaviors by teachers can have the strongest effect in creating a caring atmosphere in the classroom, especially in college classrooms. Caring means different things to different people; factors including culture, ethnicity, and past experience can impact how a student feels cared for and what behaviors express caring from educators (Tarlow, 1996). However, when students and professors are asked to describe aspects of caring and what a caring relationship between students and professor means to them, what consensus can be found? Further, what about this data can yield positive outcomes in improving the caring atmosphere in college settings?

Several prominent researchers (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1992; Tarlow, 1996) have attempted to define caring and suggest methods to create caring relationships; but a considerable knowledge gap exists for teachers in knowing which behaviors and approaches will yield the greatest results in a teacher’s attempt to care for students. When a teacher understands the importance of caring and desires to have the classroom become a caring environment, there is a distinct lack of research based evidence detailing which behaviors to focus on to help students feel cared for and nurtured.

**Purpose of This Study**

By knowing which educator caring behaviors are most positively connected with
a perception of care by students, professors can concentrate their efforts on the most effective caring strategies. A noteworthy qualitative study (Valenzuela, 1999) has shown the importance of a caring climate when it is in place and the ramifications when it is not. The literature on caring is lacking, however, in knowing which caring behaviors are most strongly connected with positive teaching outcomes. With this data professors could greatly benefit from knowing where to begin and how to focus their efforts in caring for students.

The purpose of this study was to gather data on perceptions of caring behaviors through interviews and journal keeping with both college students and professors. The data gathered from this research yielded common themes and patterns of caring behaviors that influenced perceived care among college students.

**Research Questions**

Two questions were central to the study. First, what caring behaviors by professors are the most meaningful in promoting perceptions of care among college students? Second, which behaviors should a professor best focus his/her efforts in nurturing a caring climate in the classroom?

**Limitations**

Qualitative research implies a personal, motivated, and rigorous approach to uncover data that quantitative analysis leaves undetected. This type of research, however, carries it with the asterisk of human subjectivity. Because the phenomenon of care was
researched by a human being, and because that researcher is the key instrument in the study, the information gathered and the analysis of that data is subjective (Bamberger, Rugh, & Mabry, 2006; Glesne, 2006).

In addition, the applicability of qualitative research to other populations and settings has been brought into question, as Bamberger and colleagues (2006) declared. Again, because of its subjectivity, this research may be limited in its ability to be applied to other university and post-secondary settings. Because of the unique characteristics of students and faculty of the institution where the study was conducted the degree to which principles of perceived caring may be generalized may limit the findings of this study.

Another limitation, common to qualitative research, is the degree to which participants may not adequately represent their population. Participants are motivated to participate in a study for many reasons, and their motivation to participate may reflect characteristics that set them apart from other members of their population. For example, a participant who feels motivated to participate in caring research may have experienced profound results of caring in educational settings in the past, and thus be more inclined to actively participate.

A limitation to this study is that people perceive care differently, according to their culture, background, and experience. The location of the university in which this study was conducted, and its associated cultural environment, impacted the findings in this study. In addition, care in education and its importance in college classrooms must be understood inside of the current historical and generational context of the current day and prevailing educational philosophies.
Delimitations

Expense and difficulty of travel limited this study to participants at a single university. To increase the validity of findings the author went to great lengths to maximize trustworthiness and to achieve maximum variation in participant selection. Maximum variation in selection was attempted in an effort to obtain viewpoints from varying backgrounds, cultures, gender, and experience, thus limiting over-representation for the predominant culture and background in which the university is located. These efforts are detailed in the methodology section.

Significance of the Study

The literature has shown that when elementary and secondary age students feel cared for and learn in an environment where a trusted, caring relationship exists between teacher and student, many positive educational outcomes result (Owens & Ennis, 2005). Do the same findings exist in post-secondary schools? And if so, what can professors do to foster such caring relationships?

This study yielded data indicating that perceived caring behaviors exhibited by professors do matter to college students, and discusses which of these caring behaviors mean the most to students. A professor seeking to make a difference to his or her students may concentrate efforts on these behaviors to foster perceived care among the students they teach.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A review of the literature was conducted searching for the impact and positive outcomes of caring and examples of caring behaviors that are meaningful to students. The literature was carefully examined for educator behaviors that have been linked in the past with student perceptions of a caring teacher. The literature suggests that further research be conducted to explore aspects of caring that make the most difference to students in having an appropriate relationship of trust and care with their teacher. The current study collected that data and then explored connections between teaching behaviors and students’ perceived level of care by university instructors.

The purpose of this literature review was to synthesize previous research on caring and relation in education, to show the positive benefits and outcomes that result when a caring relationship exists between teacher and student, and to show the need for further study at the university level to discover the correlations between certain behaviors and positive educational outcomes. In this literature review I:

1. Investigated current findings of research on the construct of perceived caring and look for examples of how care has impacted educational output and motivation.
2. Identified behaviors related to caring and attempt to determine which are most effective.
3. Demonstrated the need to further explore which instructor behaviors result in higher levels of care as perceived by university students.
Review Procedures

To locate the studies for the literature review, the electronic databases of ERIC, Education Full Text, and PSYCHInfo were searched. A computer search of preliminary sources yielded results when the following words were searched: caring, connection, concern, caring and education, caring behavior, caring and higher education, and relation. The articles that this search yielded were then reviewed and filtered by the following criteria: (a) Does this article provide significant insight into why a caring and relation matters in teaching? (b) Does the article provide clues and insights into identifying effective caring behaviors? and (c) Does this article apply the caring literature to college classrooms? Articles that met any of the above criteria were selected for inclusion.

Review Characteristics

Each piece of literature located in this review fit into one of two categories. First, most of the scholarly articles were written with the objective of introducing the need for a study of caring and relation and inviting the educational research community to validate the topic as one worthy of investigation. The rest consisted of a broad range of qualitative studies observing care in educational settings. Noticeably lacking were articles examining the application of theories of care in college classrooms as well as those suggesting a method of quantitatively measuring caring behaviors.

Need for Caring Educators: A Synthesis of the Literature

A wide body of research has affirmed the need for an increased focus on caring
and building relationships of trust with students. Noddings (1992) posited that the main goal of education should be to produce competent, caring, loving, and lovable people. According to Noddings (1992), educators in traditional disciplines must be aware that students bring with them various strengths, and that these strengths should be refined in an environment of caring, not competition. When educators fail to make caring a priority, students feel alienated from their teachers, and hostilities among themselves increase; social relationships become fragile, incomplete, or nonexistent (Noddings, 1994).

Other researchers have attempted to clarify the construct of caring and foster its importance. Oliner and Oliner (1995) stated that caring occurs when one assumes a vested interest in another’s welfare, and when caring is absent students are less likely to invest in their education. Smith and Emigh (2005) defined caring as engrossment in student welfare. Another definition asserts that true caring occurs when persons relate to others in ways that honor and encourage the healthy unfolding of all types of development (Noddings, 1992). Caring, as it relates to students, happens when a student identifies and understands the caring behaviors from their teachers and attributes them to a concern for their welfare. Caring, as it relates to teachers, occurs when a teacher communicates care by word or action when motivated by a desire to strengthen positive relationships between teacher and student.

As teachers devote time to building these relationships and showing concern for the issues at the forefront of students’ lives, crucial educational connections are fostered, and students are given momentum in the process of becoming caring individuals themselves (Smith & Emigh, 2005). It is crucial that school personnel be initiators of
these relationships, since many students will not seek to connect with their teachers because of their relatively weak position in terms of classroom power (Noddings, 1994).

When teachers fail to connect with their students in a meaningful way, the costs exacted become terrible in terms of academic, social, and motivational currency (Gibson, 1993). When schools neglect to create environments that nurture students in a caring and connective way, important opportunities for growth are missed (McNeil, 1988). The extensive Claremont study, which was commissioned and conducted with the purpose of defining the main issues affecting American public education as seen from inside the classroom, revealed data from students, teachers, parents, and administrators. The study discussed the most important topics in education as seen from each category of participants. Near the forefront of the discussed items stood the issue of relationships.

Participants feel the crisis inside schools is directly linked to human relationships. This theme was prominently stated by participants and so deeply connected to all other themes in that data that is believed this may be one of the most central issues in solving the crisis inside schools. This demonstrates a very practical need for relational educational theory that would penetrate the world of practical teachers’ thinking and mainstream policy making. (Poplin & Weeres, 1992, p. 213)

The Claremont study illustrated that as school size and bureaucratization has increased, so has alienation. Feelings of frustration, anonymity, and a lack of meaningful human connection have intensified, as well as a feeling of dissatisfaction with the educational process. As theorists and professionals alike highlight low achievement, breakdowns in social order, and reduced academic expectations, they fail to attribute its cause as alienation produced by a lack of caring.

Irmsher (1997) discussed the implications of a study the U.S. Congress commissioned in 1991. In this study, the Department of Education’s Office of
Educational Research and Improvement sought to investigate the various aspects of educational reform. In his analysis, Irmsher showed one thing in common among schools that are effectively meeting the educational needs of students: these schools are led by administrators and teachers who were verified practitioners in the construct of caring.

In 2004 leading researchers in the field of caring and relation (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004) made a plea for the assertive application of caring in education. Their straightforward petition analyzed the polarizing camps of educational reform. On one hand, traditionalists issue a cry for a return to orderly schools that focus on high stakes testing and accountability. The dangers with this focus include alienation and exclusion of multicultural and other individual factors of students. On the other hand, educational progressivists believe that reformed curriculum and engaged instruction will increase motivation in students. This solution is idealistic in many respects, as it assumes that all children will naturally be interested in learning.

Bingham and Sidorkin (2004) proposed an alternative to those solutions proposed by traditionalists and progressivists.

We offer a third solution. It relies on neither brute force of exclusion, nor romantic expectations. Schools must focus on human relations and address the core of the problem. A school with a vibrant community can avoid dangerous outbursts of vandalism and violence. Such a school can also compensate for the lack of intrinsic motivation, because students learn partially out of respect for teachers and peers. The pedagogy of relation will not necessarily solve the problems of inequality and prejudice that plague our schools. However, we need to move from struggling against something to struggling for something. Pedagogy of relation offers an ideal of school based on the notion of democratic relations. (pp. 3-4)

Caring has also been found to play a major role in enhancing school culture and developing a sense of community in schools. These studies reveal that caring is
consistently in place in schools that have been found to have a strong sense of community and where the school culture is perceived as positive (Owens & Ennis, 2005). Students who are cared for feel more freedom, are more creative, and spontaneously respond in class more often than students who do not feel cared for (Noddings, 1992).

According to Christophel (1990), the literature indicates one measurable outcome of a caring environment is a student’s motivation to work hard, be engaged, and succeed in the course. Increasing learning, of course, is the sweeping goal of education; the research has shown that student motivation is the greatest measurable outcome that can be associated with the much broader goal of learning.

The research area of caring, despite its significance, needs the strength that replicable and systematic research can provide. This review of literature found only four studies that had attempted a vigorous quantitative measure of caring behaviors, and these had operationalized the construct of caring into a set of measurable behaviors that in the literature has been labeled im immediacy. Immediacy is defined as the degree to which an educator is perceived as approachable and open to students (Christophel, 1990) and differs from care in two fundamental ways. First, immediacy studies deal with only the behaviors that prompt students to label teachers as approachable; it does not touch the motivation behind teachers displaying these behaviors. Second, immediacy does not deal with descriptions of relationships between teacher and student (Christophel, 1990).

Immediacy, as opposed to the deeper construct of care, has been studied at the university level, and results of this research enhance the study of care in post-secondary settings. Kearney, Plax, and Wendt-Wasco (1985) showed that college students were
more affected by immediacy behaviors if the class being taught was people-oriented (e.g., psychology, sociology, history) as opposed to task-oriented courses (e.g., welding, accounting, computer programming). Students who observed frequent occurrence of verbal and nonverbal immediacy were more inclined to give high ratings to the value of the course and quality of instruction (Moore, Masterson, Christophel, & Shea, 1996). Rocca (2004) found that high rankings of nonverbal immediacy were correlated with student likelihood to attend class at high levels. One study detailed that a behavior more commonly associated with care as opposed to verbal immediacy, the willingness of a teacher to communicate with students outside of class, led to greater student motivation and trust in the professor (Jaasma & Koper, 1999). Gorham and Christophel (1992) detailed findings that negative or nonexamples of immediacy had a greater impact on students demotivation in college courses than positive and examples of immediacy had on motivation.

Immediacy, then, is simply one aspect of the broader construct of care; and care is in great need of similar measurement and analysis. This study attempted to identify and measure effective caring behaviors.

**Caring Behaviors**

The literature was carefully examined for examples of efficacious caring behaviors. Valenzuela (1999) found the following behaviors as examples of caring: engrossment in student welfare, connection with student family issues, connection with student social concerns and issues, connection with students’ ethnicity or gender issues,
understanding and assistance in educational concerns, connection with student interests and hobbies, and expression of care verbally.

Gordon, Benner, and Noddings (1996) suggested that care is a construct that occurs within relationships, and consists of a set of practices in relations that prompt mutual recognition and realization, development, growth, protection, empowerment, human community, culture, and possibility. These outcomes are products of something the educator does; it is the direct result of caring behaviors on the part of the educator, as opposed to simply caring thoughts and feelings.

Care has been described as being present when engrossment, commitment, and a motivational shift have occurred from the teacher toward the student (Noddings, 1992). Engrossment occurs when the teacher helps the student feel included and when they know their feelings are valued; they feel accepted and that their needs are important to the teacher. Commitment is a construct of caring that exists when the students perceive that there is nothing that takes precedence over the teachers’ responsibility to care for students. Further, a motivational-shift is present when students sense that the teacher has placed their own desires and needs second to those of students.

Noddings (1988) suggested three activity sets that demonstrate care to students. First, teachers must model caring: they do not verbally express it per se; they model it in action by creating caring relations with them and then showing them how to do so with other students. To model, a teacher extends care to a student, and then invites students to interact with each other in a similar way.

The second activity involves talking and listening, and sharing and responding.
The dialogue becomes an open-ended discussion and allows students to connect with the teacher and each other through language and shared experience.

The third activity set is defined as confirmation, and deals with the act of a teacher affirming and encouraging the best in others, and developing a relationship of trust. This occurs as teachers actively attempt to get to know their students, their names, their goals, and helping the student visualize what he or she wants to become. Confirmation happens as teachers make consistent effort over time to maintain and strengthen relationships of trust through investment in their students.

Another interesting caring behavior as described by Bronfenbrenner (1978) is irrationality; or that the caring relationship is not earned or expected. Its existence has no basis outside of intrinsic motivation by the teacher. “Someone has got to be crazy about the kids,” Bronfenbrenner (p. 12) explained, and the relationship is enhanced because it has no ulterior or selfish motive by the teacher.

Tarlow (1996) conducted 84 participant interviews to generate a useful list of caring behaviors. She suggested that eight characteristics must be in place in order for caring to begin. First was the idea of time, or the willingness of the teacher to spend time with the student. Going beyond just being in the same room, this aspect of care involved the teacher being in the emotional presence of the student, or the student feeling that the teacher was very aware of the student.

The second of Tarlow’s (1996) characteristics is “to be there,” or the willingness of the teacher to be present and prepared to help the cared for in any way that they could. The third, dialogue, can be described as talking often and easily with the cared for
student. Tarlow tags this behavior as essential in building and maintaining a caring relationship. The fourth characteristic, sensitivity, can be defined as a teacher being conscious of and focusing on the mood and attitude of students. The fifth, acting in the best interest of the other, occurs when the teacher actively promotes student success in the classroom and preparation for the world outside of school.

The sixth and seventh aspects can be defined as caring as feeling and caring as doing. In Tarlow’s (1996) study, 75% of the participants described caring as something they felt inside. She argued that feelings and sentiments are part of what constitutes the motivation for caring; that caring is something both the caring and cared for can feel. Caring as doing concerns itself with actively performing needed tasks and activities for the cared for student.

Other caring behaviors mentioned in the literature include talking to students outside of class (McLaughlin, 1991), strongly encouraging student learning (Rogers & Webb, 1991), fulfilling needs for security and belonging (Dempsey & Noblit, 1993), including students in decision making (Kohn, 1991), and involving humor and making school fun (Rogers & Webb, 1991).

Wentzel (1997) attempted to discover which caring behaviors students characterized as behaviors of a caring teacher. Her method, though quite simple, provided valuable information. Students were asked to write in response to two questions: “How do you know when a teacher cares about you? List three things that teachers do to show you that they care about you” and “How do you know when a teacher does not care about you? List three things that teachers do to show that they do not care about you.”
Responses were coded along suggested forms of caring by Noddings’ (1988, 1992) work. The caring responses that were listed most often were associated with a teacher’s focus on the student as a learner. Some examples of the positive aspects of care in this category were “My teacher asks if I need help,” “My teacher takes time to make sure I understand” and “My teacher calls on me.” Some negative examples of this category were “My teacher does not explain things to me” and “My teacher doesn’t try to help me.”

The second highest-ranking category of behaviors were associated with Noddings’ construct of a teacher modeling care, by showing that they care deeply about teaching. Positive examples included “My teacher makes a special effort in his/her teaching,” “My teacher teaches in a special way,” and “My teacher makes class interesting.” Negative examples grouped in this category were “My teacher doesn’t care about my grades,” “My teacher teaches boring classes,” and “My teacher teaches while students aren’t paying attention.”

The methods and statistics in this study were quite simple, but reflect an attempt to understand which caring behaviors indicate caring the most powerfully to students. Further research could expand upon this study in attempt to isolate the most meaningful caring behaviors.

Therefore, of all of the above listed behaviors and approaches to caring, which have the greatest impact upon student motivation? A great need exists for further study in order to expand the types of behaviors that are considered to foster caring. If teachers understand that caring is vital to the educational process, the next logical step a teacher must ask herself is “How will my students feel and understand that I care?” This study
will provide answers to these types of questions by seeking to identify those caring behaviors and finding the connection with students’ perceptions of their teachers as caring in college courses.

**Other Caring Behaviors and Behaviors That Negatively Impact Caring**

The nonverbal behaviors educators use, as well as what they communicate verbally, have been shown to have a great impact upon student’s perceived care (Galloway, 1976). Eye contact, vocal inflection, the things that a teacher communicates to the class about herself, and the way she stands and gestures while lecturing have been found to be important factors in perceived care (Ramsey, 1979).

Three factors that influence perceived care are empathy, understanding, and responsiveness (McCroskey, 1992). Empathy is the ability to view a situation from the point of view of another person and feel how they feel about it. Understanding is the ability to comprehend another’s needs, emotions, and thoughts. Responsiveness occurs when teachers respond to the needs of students promptly and attentively.

In a study of student perception of care at the university level, Teven (2001) found that teacher immediacy, responsiveness, and assertiveness were three influential factors. Assertiveness is perceived by students as a caring attribute in the sense that teachers are perceived as taking an interest in students and their success.

Limited research has also been conducted seeking to determine what negative behaviors on the part of educators’ impact caring. Nonresponsiveness has been shown to negatively impact perceived care (Thomas, Richmond, & McCroskey, 1994.) This
perceived noncaring occurs as students sense that the teacher will not respond or adapt their behavior to the needs of the students, and the teacher is a prisoner to the lectern and reads his or her lecture without concern or care to the students (Robinson, 1995).

Another behavior that was found to negatively impact perceived caring was teacher verbal aggressiveness; defined, perceived verbal aggressiveness occurs when teachers respond to students with unneeded anger, hostility, and sharpness (Teven, 2001).

**Theoretical Approach: Perceived Caring Theory**

McCroskey (1992) proposed the concept of “perceived caring” as a working definition for the construct of care, a concept that invites a higher element of objectivity and measurability to this highly subjective construct. Perceived caring, McCroskey advanced, occurs when a student, despite the many facets that influence the decision, perceives that a teacher cares for them. He suggested that it is best if a teacher really cares about a student, but that this fact is secondary to the idea that a student perceives that the teacher cares about them. He summarized this by stating that is very important for a teacher to learn how to communicate in such a manner that students will perceive that he or she cares about them; if the student does not have the perception that the teacher cares, he or she might as well not care at all.

The foundation of Perceived Caring as theorized by McCroskey (1992) is rooted in the writings of Aristotle, and centers around the construct of “good will.” Good will is a major component of Aristotle’s “ethos” and can be defined as “good intention toward the receiver” (Hovland, Janis, & Kelly, 1953; Teven & McCroskey, 1997; McCroskey...
(1993) found that perceived caring was strongly correlated with the Aristolean construct of good will, and that the two terms may be considered isomorphic. To summarize his research, students perceive that an educator cares for them when they feel “good will” from the educator, or in other words they perceive positive and good intentions, motivated by altruism, concerning their welfare from the educator (Stiff, Dillard, Somera, Kim, & Sleight, 1988).

Teven and McCroskey (1997) found that behavior patterns of educators heavily influence behavior patterns of students and that the more students perceive that their teacher cares about them, the more likely they are to care about the class and consequently attend more carefully. This study also indicated that students who perceive their teacher as caring report they learned more in the courses they were enrolled in.

Three factors that influence perceived care are empathy, understanding, and responsiveness (McCroskey, 1992). Empathy is the ability to view a situation from the point of view of another person and feel how they feel about it. When a teacher cannot only understand how a student feels but respect it, the teacher is granted more credibility, and the students are more likely to perceive the teacher cares about them (Teven & McCroskey, 1997).

Understanding is the ability to comprehend another’s needs, emotions, and thoughts. Perceived understanding has a positive impact on educational outcomes and improves teacher-student communication (Cahn, 1986; Cahn & Shulman, 1984).

Responsiveness occurs when teachers respond to the needs of students promptly and attentively. Perceived responsiveness is more likely to occur when students feel that
the teacher listens to the student, and is attentive to their needs (Teven & McCroskey, 1997). A responsive teacher recognizes and reacts to students, while a nonresponsive teacher’s behavior is not adapted to the students (McCroskey, 1992).

When teachers are perceived as caring, students are more likely to esteem their teachers as credible and qualified to teach, and to attach positive feelings with the course being taught (Teven, 2007). Perceived caring is also strongly correlated with a student giving a teacher a positive course end evaluation, and a students’ perception that they learned more in class (McCroskey & Richmond, 1989). Basic tenets of perceived caring (Teven & McCroskey, 1997) as a model for understanding care in the classroom are:

- Caring is best understood by studying it through the eyes and perceptions of the student: Does the student perceive that the educator cares?
- Caring is best defined as students’ perceptions that “good will” or positive intentions toward the receiver exists from the educator towards them.
- Caring behaviors from educator to student are most often interpreted as being motivated by good will or care towards the student, and increase the likelihood that the students will perceive care from the educator.
- Caring is more likely to be perceived by students when educators display empathy, understanding, and responsiveness.

This study was conducted with these tenets as a theoretical lens and an approach to understanding the role that caring plays between educator and student. The purpose of this study, when viewed through this lens, was to discover those behaviors that are most likely to lead to a feeling of good will or perceived care from educator towards students.
Conclusion

This review of the literature has provided the research background on the phenomenon of care in education, and has also show the need for this current study. The body of caring literature issues a call for a pedagogy of caring that would place precedence on relationships and how these relationships are socially constructed. The review has demonstrated:

- Educators who are perceived as caring make a positive impact upon those they teach, and many positive educational outcomes are present when a caring environment exists in classrooms.
- Many caring behaviors are present in the literature, which have been shown in past studies to increase the likelihood that students will perceive care from their educators.
- These two previously listed conclusions are relatively unstudied in post-secondary education.
- There is a need to research the phenomenon of care in college classrooms, how students perceive a caring relationship between students and their professors, and which caring behaviors are most likely to strengthen this relationship.
- The need to develop a scale of caring behaviors that can quantitatively measure correlation between these caring behaviors and students’ perceptions of their professors as caring.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

This chapter contains a discussion of the methodological approach and procedures that were implemented in this study. The chapter begins with a discussion of the overall approach to my research procedures and analysis. My role as the researcher and the impact of my theoretical perspective are discussed.

Next, the research procedures I used in the study are explained, including discussion of participant selection, data gathering methods, data analysis, and writing procedures. The chapter concludes with a discussion of strategies I used to strengthen trustworthiness for the study.

Overall Approach

The qualitative approach to research used in this study, phenomenology, provides a rich paradigm guiding data collection and analysis. I chose phenomenology as my research perspective because of its focus on understanding common or shared experiences of phenomenon—in this instance, the construct of perceived care—in order to develop a deeper understanding of the features of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007).

According to phenomenology, the researcher states clearly their paradigm or theoretical perspective with which they view the nature of reality and by which they interpret the data their research yields (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Theoretical perspective, openly stated, serves as a framework for qualitative analysis throughout the study. For this study, as mentioned above, the theoretical perspective of perceived care will guide
data collection and interpretation in researching the aspects of how the perception of instructor care influences learning environments.

Phenomenology is concerned with discovering the essence of the thing being studied (Creswell, Hanson, Plano Clark, & Morales, 2007). The guiding question behind phenomenology is this: What is the essence that all persons experience about a certain phenomenon? The basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce the experiences of persons with a phenomenon to a description of its universal essence, to grasp the very nature of the topic of research. Phenomenologists describe what all participants have in common when they experience the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological research seeks to understand several individuals’ common experiences of the phenomenon being studied, and analysis of the data gleaned is used to develop practice or policy, and to develop a deeper understanding about the features of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007).

Another role of the researcher in phenomenology is to rely, to the greatest extent possible, on a participant’s perspective of the phenomena in its social and historical context (Creswell, 2007). The researcher then attempts to make meaning of the ideas, perspectives, and activities of participants in regards to the specific phenomena (Guba & Lincoln, 2005).

According to phenomenological procedures, the researcher collects data from persons who have experienced the phenomenon and develops a composite description of the essence of the experience of the participants (Creswell, 2007). Basic research questions deal with what the participants experience and how they experienced it.
According to Moustakas (1994), proper phenomenological procedure should follow a logical sequence of procedures. These steps are: (a) determine if the applicable research question is best suited for a phenomenological approach, (b) designate the phenomenon of interest to research, (c) recognize and acknowledge the philosophical assumptions of phenomenology, (d) collect the data from participants who have experienced the phenomenon, (e) analyze the data by grouping responses into themes or statements that provide deeper understanding to the participants’ experience with the phenomena, and (f) writing a composite description which captures the essence of the phenomenon. My study followed this procedural pattern.

**Role of the Researcher**

There are two basic roles of the researcher in qualitative research; researcher and learner (Glesne, 2006). When in the role of researcher, I sought knowledge by asking questions. My researcher role also prompted me to interpret the gathered data and draw conclusions. As a learner, my role was to be curious, contemplative, and teachable.

My role as the researcher was influenced by research purposes, the procedures I had decided upon, characteristics of the subject being researched, and the personal attributes of both the participants and myself. At times these factors may have led to playing other roles, including reformer, exploiter, and friend. Some of these roles may be uncomfortable, or, on the other hand, attractive.

It is important to remember that my role as the researcher in qualitative inquiry is highly interpretive and subjective (Creswell, 2007). Thus, with the researcher being the
main instrument for data gathering and analysis, it is crucial that I reveal my intended role and its possible impact upon the research.

I made great effort to fill the role of learner. Research of the construct of perceived care is a relatively untouched field of inquiry, particularly at the post K-12 level, and preexisting notions or hypothesis could easily lead to flawed findings. I made every attempt to ask questions that were not leading and to analyze data while trying to avoid manipulating the findings to support my own bias. With that being said, I readily acknowledge my theoretical lens and personal attachment to the importance of perceived care in education. In an attempt to make my perspective more transparent, a bracketing interview was conducted. The results of the bracketing interview can be found in Appendix A.

I went to great lengths to avoid the role of exploiter while conducting this study. In preparation for this study, I chose to adhere to the American Anthropological Association’s (1998) code of ethics, which delineates that a researcher must do everything possible to ensure that the safety, dignity, and privacy of participants, is not compromised.

During the pilot study I came to understand that participation in the study had the potential to skew the future perspective of students toward their college courses, their professors, and their motivation to succeed in their future courses. I became acutely sensitive to the fact that I must observe, record, and analyze without lecturing, teaching, or attempting to influence participants’ viewpoints considering professor care.
Rapport

It is vital that a relationship of rapport and trust be built between researcher and participant. Rapport, as defined by Glesne (2006) is displayed in a relationship when the personality of the researcher and the participant is one where emotional distance is reduced, anxiety is decreased, and trust is increased. It is necessary for the interviewer to rapidly develop a positive relationship during in-depth interviews. The process of establishing rapport is an essential component of the interview.

Essentially, rapport involves trust and a respect for the interviewee and the information he or she shares. It is also the means of establishing a safe and comfortable environment for sharing the interviewee’s personal experiences and attitudes as they actually occurred. It is through the connection of many ‘truths’ that interview research contributes to our knowledge of the meaning of the human experience (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

Anxiety in qualitative interviews can be characterized by the strangeness of a context in which the interviewer and interviewee are unfamiliar. The more the interviewee talks at this stage the easier rapport will be built. Initial questions that I used were broad, open ended, and nonthreatening. A draft of the interview protocol is provided in Appendix B. I allowed the interviewee ample time to answer, if necessary rephrasing the question to allow the interviewee time to hear the question correctly and to think of how to respond. I repeated the initial answers of the participants, with simple invitations to clarify without leading the interviewee in any way. Beginning the interview process in this way limited misleading answers by the interviewee and established rapport.
Establishing rapport by following this interview format facilitated frank disclosure of data (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

To build rapport with participants, both students and professors, I carefully monitored tone, language used, behavior, and appearance to maximize cultural appropriateness and nonjudgment. I refrained from revealing personal feelings on participant responses by not agreeing or disagreeing with them.

In addition, I carefully approached professor interviews when discussing caring student relationships. By using carefully crafted questions that did not cast judgment or expectation on the professor’s efforts to care, I built rapport with professor participants that increased the likelihood of valid responses.

Subjectivity

Subjectivity is an inevitable part of qualitative research, and can be a positive influence upon a study if it is recognized and monitored (Creswell, 2007). It is common for a researcher to feel strongly about the topic of research and the data that is gathered. These feelings of subjectivity influence research topic selection, data gathering, and interpretation. An effective researcher is attuned to these emotions, acknowledges them, and seeks to monitor them in such a way as to maximize the benefit of the research that is conducted (Glesne, 2006).

For this study, I recorded my thoughts, feelings, and emotions in a field journal to document and be aware of and monitor my subjectivity. A bracketing interview was also held with an educational professional to assist me in verbalizing my feelings and potential biases with the phenomenon under study, enabling me to acknowledge, yet set
Pilot Study

A preliminary qualitative study on caring behaviors exhibited by university professors was conducted in 2013. The findings yielded great insight into instructor behaviors that related student perceptions of care and set the stage for additional study. Four participants were randomly selected from a list of freshmen enrolled in orientation courses at Utah State University. Each of the four participated in interviews and reflective journal writing during the first semester of their freshman year. Participants were asked to record and share their insights regarding the presence of care and caring behaviors exhibited by their professors in all of the classes they were enrolled during this semester. These participants showed great interest in the study and were very cooperative throughout; each completed the journal writing they were asked to do, and participated fully in the interviews they were invited to attend. Data were analyzed according to grounded theory. Responses from participants that referred to caring behaviors by professors were coded, numbered, and analyzed accordingly.

The four participants provided meaningful insights into how teacher care impacted them in their studies. The following three questions were asked of participants: Is teacher care meaningful to college students? What behaviors make a difference in fostering a perceived caring relationship? How does caring increase meaningful educational outcomes? The insights that were prompted from these questions became a foundation for the current study.
Do College Students Care if Professors Care?

“Dr. Smith really cares about us as a class and me individually. You can tell. It’s something you can feel from her. She won’t let me just stay quiet and sit in the back of class.” This comment, from one of the participants, reflected a common theme: college students care if their teachers care about them. The participants displayed the need to find acceptance, the need to be noticed, the need to know that individuals’ thoughts and deeds mattered in the college learning process. The students unanimously expressed appreciation for their professors’ attempts to care, as well as frustration and longing when they sensed a lack of caring.

The participants discussed at length their perceptions of their teachers’ efforts to know them personally, to welcome them, and to understand their frustrations and worries. Enjoyment and motivation to succeed in their courses were directly linked to perceived caring by the students. Indeed, one student shared, “If more classes were like this it would make college so much more enjoyable.”

One student, who did not perceive his professor as caring exclaimed, “I had some great teachers that I was very close to in high school, and thought I knew college would be a little different. I didn’t expect to be almost completely ignored as a person here.”

Another student remarked, “Caring matters because education is people business. It’s about people. And you can’t work with people effectively if you don’t care about them.” Because caring mattered so much to them, the students had very poignant feelings about which caring behaviors mattered. The data garnered were analyzed and compiled, and five very clear themes emerged. There were five very distinct ways that professors
could show they cared, and the participants shared insight into how each could be implemented in class.

One participant, when asked about the caring behaviors, remarked “I think it’s quite easy for a professor to show they care. If they want to bad enough, I think how to do it becomes obvious. It should almost be just in their nature. Even though each person appreciates different things, there are some things that professors can do that will make a difference to everyone.”

**Importance of a Name**

The effort to know names means a lot to college students. One student, given the pseudonym of Chrissy, explained, “Knowing my name makes a huge difference to me. I know when a teacher really cares because they go beyond just knowing my name on the roll (which is Christina) but know me well enough to know that the name I go by is Chrissy.”

Chrissy went on to say that even if a class was huge, she thought a professor should make the effort to memorize names. In her opinion, if they didn’t have the time to memorize every name, that the professor could simply ask the name of people when they raised their hands or when he called on them; this little extra effort would garner huge gains in Chrissy’s eyes. “I really respect teachers that go through that extra effort to know their students. It only takes a little bit of time but it really matters to me and other people,” she explained.

When looking at where to concentrate caring effort, each participant talked about the importance of knowing names. Whether class size makes knowing names feasible for
a class or not, students recognize the efforts made in this regard and accept and recognize that even though they do not know all the names of the class, they desire it. The effort and desire to do this indicates care to students, whether or not they are able to accomplish it.

**Attempts to Build Relation**

Caring professors make attempts to appropriately build relation with their students by displaying interest in their lives and striving to ask questions that extend beyond the curriculum. “We talk about personal things, sometimes even after class. She knows my name, and that I am from Georgia. She often comes early to class and small chats with those who are here early. That interest makes a difference to me,” one participant happily explained. The way she spoke and the way she smiled as she shared communicated happiness and satisfaction that a professor had made the investment to create this relationship.

Participants shared additional evidences of caring attempts to build relation. Email messages, sharing experiences in class that connected with students’ lives, and inviting students in class to share openly were identified as meaningful ways to build relation.

**Office Hours**

Of all the experiences that participants had appreciated from their professors, however, the one that implied the most care was the effective use of office hours. During these times of meeting with the professor one on one, students felt concern for their
welfare and the interest of their professors. One student indicated:

“If I could give professors some advice, it would be to try to make students feel more comfortable about coming to office hours. I don’t go to office hours to teachers that don’t know me or seem to not care about me. But when a professor does seem interested in me and my life I feel like I can ask them questions and talk to them during office hours, and some of my most incredible learning experiences in college have come during office hours.”

A professor who displayed care while meeting with students during office hours convinced this student that they cared; this facet impacted her above and beyond all other caring behaviors and attempts.

Engaging, Interesting Lectures

“If a professor wants to make a difference to me they call on me personally to answer questions, they go the extra effort to give me a direct question to ponder and then talk about,” one participant commented. Going the extra mile in creating engaging lessons was noticed by students and appreciated.

Another student remarked:

When I know I am a higher priority to my professor than their own personal interests or goals, I feel cared for. Professors do this by getting out of themselves, smiling and enjoying their time with us as students, having a good sense of humor, and preparing lessons that have current meaning to us as students.

Another factor that helped foster the feeling of caring students appreciated was the enthusiasm and eagerness in which professors approached their lectures every day. Excitement, energy, enthusiasm, enjoyment, interest, and elation were all words
participants used to describe the attitudes with which caring professors approached their subjects throughout the study. “I could tell how much she cared for her subject today as she lectured, and that makes me feel like this class in worth her energy and time,” one student had written describing one enjoyable day in class.

    One student, who described his professor as uncaring, said this in contrast:

    His lack of concern is obvious because you can tell he does not prepare much before class. Class always ends early, and it seems like he doesn’t want to be there. He is very judgmental of what people comment on, even when they do dare to comment. He makes weird faces when we comment, and I have even heard him call some kids weird.

    Participants noticed professors who made the effort to draw “interesting, real-world applications, or to share a joke or other funny tidbits to their lecture to spark attention,” as one student commented. This indicated to her that professors cared if students were engaged and learning. “Professors that don’t go through this effort are obviously only there to endure through class and those are the classes that I hate going to and sometimes struggle with,” this participant clarified.

**Responding to Student Questions and Concerns**

    Caring teachers also, as participants shared, display care by the way they handle questions in class. “Different teachers I’ve had that don’t care don’t seem to want to take the time to answer questions, or even care if we have questions. I’ve seen professors completely ignore questions just to move through their material,” a participant described. “My stats professor not only welcomes questions but gets very excited by them. He will go on for minutes about them and seems to enjoy sharing with us what he knows about
the question.”

**Implications of Preliminary Study**

The preliminary study was helpful in identifying the caring behaviors that matter most to college students, and why students feel so strongly about them. But further research is clearly needed. Will further study that involves more participants and the perspective of professors corroborate the findings of the preliminary study? Will these five behaviors be shown to be a valid conclusion of the behaviors that mean the most to students, or will further study reveal further important caring behaviors? A wider, more representative sample of participants is clearly needed in addition to increasing the number of total participants. And, as indicated above, what additional insights will professor interviews provide?

**Research Procedures**

**Student Participants**

Twenty students were selected to engage in a broader qualitative study and were asked to share their impressions about caring behaviors by their instructors. Participants were sought until interview results revealed a saturation of caring data and the research failed to reveal significant further insight.

Participants were asked (a) what caring from their instructor means to them, (b) to what extent they value caring attempts by their instructor, and (c) what professor behaviors seem to connect to them and strengthen the relation between teacher and student. Each participant was asked to address these three questions over a period of three
weeks in a daily journal that chronicled their thoughts and perceptions of professor care. Participant responses revealed insights into the importance of establishing caring relations between professor and student and provided valuable insight into creating a caring culture in the college classroom.

Participants were asked to write in a journal format about caring perceptions after each class period during the three-week time span of this study. Participants were asked to bring these journals to the interviews and to use them as discussion points. The journal was collected as data, and then the journals, were returned to students if they desired. These 20 participants were asked to meet twice in interviews that each took place in approximately 30 minutes. During the interviews students were asked to share opinions, introspections, and insights about certain aspects of caring. Students were encouraged to pick a location and time to meet that was convenient for them. They were encouraged to meet on the USU campus if that was convenient. I recommended meeting in a study room in the library and most of the interviews took place there. The data garnered was synthesized and discussed in comparison to the results of the pilot study.

**Professor Participants**

In addition to the student participants, ten professors were interviewed. Professors were asked (a) what extending care to students meant to them, (b) what efforts to care seem to matter most to students, and (c) are these efforts worthwhile in the overall scope of their teaching. Time parameters and all other details regarding professor interviews mirrored the student participant methodology described above, with the exception that most professor interviews took place in individual professor offices.
Selection

Selection of student and professor participants was conducted with the goal of achieving as much maximum variation as possible. Patton (2001) described maximum variation as follows.

For small samples, a great deal of heterogeneity can be a problem because individual cases are so different from each other. The maximum variation sampling strategy turns that apparent weakness into a strength by applying the following logic: Any common patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared dimensions of a setting or phenomenon. (p. 235)

The following guidelines were used to every extent possible in maximizing variation of students and professors to be selected for the study.

1. Student participants were chosen to represent the spectrums of age, gender, culture, and background.

2. Student participants were chosen to represent the spectrum of years they have attended college.

3. Student participants were chosen to represent a wide variety of majors. The demographic information of the students who participated in the study is shown in Table 1.

4. Professor participants were chosen to represent a wide variety of subject areas in which they teach.

5. Professor participants were chosen to represent the spectrum of experience in teaching at the post-secondary level. The demographic variables of the professors who were participants in the study are shown in Table 2.
### Table 1

**Characteristics of Student Participants**

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<td>Male</td>
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<td><strong>Year in school</strong></td>
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*Note. N = 20.*
Table 2

*Characteristics of Professor Participants*

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*Note: $N = 10$.*

**Gaining Access**

At the beginning of the research process, it was crucial that I be granted permission to access participants to conduct the research as detailed in this section. I contacted John Mortensen, Assistant Vice President for Student Affairs at USU, to obtain permission and to receive his suggestions for possible participants.

After Institutional Review Board approval, student and professor participants were contacted by email, soliciting their participation in the study. Interviews were then
held with the professors and students, consent forms completed, materials distributed, expectations explained and questions answered.

**Data Gathering Methods**

Study trustworthiness increases when multiple methods of data collection are utilized (Creswell, 2007). In addition to in-depth interviews with participants, participant journals, document analysis, and a preliminary study provided varied and rich information to aid in triangulation of data (Bamberger et al., 2006; Glesne, 2006).

**Interviewing.** The interviews in this study were conducted in a face-to-face format, and were held in half-hour increments. The structure of the inquiry followed the pattern of naturalistic inquiry of qualitative research (Bamberger et al., 2006). An interview protocol was developed and followed (Appendix B), but flexibility was allowed to account for needed follow-up questions and emergent information that was not included in the interview protocol. This more congenial and less rigid format prompted valuable data to be shared in the interviews (Bamberger et al., 2006). Interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed to ensure accuracy.

Participants in the study were informed in the initial interview and consent forms were provided assuring that their identities were to be held in strict confidence. Participants were told their risk of embarrassment would be minimized to the greatest extent possible, and that if they chose they could withdraw from the study at any time. All data analysis and writing procedures were conducted with extreme sensitivity to participant confidentiality. Professor and student participants were not given any information regarding other participants in the study. Pseudonyms were used in place of
participant’s names. As suggested by Creswell (2007), interview materials and journals were kept in a locked cabinet or password secure computer.

**Journaling.** Student participants were asked to chronicle varied aspects of caring they experienced during the research period. Several prompts were given to participants to invite response in their journals, but the researcher made it clear that they are free to record any thoughts or feelings regarding the research topic. Participants were invited to share from their journals during the final interview. After the data from the journals were documented and analyzed, they were returned to the participants.

**Field journal observations.** There is a great value in the keeping of a “field journal” to continually analyze the research to self-assess evidence of personal bias (Glesne, 2006). This field journal was recorded on my laptop, and was used to record self-reflection, interpretation of data, and reports of monitored subjectivity.

**Data Analysis and Writing Procedures**

Data were recorded and then analyzed according to principles of the qualitative method known as phenomenology. The following phenomenological pattern suggested by Creswell and colleagues (2007) guided the analysis of data collected: (a) a description of perceived care as experienced by participants was documented, (b) essential themes that constitute the nature of the lived experience of participants concerning care were shared, and (c) an interpretive analysis of the phenomenon was shared as the researcher interpreted the meaning of the lived experiences concerning perceived care.

The analysis process involved pulling phenomenological themes from the interviews and journals, and collapsing them into meaning units or broader themes. As
these themes emerged, I described and interpreted them by examining the participants’ common experiences with the phenomenon of care.

**Coding.** Coding methods were used to analyze caring behaviors seen in the data. Coding in qualitative research reference occurs as the researcher analyzes the data and searches for certain segments that vary from a single word to a short phrase. Each segment is given a simple label. The researcher then documents the frequency of occurrence of each segment as it occurs in the data. Analysis consists of summarizing the prevalence of each segment, comparing relationships between codes, and seeking to understand the phenomenon by drawing conclusions from the number of times each code appears.

Coding in this study was chosen as a method of analysis because of the nature of research questions regarding caring behaviors. In this study I sought to determine if the five caring behaviors revealed in the pilot study were validated by further research, and if others were mentioned with significant frequency. As further themes appeared in the data, I sought to describe and detail them.

The transcript of each interview was coded twice (Patton, 2001). The first round consisted of open coding, where an initial coding scheme was developed for the transcript. A negotiated set of codes was then developed, and I went back and recoded the transcripts based on this set of codes. Using comparative pattern analysis, these codes were used to develop categories. Using the theoretical perspective of perceived caring (McCroskey, 1992), these categories were then interpreted to determine the themes that emerged from the data.
Coding is often criticized as a qualitative method because of its similarities to quantitative methods. Rich, thick description of feelings and attitudes surrounding the occurrence of each caring behavior were used as I carefully documented and sought further understanding to counteract the quantitative “feel” of coding.

**Trustworthiness**

I engaged in five qualitative research methods designed to increase study trustworthiness, as recommended by Creswell (2007). These strategies, detailed below, are member checking, triangulation, rich and thick description, peer review with an external audit, and taxonomic analytic scheme.

**Member Checking**

Member checking is recognized by many qualitative researchers as the most important technique a researcher can take to establish credibility and trustworthiness (Creswell, 2007). Member checking occurs as participants are asked to review the written analysis of the gathered data, and express their opinions of their contributions. In this way, participants gain confidence that the researcher has honestly attempted to describe the original views and perspectives they wished to convey (Glesne, 2006). Member checking occurred and the participants approved of the written analysis.

**Triangulation**

Triangulation occurs as the researcher attempts to reach valid conclusions by gathering data from multiple data points (Bamberger et al., 2006). I collected data from
student participants and professor participants and compared these findings with those found in the pilot study to achieve triangulation.

**Rich and Thick Description**

I contributed to the trustworthiness of this study by making an effort to describe in rich detail the participants, the setting for the research, and the feelings and emotions that surrounded the participants and the research. Rich and thick description, using a field journal, aids the reader in making decisions of how the information in the study transfers to other settings (Creswell, 2007).

**Peer Review and External Audit**

Credibility increases in a study when the researcher invites experts to review and provide comment on research methods and procedures. I gained approval of and feedback for this study from two panels of experts. First, my doctoral committee carefully examined and provided suggestions for the study. The University’s Institutional Review Board also provided approval of and feedback on the ethical issues of the study.

A professional colleague of mine was also enlisted to provide feedback and recommendations for the study. This process, of having an external colleague ‘audit’ research materials, prompts researcher accuracy and honesty (Creswell, 2007). This colleague has professionally demonstrated deep knowledge of qualitative methods and has deep understanding of the research involving the studied phenomenon. He was provided journal notes, transcripts of interviews, written analyses, and research methods. The evidence of his audit is included as Appendix C.
**Taxonomic Analytic Scheme**

It is helpful for readers of qualitative research to understand the thought process of the researcher and how he codes and analyzes the data gathered during a study. A graphic that displays this process is included as Appendix B through which the reader can view the analytic process I followed in reducing data to the written findings of the study.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter was to detail the methods and procedures used in conducting the current study. The methodological and theoretical approaches were discussed. The role of the researcher was discussed in detail. Also, the methodological procedures utilized in gathering and analyzing data were discussed, including the description of the pilot study, selection of participants, and details of how data were gathered, analyzed, and written. Procedures used to establish trustworthiness were also discussed.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The purpose of the current study was to discover the professor behaviors that contribute to perceived care by college students, and to document through interview how professors in turn described their efforts to enhance the perception of caring by their students. The intent of this chapter is to detail these behaviors through the lens of the theoretical framework of perceived care.

The descriptions have been derived from verbatim examples and direct quotations of students and professors, which have then been classified into groups of caring behaviors. The groups of caring behaviors were selected because of the numerous occurrences, statements, quotes, and examples that existed in participants’ responses, and because of their connection to the literature review and theoretical framework of perceived care. Descriptions of each caring action are comprised of student responses and professor responses, as well as by researcher observation and document analysis.

The groups of behaviors identified that prompt perceived care were (a) verbal expressions of care, (b) nonverbal expressions of care, (c) knowing student names, (d) effective use of office hours, (e) creating a “feeling” or atmosphere of perceived care in class, (f) building appropriate relations with students, (g) responding to student questions and concerns, and (h) the use of engaging and applicable lectures. Three groups of behaviors that appeared in the research, but without the frequency of the above mentioned groups, will also be discussed. These include (a) the effect of class size on perceived care, (b) the effect of class rigor on perceived care, and (c) the effect of humor
on perceived care.

Data were analyzed using a taxonomic analytic scheme. An example of this is provided in Appendix D. Following is a description of each group of behaviors that prompted perceived care as experienced by students and professors.

**Verbal Expressions of Care: “Tell Them”**

“The fact that she said this, that she actually verbalized that she cared, really made a difference,” Jill expressed (Interview, 9/11/2014) as she doodled in the journal where she had recorded in writing the sentence she had just shared. She looked up, pausing from her doodling, and while politely pointing a finger at me for emphasis, remarked “You don’t really expect to hear that in a college class. I expected a cold hard atmosphere like my other math classes. But this is one is different. I love this class, and I really enjoy learning here.”

Before sharing this, Jill, a junior at Western University majoring in math education, explained that she felt that some of her math professors had been anything but caring, but that Professor Lewis had been different. “I could tell that she meant it. Hearing her say it was awesome.”

When it comes to perceiving care in their college classrooms, students express that they perceive their professors care for them when they verbalize it; when they say it out loud. Though several varied professor behaviors communicate care to students, when they take the time to sincerely express it through words, students in class hear it, and it makes a difference to them.
Leigh, a freshman majoring in accounting, spoke of what verbal caring meant to her.

My English professor told us the very first day that she wanted us to succeed and would do anything possible to help us. She said I don’t know you well yet, but I want to and that will help me make this class more enjoyable for you. The fact that she said this; that she verbalized this really spoke to me. I could tell she meant it. Though I feel that a lot of my professors care, hearing her say that she did meant a lot to me. (Interview, 9/10/2014)

Professors at times feel awkward about expressing care verbally. Professor Thurber, an economics professor who had been teaching college courses for over thirty years, described his feelings very carefully one afternoon while sitting in his warm, south facing office. “No professor wants to come off as forward or inappropriate, so we sometimes error the other direction. We make our caring efforts too difficult to detect at times because we don’t want to create an awkward feeling in class” (Interview, 9/12/2014).

But despite this risk, Professor Thurber explained that he had noticed that students responded very positively when he explained that he cared for them and wanted them to succeed. “They sit up and take notice. There’s a change that comes over their face when they feel I really mean what I’m saying, that I care, and that I will do whatever I can to help them. I haven’t had a negative reaction yet.”

Professor Sam Bryan, a nutrition professor who taught three large freshmen-level classes, meditated quietly for close to 3 minutes before she responded to the question about how she increased perceived care in her classrooms. After close to an entire minute of invested thought, she shared:

Most of my students have just barely left home. They are used to having parents,
coaches, teachers, religious leaders, and others who form a very strong support system for them. So when they come to college for the first time, they often struggle because they don’t have anybody. They don’t know who to turn to when they need help. And because you represent an authority figure, you’re there in front of them like their trusted network of people used to be; they want you to care. And so when you tell them you care and they hear it said in class the walls come down. They’re ready to have a caring relationship. They’re ready to let you in. And most of the time all you have to do is tell them. (Interview, 9/12/14)

Jill, in her writings in her journal added credence to Dr. Bryan’s statement when she wrote, “Your office hours may indeed be open, and you may care about our personal lives. But tell us; make it known so we don’t doubt that you are invested in us” (Journal account, recorded 9/5/14).

Jed, sitting in a small room in the university library, shared his journal account of his classroom experiences. Jed, a senior in the College of Natural Resources who was originally from South Dakota, commented after reading his journal “If professors care, they should say so.” I shared with him Professor Thurber’s explanation of why some professors may balk at sharing care verbally. In response, as he leaned forward and cemented eye contact with me, he shared:

One day I was having a really bad day. I was stressed and when I came into class I had just got off the phone and I was struggling and it was easy to see I think that I was frustrated and down. My professor took the time to write me a note which simply said “Are you ok? I care” on it and handed it to me while she walked by. It was very kind. And after class she stopped me and she said “Jed, I don’t know what you’re dealing with but I care and if I can do something, especially if it has to do with my class, I’d be glad to help you.” (Interview, 9/13/2014)

Jed shared this experience as he drew line after line in black ink under the two words recorded in his journal: “Tell them.”

“Don’t assume that students know you care,” Amber, a sophomore art student shared. “If you care about us as students, say so. Say that you believe in us and that you
believe we can succeed.” Having heard how important it was for the perception of care for some students, I invited her to elaborate; to explain what she liked to hear students verbalize. “Say that we can contact you at any time with questions or concerns. Tell students what you feel about them and what you desire for them so that there is no way they can misunderstand what your intentions really are. If you care simply say it,” Amber commented (Interview, 9/10/14).

Jan, a sophomore majoring in engineering, explained to me that she knew most of her professors cared because they said it; they told her. She explained that it didn’t have to happen in every class, but that they should take the time to do it often. “My professors say that it is a privilege to be in class in with us, and I can tell they really mean it. They want us to work hard, but they tell us they enjoy teaching and being with us and so when they ask things of us it’s easy to do it because I know that they care,” Jan remarked. She had made it clear in her journal (Journal Notes, recorded 9/7/14) that she had come to college not expecting this response, but that she had been pleasantly surprised. “Most of my college professors are great, and I know that they would help me with anything,” she explained. And she knew that because they had told her that.

Professors striving to increase perceived care can also use email, according to Connor, a freshman majoring in psychology. He shared:

I have a professor who emailed me the first week of class. He told me that he wanted class to be a great experience and that he cared about my success. It wasn’t a generated email, because he mentioned something that we had talked about in class that very day. That he would take the time to send me a personal email and tell me he cared made me feel special. He said he knew I would do well in class and that he was confident I would succeed and that he would do everything to help me do that; very special and very cool. (Interview, 9/10/14)
Nonverbal Caring Behaviors: “Show it in Your Face”

Many students perceive care when their professors communicate it verbally to them; they take notice when they express care directly in words or in email. In addition, students perceive care by several unverbalized behaviors that professors display in class. They attentively pick up on unspoken attitudes and behaviors of their professors and attribute care as the motivating factor for them displaying such behaviors.

Tommy, a senior majoring in music education noted carefully in his journal several instances when nonverbal behaviors by professors enhanced his perceived care, and offered his advice to them. “Smile at a student when they speak. Respond to student comments with a smile, you don’t need to keep up your professor persona to impress us. Be light hearted and smile a lot more” (Journal Notes, recorded 9/6/14).

Jed also commented on the importance of facial expressions as a way to increase perceived care. “Facial expressions mean so much. A smile is all [professors] need to show me that they enjoy us as students and enjoy teaching” (Interview, 9/13/2014).

Jed felt so strongly about the importance of smiling that he expressed:

If I was a dean and in charge of hiring professors, that would be my one thing I would use in hiring. I would make them do a practice lecture, and I would watch them and see if they smile. It doesn’t matter what comes out of their mouth. I just wanna know if they smile while they teach.

Students noticed other nonverbal behaviors in their professors, and perceived care when they were exhibited. Some, like Tommy, mentioned the importance of eye contact. During an interview, while sitting back with his legs crossed next to his backpack and guitar, Tommy elaborated on how professors use eye contact to increase perceived care:
Make eye contact with students. I can’t overemphasize the importance of eye contact. Your eyes communicate your excitement to be with students and if you’re enjoying the teaching experience. Your eyes communicate your attitude and enthusiasm. So when you make eye contact with students they can see into you a bit and know why you are really there—to help students or to just go through the motions and get a paycheck. (Interview, 9/14/2014)

Jan expressed the importance of eye contact and facial expression from her experiences in her engineering classes. “You can tell a professor cares by just the way they look at you” (Interview, 9/13/2014). When prompted to elaborate, she remarked:

Well, you can tell they care when they look at you. It’s in their eyes. Not in a creepy way; it’s just that you can tell by their facial expressions and eyes and smile if they consider you as important. When you ask questions they look at you with interest. When you have conversations with them they are involved with you and aren’t distracted by other things. It’s something you can see in teachers’ faces.

Kristin, a freshman student in her first semester majoring in biology, shared excitedly in her interview how eye contact and facial expression impacted her perceived care. Full of enthusiasm and excitement herself, she modeled her words by using eye contact as she shared “When a professor takes the time to make eye contact with you, he communicates to you that he cares more about you than about his all-important knowledge on any subject he is teaching” (9/14/2014). Her appreciation for one of her current biology professors was easy to detect. She continued sharing her strong feelings about nonverbal caring behaviors by explaining:

Little things professors do contribute to the way the class feels; the feeling that is in a classroom. It’s in the way that they speak for example. There’s a change in tone, and excitement that comes through the way that they speak. And they look at you in the eye. I had a professor who actually tapped a kid sitting by me who was on his phone and said “I need you to look at me when I’m talking so I can understand if you’re understanding or not.” I thought that was cool. He was using his eyes to figure out if students were understanding his lecture or not. So I guess one of the biggest things to me is that it’s in the teachers face or voice if they care
or not about their students.

Smiling and eye contact were repeatedly mentioned by students during interview and journal recording. In addition, tone of voice that implied enthusiasm, excitement, and enjoyment promoted perceived care for students.

Jocelyn, a junior accounting major who commuted 20 miles to the university every day from her parent’s home, perceived care by the tone of voice her professors used in class. “Teachers who care teach with effort; they teach with emotion. That emotion comes through the way they talk—whether they change their voice tone” (Interview, 9/12/2014).

She had detailed in her journal what she liked about a particular professor in whose class she perceived care. Unprompted by the study, she had created a table of caring behaviors, and had placed tally marks to record the frequency of these behaviors (Journal Notes, recorded 9/11/2014). While sharing her thoughts, she placed her finger on her handwritten word “Voice”; it had received 12 tally marks.

When asked to share more of her thoughts about the topic, she explained:

There’s feeling and concern in the words they say, but it’s more than that. It’s how they say it. There’s a look a professor has when she cares about you and the subject and wants you to succeed. It’s more than her job to teach you, it’s like her calling. Caring teachers teach with power, feeling and emotion. It comes out in the way they talk.

Jocelyn went on to explain that it wasn’t what the teacher was saying that mattered; it was how they said it. There was inflection in their voice. Their pace of speaking contained variety and emotion. And the way they spoke denoted enthusiasm, excitement, and enjoyment in having the opportunity to teach.
“You can feel it when the professor cares for you” explained Linda, a sophomore sociology major. She paused after this statement, waiting for a response. After a quiet moment she continued, “Well, it’s just in the way they interact with the class. You know, you can tell when someone cares about you. It’s the way they talk to you, the look they have in their eyes, and the way they handle themselves around you” (Interview, 9/14/2014).

Waiting again for a response, she put her hands up and simply asked “Do you know what I’m saying—know what I mean?” An affirmative nod reassured her, followed by an invitation to clarify. “Teachers that care—that sincerely care—show it in their face.”

Leigh echoed Linda’s feelings and summarized her feelings of perceived care as exhibited in nonverbal behaviors:

Enthusiasm; there’s a general feeling of excitement to be in the classroom when you have a professor who cares. That excitement tells me that the professor really enjoys teaching and being with students. I like it when professors get excited about their topic. It translates to me that they care about what they are doing—which at that moment is teaching. I have a class where there were 400 people, and so there was no way a teacher could get to know every one of us. Instead, he was very animated and enthused about being with us, you could tell he was just excited. He laughed and smiled a lot, and you could tell by looking at him that he enjoyed what he was doing. He moves his hands. He gets out from behind his desk and walks close to us. Because he does that he doesn’t have to get to know every single one of us. He cared for us by his attitude. (Interview, 9/10/2014)

John Alldredge, a history professor who has taught at the college level for 5 years, was invited to share how he attempted to increase perceived care in his classroom. He spoke at length about how his enthusiasm for history and the gratitude he felt to be able to teach should be perceived as care for his students. “When you care about students it
comes through in your day to day interaction with them. It’s in knowing their names and wanting to know more about them, true. But it’s also in how you interact with them in class. You’re happy to be with them. You’re happy to be teaching them a subject you care deeply about. And it comes through to them in your voice, how you look at them, and how you talk to them” (Interview, 9/10/2014).

**Knowing Student Names: “A Little Time and Effort”**

From the 20 student participants who provided data for this study, 19 mentioned they perceived care from their professors when they made attempts to memorize and call them by name in class. Of the 10 professors interviewed, 7 discussed their efforts to know students’ names as a way they attempted to increase perceived care.

After she mentioned her efforts to know and use names in class, Faith Johnson, a sociology professor, answered why she thought this action made such a difference to students. “When you know a student’s name you’re saying to them that you’ve made an investment in them. You’ve expended a little time and effort on their behalf. And that effort breaks out a chunk of the wall that initially stands between professor and student” (Interview, 9/10/2014).

The sheer number of responses by student participants indicated the importance of this action in increasing perceived care. For example, the invitation “Get to know our names” is found verbatim 11 times in participant journals, and the number jumps to 26 when subtle variations are included.

Leigh explained why name learning efforts mattered to her:
When [professors] make this effort it’s clear they care about you and your story. You become more of a human—an actual person to them—and you don’t feel they are assigning a grade to you like a cow at the fair. They take the time to care about you and you become a person it seems when they get to know your name. When they know your name and vice versa you’re so much more likely to ask further questions and get to know them better. (Interview, 9/10/2014)

Andrea, a freshman student majoring in elementary education, perceived care strongly in her education classes, and wrote about how she wanted to be the kind of teacher that prompted perceived care in her students. As she wrote, she documented professor behaviors that she wanted to imitate when her time to teach came.

Every elementary teacher should get to know their students’ very well, and knowing their names the very first day should be my goal. Everyone knows this and expects it from an elementary teacher. So if it’s that important to good teaching, why would it change for older students?” (Notes from Journal, recorded 9/10/2014)

When interviewed, Andrea admitted this expectation caused frustration when professors didn’t make the effort to know student names.

Pay the price to know my name. It would be great if I saw you somewhere outside of class if you were able to look at me, call me by name, and say hi. We’re spending about 50 hours together over the semester the least you could do is try to learn and memorize my name. (Interview, 9/14/2014)

Connor wrote at length in his journal about how knowing names increased perceived care. “I want my professors, when class size makes it possible, to know my name. They should know my name” (Notes from Journal, recorded 9/8/2014). He recognized that this required effort on the part of professors, but that the effort involved was what mattered to him; it was the effort not necessarily the achievement of knowing the name of each student in class, that indicated professors cared about him. “Knowing names requires effort, I know, but when you make that effort, that, maybe more than
anything else, says you care. Because it means you’re willing to work at it, and that you feel the teacher/student relationship is important to you.”

Like Connor, Susan, a junior psychology major, indicated that the effort, not the accomplishment of knowing every student name, was what prompted perceived care. With a look that denoted empathy and understanding for professors with large classes, she invited professors:

Try to get know names of your students. You don’t need to be perfect at it. You can make a lot of mistakes and no one’s going to care because you’re trying. It’s the effort to learn the names that shows students you care and not whether or not you can actually do it perfectly. (Interview, 9/13/2014)

**Office Hours: “Caring, to Me, Equals Time”**

“At the university level, opportunities to meet with students one-on-one are limited because of the sheer number of students most of us teach. That’s why office hours are so important,” commented Jim Ribera, a soft-spoken social studies in secondary education professor. As he shared this, he moved the mouse on his desktop computer, bringing it to life. Three quick clicks opened up a folder in his email account, where he filed requests by students to meet with him and where he organized his office hours appointments. Pointing at them, as if to display evidence of his remarks, he said, “This is a great way to show students you care for them” (Interview, 9/13/2014).

Students agree with Professor Ribera as evidenced by their journal writing and interview statements. Carlos, an undeclared sophomore student, shared that he perceived care by a professor’s attitude and behaviors concerning office hours. “The way a professor handles office hours, or the time that they are not up in front of class is where
you really find out. That’s one way you know if they care” (Interview, 9/12/2014).

Carlos shyly remarked that some of his struggle in selecting a major had started when he felt that the professors in his originally declared major had seemed insensitive, uncaring, and even “brutal” in the way they interacted with him. When asked to clarify his use of the word “brutal,” Carlos shared an experience where he had visited a professor during office hours to get help after he had performed poorly on a test. The professor seemed disinterested, at one point even picking up his phone to send a text, and then had smugly remarked, “Maybe you’d better hire a tutor” indicating to Carlos that the brief visit was at an end.

In contrast Carlos mentioned several office hour visits that were very positive. Referencing them, he said:

If a professor welcomes you in, talks to you about your life outside of class, and spends whatever time is needed to assist you outside of class, that’s when you know they’re not trying to blow smoke or impress anybody. They do it because they care about you as a person and want you to do well in their class.

Carlos closed this part of the interview by stating “Professors should put all they can into office hours if they want students to know they care.”

Angela, a senior majoring in theater, shared a time when a professor had helped her perceive care during office hours.

[My professor] really strongly encourages office hours as a means to help struggling students. There was even one time I called my professor at home one night before a test for specific help, because she told me I could. And she spent almost a half hour with me helping me understand some very difficult concepts. I know I passed that test because of her help, and I remember the information from that discussion better than I remember anything from taking a whole course on the subject in high school. (Interview, 9/15/2014)

Angela commented that she felt comfortable enough calling her professor for help
because of discussions that had occurred during office hours. “When I came in to the office she was excited to see me, acted like she had all the time in the world for me, and even asked for my opinion on how to handle upcoming classes. It was great.”

Brooke, a freshman majoring in instructional technology, shared her opinion as to why effective use of office hours increased her feelings of perceived care. “The reason that office hours are a way for professors to show they care is because it shows students that they are available. It’s like ‘Listen, I’m here. And I care’” (Interview, 9/14/2014).

A follow-up question was asked, inviting Brooke to share what exactly she had experienced during office hours that increased her perceived care. Holding up her hand and raising one finger at a time for emphasis, she explained, “They talk to you one on one. They ask questions to find out why you need help. They spend a little time to get to know you more. And they are patient and understanding with whatever you are struggling with.” When asked if there were anything else, she said, “It really boils down to this: a professor saying during that time that I will slide my research or study to the side to make sure you do well in this class.”

Chris, a junior studying English Literature, shared his advice to professors in his journal.

Really make efforts to help students during office hours. Tell students every day that you are available and have the time to meet with them. Some students will take advantage of it and others won’t. But if you really reach out to students during office hours it will make a difference and students will talk to other students and you will get the reputation that you care. (Notes taken from Journal, recorded 9/10/2014)

Four participants mentioned that email communication served a vital role in perceived care, for the same reasons that effective use of office hours did. Jocelyn
commented, “Just as important as office hours is how a teacher handles email. It’s great when professors put thought and time into email communications with students and respond in a timely manner” (Interview, 9/12/2014).

Jocelyn explained that she had received great amounts of help through email, and that she attributed a feeling of perceived care when professors took the time to teach, counsel, and guide through email. “Professors can do a lot to care for students individually through email. You might not have enough time to get to know all your students in class but you have time to get to know them electronically. I would suggest professors send five emails every day to students during down time and watch what a difference that makes to students.”

When students are struggling it helps when a professor will notice and invite the student to come in during office hours,” suggested Mark, a sophomore engineering student.

“I had a professor who knew I needed help, and could guess that I was probably too shy to ask for it. So he personally invited me to come in. That says, “Look, I’ve noticed you’re struggling and here are some resources that could really help you if you would like to take advantage of them.” I did better after that. That professor really cared about me and it helped me succeed in the course. (Interview, 9/14/2014)

Professor Thurber agreed that office hours were a great time to extend caring to students. “I try to have an open door policy as much as possible. I communicate to students that they can come and visit me anytime, and when I hand assignments and papers back I invite students to come see me.” He then explained that he used office hours as a chance to get to know students personally. “It’s the best time to do that,” he added. “And during office hours you can build confidence, give one-on-one assistance,
and encourage students. I really enjoy office hours” (Interview, 9/12/2014).

Tommy detailed a time when a visit to a professor during office hours impacted him.

I had a professor who I visited with during office hours. I had missed a class and I wanted to make sure I hadn’t missed anything. He repeated the entire lesson—it took almost an entire hour—for just me. He could have just given me his notes or something but he taught me the entire lesson! I love this class a ton and it’s all because of the professor. (Interview, 9/14/2014)

“Professors can make themselves available to students after class time during office hours and other appointments and that really helps,” explained Linda. (Interview, 9/14/2014). When asked to clarify, Linda discussed that when professors use office hours as a time to connect with students, strive to understand their concerns, and offer meaningful assistance, perceived care is significantly raised. “Caring, too me, equals time; and when a professor shows you that you are important enough to meet with you outside of class it goes a long way.”

Feeling of Care: “You Can Feel it”

“There are some things that are just difficult to put into words. But people know what you’re talking about nonetheless.” Professor Thurber leaned forward as he shared these words. He spoke them quietly and slowly, inviting meditation upon them.

You can’t measure it. You can’t touch it or feel it. I know that doesn’t sound very academic or scientific, especially coming from a professor. But the fact remains, when a teacher cares for you, you can just feel it. I felt it often in my classes as a student, and I want my students to feel it too. (Interview, 9/12/2014)

Professor Thurber spoke of this aspect of perceived care at length. Question after question was given inviting clarification, and he politely accepted and continued to share.
“Whether it’s liking a teacher who seems to like you, or feeling comfortable and safe, or feeling like you have an advocate, there’s an emotional aspect to care that speaks to all of us. We like to feel cared for. And we feel good when we do.”

Several student participants noted through journal and interview that they perceived care when they experienced an emotional aspect—a “feeling”—that existed in the classrooms. Tommy explained:

When a teacher cares for you it gets you right in the ‘feels’—or that part of you where you can sense what someone is feeling—the emotional part of you. And when you sense that, it’s easy for you to reciprocate the feeling and class becomes a much more enjoyable experience. (Interview, 9/14/2014)

Though Carlos had had several negative experiences regarding perceived care in his classes, he described a “feeling” that existed in certain classes where he perceived care. “Care to me is something you feel. It’s something in a professor’s eyes and ‘aura’ for lack of a better word” (Interview, 9/12/2014).

He then opened up his journal, and as he smiled, pointed to a paragraph he had written. He was beaming as he did so; the pride in his creation was easy to detect. “This took me a few tries to get right,” he explained. The final draft of his paragraph appeared below three scratched out versions. It said:

Care is manifest in a currency of patience and kindness and other means. It’s something you can just feel—just sense—when the professor has paid the price. And you can also tell when it’s not there. The currency paid by the professor in caring for students hasn’t been paid; there’s a deficit. And when that account isn’t in the black, you can feel it. And you can also sense when it’s faked or manufactured or just an act.

Joe, a junior preparing for a career in biochemistry, shared, “Students can feel when a professor cares for them. You can feel when [a professor] is really interested in
you as a person.” A question came seeking more clarification; an explanation of what the ‘feel’ part of his sentence meant was desired. He explained, “I know that’s not scientific or anything, but that’s really the way it is. It’s something you sense; you feel it. Some teachers are really good at creating that feeling and some just plain aren’t” (Interview, 9/15/2014). He then showed me a portion of this journal which read, “If a professor really cares you can feel it. You can actually almost measurably feel their desire to help you and because of that you want to do better in the class” (Notes taken from Journal, recorded 9/7/2014).

Jocelyn referenced an accounting class she was taking, and after contemplating the perceived care that she “felt” in class, explained:

You can feel it when the professor cares for you. Well, it’s just in the way they interact with the class. You know, you can tell when someone cares about you. It’s the way they talk to you, the look they have in their eyes, and the way they handle themselves around you. (Interview, 9/12/2014)

Jocelyn made analogies to help increase understanding of her statement. “It’s like the sun,” she said. You can’t touch it, or measure it, or really wrap your mind around it all. You really can’t understand it fully. But on a warm day you can feel it. Feeling cared for is kinda like that.” She continued:

Or it’s like your brain…. You can’t touch your brain, at least while you’re alive. But it’s working. It’s thinking. It’s processing and feeling. You can’t explain it all the way, but just because you can’t explain it doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist.” Smiling, and proud of the point she was making, pointed and said “Feeling cared for is like that.

Leigh explained, “You can feel it in class—you can feel it when the professor cares for you. It’s in the way they talk about things. The way they joke with students. Some professors just say it so the feeling isn’t there. But when a teacher says it and
means it, you can actually feel it in class” (Interview, 9/10/2014).

Kristin explained that she perceived care by a ‘feeling’ that existed in class. “I don’t think it’s an emotion, or like an emotional thing. It’s just something you feel, that you know exists when a teacher cares for you.” She referenced back to the table where she had carefully noted behaviors that increased perceived care for her. The words “That ‘feeling’ in class” had received 12 tick marks, marked thickly in black and blue ink.

**Developing Appropriate Relation: “Tell Me a Little About Yourself”**

When professors reach out to students by showing genuine interest in their lives they perceive care, as evidenced by participants in this study. Professors who ask questions about students’ lives, show interest in what interests them, and seek to know them better display the kinds of relation building behaviors that foster perceived care.

Jill, for example, explained, “I have a professor who talks about personal things that happens to us outside of class. He asks about roommates, and dating, and other things that happen to us outside of class. I feel like he really cares for us” (Interview, 9/11/2014).

A follow up question seeking clarification followed, and Jill referenced her journal where she had recorded, “He wants to know me as a person not just as a student” (Notes from journal, recorded 9/5/2014). She continued to explain:

Maybe it’s weird, but I feel cared for when the professor talks to us about things completely not related to class; almost the more it DOESN’T have to do with our class the more strongly it feels that our teacher cares. I have a professor who not only talks to us about our lives and what we experience, he talks about world events that are impacting and changing the world we live in. He talks about the event then shows us how it relates to our future lives as young adults. Then he
moves on and talks about geography. It’s awesome when he does that.

Brooke commented “I appreciate it when professors make the effort to get know you; more than just your name. They want to know where you’re from, the hobbies you are interested in, what you are studying” (Interview, 9/14/2014).

What kinds of things do they ask about that leads you to perceive they care? Brooke was asked. She paused, reflecting, placing a finger to her chin, and said “I’m not sure if what they’re asking matters. As long as they’re asking and showing genuine interest.” A prompt for examples that she could remember was made, and Brooke explained:

I even have one professor who asked me about my family and if it was hard for me to be such a long way away from them. I have another professor who I feel not only couldn’t pick me out of a police lineup, but that I’m not worth his time to get to know me. I’m not used to having a teacher that acts this way. The ones that strive to get to know you and understand you are the teachers that really stand out to me.

Attempts by professors to build relationships with students don’t need to be elaborate; simple attempts work. “I like it when a professor will say these simple words: ‘Tell me a little about yourself.’ Just that much is all that has to happen for me to know a professor is trying,” Angela shared (Interview, 9/15/2014). “Whether it happens before class, or after class, or through an email, a simple question like that helps me connect with my teachers.”

“A caring professor will communicate and ask personal questions about you- they want to know you personally,” Susan pointed out, displaying in her journal the types of questions that she had recorded that her professor has asked her. “What’s your major? Where are you from? How are you liking class? What kinds of things do you like to do?”
had all been recorded with brief comments next to them, explaining how this concern by professors helped her perceive care (Notes from Journal, recorded 9/6/2014).

“Caring professors are genuinely interested in your life, your opinions, your overall view of your education process, and especially about your feelings about how things are going in class,” Susan added (Interview, 9/13/2014).

Professor Sam Bryan shared, “Caring for students is crucial to my teaching. It’s challenging at times to show students that you care. They’re each so different. What you might think is caring can be intrusive or offensive to a student.”

When asked how she tries to help them perceive care, she explained:

You try to care for them I think the way you like to be cared for. To me, how I most often connect, is to get to know them. Talk to them. Find out what’s going on in their lives. And be sincerely interested in what they say. And they try to find a way to connect their lives to what you are teaching in class. But I usually have to start the process—in trying to get to know them. Students rarely do, but I think they want that kind of friendly relationship with their professor. (Interview, 9/12/2014)

Amber talked at length about the importance of professors striving to build appropriate relation with students.

Talk to students like adults. Like equals. When a professor comes into class with a cocky attitude it’s a real turn off to me, and I put up a wall; I don’t like to associate with professors like that. Talk to us as peers and treat us like adults. Go the extra mile to have a friendship with you students, or at least get to know them a little bit. Little attempts to get to know your students send the message that you care and that you want the class to be a positive thing for us. (Interview, 9/10/2014)

Sitting forward in her seat, and raising her eyebrows to indicate that what she was about to share was incredibly important, Amber pointedly explained:

Take the time to get to know me personally. I have a professor who really gives me a snotty look when I come three minutes late into her class every day. But she
doesn’t know that I’m taking 18 credits, am involved in three groups at school, and work 30 hours a week.

She appeared frustrated by this; and the frustration bordered on anger. She explained that even though it wasn’t her professors’ fault that she was so busy and that she came into class late at times, it was her responsibility to understand Amber and offer assistance if she could.

Amber contrasted this professor with another. “I have another professor who knows all of this, and asks me all the time how I’m holding up and if she can help me in anyway at all. Guess which class I like more and am doing better in?”

A question followed, inviting Amber to explain more about how this particular professor helped her perceive care. Again, leaning forward to add even more emphasis, she shared:

This is what happened. One day I was feeling really down because of personal stuff and all of the stress in my life right now. My professor pulled me aside after class and asked if was ok because I was particularly quiet in class that day. That really made me feel cared for and that she cared about my overall well-being. She let me know she was there for me in any way that I needed, that I wasn’t just a body taking up space in her class.

Having a relationship with students that aided in understanding their lives also impacted Leigh, and demonstrated care from her professor. While appearing to feel strong emotion as she recalled the experience, she shared:

I had a concussion—I got in a serious car wreck. Somehow my professor found out and he was very happy to work with me. He reached out to me after he knew, and he asked me all about it when I came back to class. He did more than just work with me, he really tried to understand me and give the help that I needed. I knew he was changing jobs and so so busy but he took a real interest in me. He emailed me and asked questions about my health in addition to just working with me which he did—and it was great—he really cared about how I was doing.

(Interview, 9/10/2014)
“It’s all about respect.” Connor explained. “Enough respect to have an equal relationship. Wanting to know about you and where you come from makes it seem like you are equals, and that one person isn’t more powerful than another” (Interview, 9/10/2014).

After a request for further details, Connor shared:

When a professor respects students and tries to meet them on equal ground it really creates a great feeling in class. Respect is shown when you try to establish a relationship that doesn’t necessarily involve your subject. You should try to get to know our names, a little about us, where we are from, why we are taking your class, even some of our hobbies. Interest in your students like that shows a deep respect for them and communicates that you want the relationship to be equal, not one being subservient to the other.

“When a professor shows interest in me and my life it’s so much easier for me to relate to them, respect them- when a professor reaches out to me it makes me want to learn more from them,” reported Linda, as she explained what she had recorded in her journal (Interview, 9/14/2014). “Ask how we are doing. Make an effort to bridge the communication and generation gap. It’s hard for students to do that initially, but most of us are willing to respond positively to you if you will reach out and show care and concern first.”

Response to Questions and Concerns: “Understand and Help Us”

As evidenced in this study, students perceive care when a professor makes efforts to discover and then respond to student needs and concerns. “Ask us how we are doing; ask us questions about how we feel about the class and how we are learning,” explained Mark (Interview, 9/14/2014). “A professor should take the time to look his students in the
eye and seek honest feedback on how they are learning the material and how they are progressing.”

Students appreciate and take note of these kinds of efforts, and are more likely to perceive that their professors care when they display them. Mark continued to share:

One professor I have goes out of her way to get to know you, make you feel at home, and help you achieve your best. She notices if start to slip up or worry and she comes to you to resolve your questions and concerns. That means a lot. She doesn’t have to ask you if you are struggling; she just kinda knows when you’re struggling and she really tries to help.

Leigh explained, “You can tell by the way a professor handles class questions if a professor cares” (Interview, 9/10/2014). The interview paused while Leigh thumbed through her journal, counting silently. She looked up, and reported, “I counted seven different times that I was impressed by the way professors responded to questions and concerns. When a professor will put their lesson on pause in order to ensure understanding or to give an example to help a student understand, I noticed those times and felt the professor cared for the class when they did that.” She then shared this experience.

For example, I had a professor who took the time in class to address every one of my questions with a great answer. But there was one question he didn’t know. He said I’ll have to research that and I’ll get back to you. I thought that would be the last time I ever heard of the matter. But when I came back to class two days later he handed me about five pages of research he did to discover the answer. And then, as he started class, he said “Our scheduled topic today as seen in the syllabus, well folks, cross that out. Today is Leigh day in class. This lecture is about everything I learned while researching Leigh’s question from [last class.]”

Leigh paused, waiting for response, and seeing only a nod to continue, she said, “Wow; seriously, who does that in college? I think my other teachers would have told me, ‘Go discover it yourself- you’ll learn more that way.’ Whether or not that is true, my
view of that professor changed dramatically that day. He seriously is the best teacher I’ve had period.”

Professor Bryan had experienced many times when she felt that her students felt cared for because of her willingness to respond to their needs and concerns. “I think I best show care to students by being willing to work with them; to help them when they have a need arise to do what I can to enable them to succeed” (Interview, 9/12/2014).

After being invited to provide further insight, she explained:

I like the feeling of having a student come to me when they are at the end of the rope and I know I can do something to help them. They have such complicated lives. They’re taking a bunch of credits. They’re working. They’re trying hard to figure out who they are and who they want to be. They’re dating and in some cases married and trying to raise young families. And they’re trying to become adults in a very complicated world. And when they come to me and they’re struggling for some reason I enjoy being able to tweak something here, or make an adjustment there, or give them some kind of resource to help them. I like to do that because I know it increases their ability and their motivation to learn, and that it makes what I teach more likely to remain with them.

Professor Max James, a history professor, felt strongly that a professor should work with students when problems and questions arose, and explained candidly why:

Perhaps our greatest responsibility is to help students succeed. And if they fail, we fail. I care enough about these kids that I want to be sure that ten, twenty years from now they’ll be able to say their life is better because they came to college here, and because they had been in my class. We cut off our noses to spite our faces when we as professors make things unreasonably hard on students. I try to extend myself, to let them take tests at different times if they need it, and to accommodate their needs and questions the best way that I can. (Interview, 9/15/2014)

Kristin had experienced the kind of concern and response that Professor Bryan described. She explained, “If [professors] are warm and welcome the questions and answer with a smile on your face, and gratitude that a student would ask a question, the
class feels warm and caring. It’s about the attitude [professors] have when they interact with students. I’ve experienced that kind of warmth and caring lots of times”(Interview, 9/14/2014).

Kristin had also experienced the opposite. “The tone [professors] take when asked a question says a lot. If you’re harsh and shut down a student you’ll shut down the entire class and the class becomes cold.”

What did professors do that made the class seem cold? Kristin pondered this follow up question. After a minute of reflecting, she shared:

Some teachers want their class to be so hard that no one can pass for some reason. I don’t understand that; it drives me crazy. They almost want you to fail because it makes them seem so superior. A caring professor wants their students to learn the material and grow. It’s ok if it’s hard sometimes. But they don’t want you to fail. They make adjustments to their lessons and to their lectures to help students really understand. I had a teacher who told us that he cared about us. But year after year he tried to make his tests so hard that no one could pass them. It doesn’t show that you care if you purposely do everything you can to make students fail.

Joe commented, “If a professor cares for their students they will be willing to change—be willing to adapt. That means everything, from day to day class to adjusting tests to adjusting office hours; they are just willing to adapt” (Interview, 9/15/2014).

Does that mean that professors should always bend to student wishes? The thought was suggested that every student would love a professor to do that. Rolling his eyes to signify that his meaning had been misunderstood, Joe clarified:

That doesn’t mean that they are pushovers to student wishes, it just means that they are willing to change things up a bit when it benefits students. Professor [Smith] gave a test that was really hard. A lot of the class flunked it. When he came to class he said I must have either taught this poorly or written the test poorly, so we will be taking another test to see if I can do better. He took the blame and made the adjustments. It was really cool.
He then shared this experience about a time when he perceived care by a professor being willing to work with him:

I missed a huge test because my car broke down. A huge test. I told my professor what was up and he could have flunked me. He didn’t have to believe me. But he did. He gave me the test while he sat in his office and worked and I knew it was a sacrifice for him to do it. But he was very kind and very accommodating and made me feel like I wasn’t putting him out at all. He really cared about me succeeding. He was way willing to help me out.

“A professor should bend over backwards to help students succeed. Show them you care by knowing, first of all, how your students are doing in your class and then work like crazy to provide us with the resources we need to improve,” commented Amber as she explained the section in her journal that she had titled “Offering Students Help” (Interview, 9/10/14). “Find out what our questions, feelings, and concerns are about the class and the topic and then do what it takes to change things to help students learn.” Amber indicated emphatically that she perceived care when professors seemed interested enough in students’ concerns to make modifications in the course to increase learning.

She continued:

I love it when a professor doesn’t tell me straight out that I’m wrong or way off track. He’s patient with me. He will talk to me in a way that doesn’t make him seem all superior but will try to come down to my level and reason with me to teach me. I like that. It shows that he’s sensitive and cares about my feelings and also that he cares enough to really help me learn and grow. So when a teacher can hear your concerns and then adjust things a bit it really goes a long way to helping you succeed, and if professors care they want you to succeed.

Leigh shared an experience she had had in class. At the request of one of the students, she had perceived care when a math professor went to extraordinary lengths to help students with their challenges in class:

I have a math professor who films himself working the problems in class and
posts them online so we can go through them later. That helped a lot. He didn’t have to do that but he wants us to learn and he knows that really helps us do well. He gave us all his cell phone number and said “text me at any time—if it’s in the middle of the night and you’re diligent enough to be doing your homework and you’re stumped, text me. I’ll be completely flattered, and then when I get over that feeling that I’m needed and liked I’ll help you ace your homework.” I haven’t tried it yet, but I knew he was sincere when he said it. (Interview, 9/10/2014)

Jocelyn perceived care when professors reached out to help her resolve questions and concerns in class as well. She explained that, “Good professors understand that we as students have lives. In our lives there are sometimes problems. And those problems sometimes can be disabling to us or make class incredibly difficult” (Interview, 9/12/2014). Jocelyn, when asked to provide why this kind of understanding increased perceived care for her, answered, “It’s great when a professor hears you, understands your problem, and then does everything in their power to help you out and see you do well; understand and help us.”

“I think the way teachers teach proves that they care. When they take the time and are willing to slow down and answer questions and explain things to students on a personal level,” explained Susan, who discussed why she perceived care from her current psychology professor (Interview, 9/13/2014). “They don’t go slide by slide in their lecture, they almost go student by student, looking at people’s face and expressions and pausing to clarify when they see that there’s trouble,” she concluded as she closed her journal. “Professors really care when they will go to that extent to help you with your questions and concerns.”

Jed felt strongly about the importance of professors’ helping with student questions and problems. He explained that students know professors care
…when a professor will sit down with you and explain things to you to assure that you are learning. And when they are understanding about the things that happen to you in your life. For example, if there is a circumstance and something comes up and I miss class, I like it when teachers are reasonable and will work with you instead of just saying it sucks to be you. Those professors are actually able to get the most out of their students.

Linda expressed poignantly how attention by her professors had impacted her. She described in detail exactly how she felt professors could increase perceived care as they made attempts to help with student questions and concerns. “Some professors will go out of their way to make you feel comfortable and succeed in class,” she explained (Interview, 9/14/2014). “They really reach out to hear what’s on your mind, what might be troubling you about the topic of the day or the class in general. They make sure you feel comfortable in sharing what’s on your mind and you know that your questions or problems are important to them,” she continued.

Why? Why do you think it’s so important for professors to do this? Linda pondered this follow up question, then, smiling, shared, “I wish all professors knew that that extra effort to understand and to help not only increases the knowledge everyone gains, it makes the class much more enjoyable for the students, and I would think for the professors as well.”

Engaging Lessons: “It’s About the Effort”

As evidenced above, students perceive care when their professors extend extra effort to help provide solutions to their questions and their problems. In a similar fashion, students perceive care when professors extend extra effort to make their lessons and their lectures applicable, engaging, and meaningful to them.
For example, Carlos shared, “If a professor cares for you, they will put more time into lesson planning and creating meaningful activities for the class” (Interview, 9/12/2014). Carlos had discovered this through keeping his journal. One particular entry documented this discovery:

I really like this class, and I really like this professor. I feel that she cares for us, but I’ve had a hard time figuring out what it was exactly that made me feel that way. I realize now that she puts an incredible amount of effort into her lessons and into their presentation. She wants them to apply to us, and you can tell she takes it kinda personal when we seem bored or not excited about the topic. She wants us to really get in to it. So she really works hard to make sure we get excited. She works hard to makes the classes fun and interactive. We enjoy it, and we all learn better that way. (Notes taken from Journal, recorded 9/4/2014)

In follow up, Carlos was invited to describe what happens when a professor doesn’t care enough to create engaging lectures. “When a professor doesn’t care a bit about students, they’ll just lecture and bore everyone into a coma. They don’t care, it’s just a job. But when they care they want you to enjoy it and learn at the same time.”

Another question prompted him to continue, and Carlos completed his thoughts by expressing:

Why does lesson planning display care to me? It’s about the effort teachers put into their lessons. We serve what we love. And when a teacher pours their heart into making a good lecture, it’s evidence that they care for their students. A good professor will try to discover the learning styles of his students and plan class activities to reach each of them.

Jill explained that a professor that she perceived care from used stories and object lessons to engage students. “When professors care they really try hard to make their lectures interesting. They use real life examples. They use object lessons. And they’ll share experiences they’ve had that make the subject of the lecture come alive and show us how what we are learning matters in the real world” (Interview, 9/11/2014).
“Caring matters. And to me, caring happens when a professor enables me to grow and learn in a way that is most conducive to my learning style” said Rosa, a freshman majoring in family sciences (Interview, 9/15/2014). “That means that classes are interesting, and mean something to me and my future. A good teacher can show you how the subject directly relates to you and to where you’re headed.”

Jed read his notes in his journal and pointed to words that said simply “Interesting vs. Boring” (Notes taken from Journal, recorded 9/9/2014). When asked to clarify, Jed shared:

So many of my professors just cram info into lectures. They’re trying to cover the topic. They forget they are teaching students, not a subject. When [professors] do nothing but cram and lecture, students get very little out of it. On the other hand, when a professor takes the time to share stories, give modern examples, to try to tie what we’re learning to our lives as students, then I learn more. I feel like the professor is trying to take his subject and make it a meaningful part of my life instead of just cramming info into my head so I can pass a test and we can both go on our way- both of us not caring if I’ve learned anything or not. (Interview, 9/13/2014).

Kristin, in her table that quantified the number of behaviors performed by professors that helped her perceive care reported the column “Interesting and Applicable Lessons” had received eight marks. After pointing this out, she didn’t wait for a prompt to explain, but said very directly:

Many factors determine if a professor cares or not. But when they try to present their material in an interesting and applicable way it shows they care about their students. They just don’t read out of the textbook. Or from a power point. They talk with students, have examples and stories, and really care if the students are involved in the lessons. (Interview, 9/14/2014).

Andrea explained how frustrated she had felt by professors who delivered lectures in a dull, monotone, less than enthusiastic format. “Caring professors have great and
interactive class discussions. They don’t just present PowerPoints. Sure, they may use PowerPoint, but they use it as a tool, not their entire lesson” (Interview, 9/14/2014)

What’s great and interactive about the lessons from professors in whom you perceive care? The question caused her to reflect, but, after only a brief time to think, Andrea answered by sharing an example of caring teaching that she had perceived:

They want to make the class lively and even fun at times. My English professor will sometimes stop class and say “Whoa wait a minute. I think we stopped having fun. Let’s go about this another way.” Everybody usually laughs and then our professor tries something new in class. It may not even be that great, but I appreciate his effort and want to pay more attention because I know he is really trying.

“You show me you care when you don’t teach just out of the textbook or just show a video. You do different learning activities that get people thinking and interacting and discussing” exclaimed Jocelyn, displaying the type of enthusiasm she was trying to describe. “You’re not about just getting through material; you can tell that you really want us to learn and understand what you are trying to teach” (Interview, 9/12/2014).

Professors who were interviewed understood and expressed that one way they can extend care to students is by crafting lessons and lectures to fit the needs and interests of their students. Professor Thurber commented “I really want to build connections with students so what I teach will be relevant to them. We should take time to get to know them and search for ways to adapt what we are teaching to what they are thinking and worried about. Also sharing experiences that connect what they are learning to real life seems to help” (Interview, 9/12/2014).

Darren Jones, a psychology professor, also saw how relevant and engaging lessons increased perceived care. “When students are motivated and engaged in class,
they do so much better. And what I can do as a professor to increase that is to teach at their level. Not to become their age or try to act their age, but try to understand their age and make class an extension of what they think about and deal with every day. They are then more interested and seem to then care about doing better in the class” (Interview, 9/17/2014).

Professor Darren Jones shared why attempts to make his class relevant and meaningful to his students helped increase perceived care.

In class I really try to promote open and free discussion to really help the students get involved. I’ll present on a topic, and then pause and ask the class, “Why does this matter to you?” I want them to make associations with what I’m teaching to their lives. They’re more engaged when we do this. They’re also more interested and motivated. But the big thing is I really want them to be better people because of my class. And that can’t happen if we don’t make connections between my course and their lives. (Interview, 9/17/2014)

Tommy perceived care when professors took time to share experiences they had had that were relevant to the topic of the day. “I love it when professors share personal experiences. This makes the subject more relevant and applicable to our lives.” A follow up question prompted him to continue sharing. Tommy added “When a teacher steps aside from their lesson and gives a real life example of what they are trying to teach it brings a personal feeling to the class that I really like” (Interview, 9/14/2014).

Joan had a clear instruction for professors that, if followed, would increase her feelings of perceived care. “Take the time to ask your students what interests them, and then build lessons and lectures about what your students care about” (Interview, 9/12/2014). She then took the time to close her journal, tap it with her fist, and concluded by expressing “That way students feel like what they are learning really applies to their
lives and at the same time that their professors care about what’s happening in their lives.”

Other Factors That Influence Perceived Care

Several other factors were mentioned, albeit less frequently, by student and professor participants that influence perceived care. These factors, detailed below, are class size, class rigor, and use of humor.

Class Size

Student and professor comments indicated that class size had a significant effect upon how students perceive care. Both groups of participants mentioned that the smaller the class size, the more likely care was to be perceived from the professor. “A lot of my ability to care for students depends on how many students I have in class. It’s simply impossible to help students feel cared for in a class of 100 or more,” explained Craig Anderson, a geography professor (Interview, 9/15/2014). When asked if there were any behaviors he thought could still effectively communicate care to students despite class size Professor Anderson sighed, and in a soft voice muttered “Some. But I can only do it for a few. Caring makes a difference; I have no doubt. But as professors our hands are tied by how big the classes are that our administration schedules for us.”

Professor Thurber shared similar frustrations. “It’s hard, especially in some of my introductory accounting classes. They’re so big. I try to schedule grad assistants to help me with the management of these classes so I have more time to attend to student needs, but I just can’t do everything I’d like to in caring for students” (Interview, 9/12/2014).
The size of class really affected how much I felt cared for. To me, class size is directly correlated to not just if I feel cared for, but how a professor acts and expresses care towards us as students.

Jill shared an interesting insight about the influence of class size on perceived care. After sharing her comments about class size, she shared:

I have the same professor for two classes. One of the classes is huge—about three hundred students. The other is very small—about fifteen. You couldn’t believe how different the feel of the classes are. But what really struck me was how different my professor acted. He is so kind, soft, and understanding in the small class. But in the bigger class he is more distant and even confrontational with students at times. It was like he is two different people. It was weird to see, but then sad as I watched. I don’t know why he acts that way. Maybe he feels more outnumbered in the bigger class, or feels like he can let down his “professionalism” or whatever in the smaller class. But he really acts different, and I don’t think the students in either class made him act one way or another.

Connor explained his feelings about class size this way. “Half of my classes are small, and the other half are very big. I know this may seem obvious, but I feel cared for in the smaller classes and don’t feel any care at all in the big ones.” (Interview, 9/10/2014). When asked to explain more, he shared “I know that’s probably not the professors fault 100%, but it’s the way it is. If the university wants kids to feel care from their professors, they should do everything possible to keep class sizes as small as possible.”

“I feel more cared for if the class size is small. That’s one thing I’ve noticed. In a class that’s small is so much easier to have a relationship with your professor and vice versa,” explained Susan (Interview, 9/13/2014).

Joan had written in her journal this sentence: “Why do our classes have to be so big?” (Notes taken from Journal, recorded 9/9/2013). When asked to explain her
thoughts, she shared that she felt that extending care in large classes was possible.

The size of the class you’re in really matters. I think professors maybe feel like caring doesn’t matter when they’re in a big class and sometimes put up walls or something to keep students out. Or they think it’s not worth it to try to get to know kids. But it is worth it. I had a professor in a huge class who asked five kids every day to stand up in class, say their name, their major, something they liked to do, and something they were liking or needing in class. It took like five or six minutes every day but that was like the best class I’ve had in college and there were like 200 people in it. Professors can care in a bigger class if they really want to, but I think it’s easier for them when they are in a smaller class.

Class Rigor

Professor Nate Vorwaller, a teacher of math, explained that he cared for students by making the classes incredibly challenging, though students might not perceive care by his doing so. “My class is tough. Life is tough. But I hope students really see that my making it tough is how I care” (Interview, 9/15/2014).

Chris shared “A few of my professors really want our grade stamp at the end of the semester to mean something. That’s what I came to college for; not for a grade but to actually learn and grow. A professor who equips me and prepares me well for my future displays ultimate care. I want class expectations to be high, and I want to walk out of class more prepared than when I walked in” (Interview, 9/10/2014).

Humor

Two students mentioned that they perceive care when a professor uses humor in class. Tommy explained “When [professors] respond to students with lightheartedness and humor it means a lot. A joke can go a long way in setting a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere in the room. I appreciate it and feel a closer relationship with professors
when they joke around a little bit” (Interview, 9/14/2014).

Angela also appreciated when professors displayed humor. After reading from her journal the words “Have fun and laugh,” she shared:

A caring teacher cracks jokes with students because she realizes that that helps create an equal atmosphere and implies that the professor doesn’t look down on you or think they are better than you. When they joke it means they are confident with themselves and don’t have to maintain some high and mighty position. (Interview, 9/15/2014).

**Conclusion**

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the purpose of this current study was to discover which behaviors by professors indicated perceived care to students, as indicated by student journal keeping and student and professor interview. This chapter has provided a description of these groups of behaviors, along with three factors that appeared in the research that influence perceived care.

The next chapter discusses these findings, suggestions for application of the research, and implications for further research.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

The current study was conducted with one basic question in mind: What behaviors, as exhibited by professors, indicate perceived care to college students? In answering this question data were collected from student and professor participants and organized into groups to describe these behaviors. These groups of responses were further analyzed in view of the literature and theoretical lens of perceived care in order to arrive at certain key findings.

This chapter will summarize these findings while viewing them through the theoretical lens of perceived care, connect them to the body of caring literature, and discuss implications for practice in college classrooms. This will then be followed by a comparison of this study to the pilot study. This chapter will conclude by discussing implications for further research.

Key Findings

Verbal Expressions of Care

As shown in this study, when professors express care verbally to their students they hear it, perceive care from those statements, and are more likely to perceive a caring climate in their classes when they hear them. Students repeatedly reported that they perceived care when professors stated that they cared, and that they were very favorable of such statements. When professors make these statements, students have a choice; they can view the statement as being sincere or attribute the statement to some other
motivation. Participants in this study connected expressions of care as coming from sincere motives, the expressions often led to them “feeling” care, and then perceived further behaviors of the professor as indications of their care.

Students did not find verbal expressions of care as awkward or inappropriate; each participant who commented on verbal expression of care labeled it as a positive experience. Participants also perceived verbal expressions of care as an investment of the time and concern needed to create a climate of care in class.

Professors noticed that expressions of care mattered to students, and reported that doing so bridged gaps in professor/student relations. Verbal expression of care, according to professors, set the stage for students to perceive other behaviors of the professor as caring.

Students reported that professors should not simply assume that students perceive their behaviors as caring. Combining other caring behaviors with the verbal expression of care helped students perceive other professor behaviors as caring.

Professors who plan to express care to students should do so verbally. Students also reported that they perceived care when professors wrote it in notes or expressed care through email.

As detailed in the literature review, the construct of immediacy, or when the teacher is perceived as approachable, is a related concept to this group of caring behaviors; immediacy research labels the verbal qualities of immediacy as verbal immediacy (Rocca, 2004). Both verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors are positively correlated with the likelihood that students will rate the course as enjoyable, and that they
enjoy being in the presence of the teacher (Moore et al., 1996). Valenzuela (1999) expressed the importance of verbalizing care in her landmark study, and suggested that when teachers do so, they begin a process that leads to building and strengthening the types of relation where students feel safe, nurtured, and capable.

Noddings (1992) explained that expressing care verbally connects people through language, and opens a pathway to dialogue between teacher and student. Communicating care verbally to others was one of Tarlow’s (1996) eight characteristics of expressing care.

A professor who seeks for her students to perceive care from her should actively and clearly express that her students. Professor Thurber, after being asked to share suggestions on how to express care verbally to college students, explained that it should be clearly and distinctly. He explained, “In your fear to not seem creepy or to seem to forward, you may veil your intent in language so effectively that kids don’t understand what you are trying to say. Tell them straight out that you care, that you really wish for them to succeed, and that you have their best interests at heart. Don’t make your care difficult to detect” (Interview, 9/12/2014).

Nonverbal Expressions of Care

Verbal expression of care is clearly a way to increased perceived care for college students, but they also perceive care in nonverbal expressions as well. To students, unverbalized forms of communication are noticed, internalized, and interpreted as messages indicating perceived care. Unspoken attitudes and behaviors are meaningful to them, and clearly raise the level of perceived care in college classrooms.
Participants record the importance of a professor smiling at students while they teach. Smiling communicates happiness to students; a happiness of enjoying the occupation of teaching, a happiness of being in the presence of students, and enjoyment of professor-student interaction and relationship. A facial expression that displays a smile when a professor makes eye contact with a student in and out of class communicates care to them. Students interpret smiling as a sign that their teacher cares for them.

Other nonverbal behaviors also prompt perceived care in students. Eye contact also communicates and increases perceived care. Eye contact between professor and student suggests excitement and enthusiasm on the part of the professor about their relationship with the student. Eye contact communicates a desire to create appropriate relation with the student, and helps students feel that the professor doesn’t perceive himself as superior the student. Eye contact also suggests to students that their relation with teacher is a priority for the teacher; other objects including notes or other items in the room are not commanding the attention of the professor, the student is.

Combined together, smiling and eye contact form a powerful nonverbal behavior combination that when used together significantly impact perceived care for students. Perceived care is also enhanced by as simple a thing as voice inflection. Changes in tone and inflection provide a variety in verbal expression that communicates enthusiasm and an enjoyment of the professor/student interaction. Participants mentioned voice inflection in conjunction with nonverbal expressions of care, implying that care was perceived in how professors said things, not just what they said. Students are able to perceive care by emotion that passion that comes across in how a teacher speaks. When a
teacher speaks with emotion and passion, students perceive such feeling again as an indicator that they place great value on the interaction between teacher and student.

Other nonverbal expressions of care that impacted students included laughing, gesturing with hands, and a willingness to move from behind a pulpit or table and approach students.

All of these behaviors, as detailed by Linda, comprise a “look” that prompts perceived care (Interview, 9/14/2014). Professors seeking to increase perceived care in their class should make eye contact with their students. They should smile at them. They should include a variety a vocal tones when speaking to students and seek to change voice inflection. They should strive to communicate enthusiasm, emotion, and care through the way they speak. They should laugh, speak with their hands, and leave the safety of the lecturing pulpit and increase proximity to students.

These behaviors have often been labeled as nonverbal immediacy behaviors in the literature. Eye contact, voice inflection, stance, and gestures have been found to be correlated with a teacher being perceived as approachable (Galloway, 1976; Ramsey, 1979). Teven (2001) reported that these types of immediacy behaviors influenced perceived care by students.

“All of these types of things [nonverbal expressions of care] matter a whole lot more than you’d ever think. You can have two people say the exact same words, but the body language they use to communicate them can make all the difference in the world” reported Leigh (Interview, 9/10/2014).
Knowing Student Names

Students and professors report time and time again the importance of this action. It is interesting to note that for many participants it was not important for the professor to achieve a 100% knowledge of every name in the class; the effort to do so was enough for them to perceive that a professor valued the relationship with the students and attributed that effort to caring.

When a professor attempts to learn the names of students, they make an investment that is deemed as essential to the student in creating an appropriate and rewarding relationship between teacher and student. Like other caring behaviors, attempts to learn student names helped bridge relationship gaps and helped students be more inclined to attribute other behaviors as being motivated by care. For example, six participants mentioned that learning names was the necessary precursor for other requisite steps in building appropriate relations. When a professor knows their name, students are more likely to attribute warm, safe, and meaningful connotations to the classroom experience. They are more likely to be involved in class discussions, and are more likely to ask questions of their professor.

Participants mentioned that a college learning atmosphere can be an intimidating and unfriendly place. An increased academic rigor, being away from the nurturing relationships of family and friends, and added stresses of finances and developing social networks can at times be overwhelming to students. Though the expectation of a more professional, antiseptic classroom exists for these students, they value an appropriate, caring relation with teachers as much as they did in their previous educational
experiences. Because of the lack of supporting relationships, perceiving care from professors is incredibly meaningful to students. And these participants explain emphatically that attempting to know their names is absolutely fundamental to them in perceiving professor care.

Students value the professor knowledge of their names, and this action enriches their classroom experience. But students are also positively affected when a professor recognizes one of their students outside of class and can call them by name when they meet.

Several participants in this study not only mentioned that name knowledge positively influenced perceived care, they shared that this action was actually a prerequisite expectation of theirs. They deemed the efforts to know their names as a minimum standard for quality teaching for professors.

Class size of course creates barriers for professors who seek to know the names of their students. But the results of this study clarify that efforts to know the names of as many students as possible increased perceived care; the effort, not the accomplishment, is what influenced perceived care.

Professors reported that they enjoyed working at the process of learning student names, and shared strategies that effectively communicated care through name knowing even in large classes. “It’s a challenge for me, especially in my bigger classes, but I enjoy the challenge,” explained Professor Bryan (Interview, 9/12/2014). She explained a technique she used that had been successful for her concerning learning names in larger classes:
When I taught my first big class I was disappointed as I realized that there was no way I could memorize everyone’s names. There were over a hundred students in class. I had enjoyed the feelings of a warm and comfortable class with smaller classes, and wanted the same experience in this class. I struggled to think of a way to learn names, and actually tried a few mnemonic techniques before I realized I didn’t have to do it. I didn’t have to know everyone’s names. What I did was every time someone raised their hand to make a comment, or each time I called on someone to share something, I took ten or fifteen seconds to say “Please, what is your name?” I would repeat it and then say “Ok, what is your question?” Students told me how much that little thing meant to them. Just a couple of seconds each time there was a comment. Maybe a total of two or three minutes each class. I was able to memorize a lot of names that way, but of course not everybody. But the students appreciated that effort. It meant something to them, and because of that I think the class became warm and a lot friendlier. I think the students could tell that I cared for them because I did that.

The results of this study connect very strongly with caring theory as proposed by Noddings (1988) who included the knowing of student names as a vital component in her third activity set of conveying care to students.

Professors who learn student names create a climate of perceived care in their classes. Professors should remember that they do not have to accomplish it perfectly in order to communicate care to students. And in large classes, even little attempts by professors to know names of students matter to them and increase the perception that they care for their students. A little time and effort, as reported by Professor Johnson (Interview, 9/10/2014) really matter to students as they strive to learn student names.

**Effective Use of Office Hours**

Educational theory and practice dictate that when a teacher is able to have quality one-on-one time with a student, great educational benefits result. In a college classroom such opportunities for one-on-one instruction are severely limited by class size and time restrictions.
This being the case, it is not surprising that opportunities for this type of personal interaction are very meaningful to college students. During office hours, professors have the time to focus on students individually, help to resolve their questions and concerns, and to build stronger appropriate relationships; when professors do this, students perceive their behaviors as being prompted by care.

Professors in this study looked forward to office hours as a way to build caring relations. The recognized that office hours were a unique opportunity for them to help students succeed and feel comfortable with class material.

Several student participants pointed out that when professors attended interestedly to students during office hours, providing them meaningful time, responding to requests for help, that the experience was incredibly powerful in raising their perceptions of care. However, students pointed out that just spending the time was insufficient; indeed one-on-one time could be very detrimental if the professor acted uninterested and distracted during office hours.

It is of interest to note that professors and student participants made it very clear that only being available during office hours was not what increased perceived care. It was the way the professors chose to use this time; perceived care increased as professors used this time effectively to take interest in and extend help to the student.

The formula for increasing perceived care, therefore, consisted of a professor making themselves available for office hours, then carefully attending to students, enjoying the time spent with them, making eye contact with students, and utilizing the time get to know the student on a more personal level. Professors increase perceived care
during office hours if they are enthusiastic, excited, and display positive emotion to students during the time spent with them.

Use of phone calls and emails to communicate with students on a one-on-one basis are also very impactful positively upon perceived care. When professors invest time in these types of communication, personalize the messages they share, respond in a timely manner, and use the medium as a way to enhance professor/student relations, teachers can make great strides in raising perceived care in their students.

As evidenced in this study, students may be hesitant for a number of reasons to take advantage of office hour visits. Professors who go out of their way to notice students in need and invite them to office hours make a significant impact; this action communicates care powerfully to students.

Tarlow (1996) theorized that eight characteristics of caring existed, and that teachers could benefit by focusing on these eight categories of caring behaviors. One of these crucial eight characteristics was a willingness on the part of the teacher to spend time to be in the emotional and physical presence of a student. Effective use of office hours certainly falls into this category.

Effective use of office hours make a difference in how college students perceive care. Relationships are built as professors focus time on students, resolve their questions and concerns, provide encouragement, build confidence, and invest time in them.

A Climate or “Feeling” of Care in Class

The purpose of this study was to discover through journal keeping and interview those behaviors that increased perceived care among students in college classroom
settings. An unexpected outcome of this research was the frequency at which both student and professor participants described not an action, but a ‘feeling’ that existed in classrooms that prompted perceived care among students.

The emotional aspect of care is challenging to describe. What one person feels when care is present is not necessarily what another feels, and the reasons each is feeling that emotion could be completely different. But the fact remains that several participants felt and described this emotional aspect; what they felt was very real to them and was a crucial component of perceived care.

Many participants, in attempt to describe the feeling of perceived care, used words like comfort, warmth, friendliness, safety, goodness, kindness, patience, sincerity, and aura.

Some participants seemed reluctant to talk about the feeling aspect of perceived care. Perhaps their experience in academic settings that focused on measuring observable scientific data had trained them to be hesitant about discussing emotion and feeling in a research setting. Nonetheless, those who mentioned it made it clear that the emotion and feeling part of perceived care was something they sensed clearly, that some professors were able to create the feeling and others weren’t, and that this aspect of care was fundamental for them in perceiving care.

Feeling care, for one participant, was the sum total of other caring behaviors being exhibited by the professor. Jocelyn, after being asked to describe the feeling in more detail, explained:

I think the feeling I’m trying to describe probably exists because the professor is doing all of the other things right. He talks to you. He’s interested in you. He
wants to understand your life and what’s going with you. He teaches to us, because he understands us, and he helps us with all of our questions and problems. So the feeling of care is there because all of those other things there. When someone cares for you feel it. It’s the emotion you feel because of all the things that he does. (Interview, 9/12/2014)

Therefore, professors seeking to create a feeling of care in their classrooms should strive to display the caring behaviors as described in this study. The very perception of care might very well be the ‘feeling’ that Jocelyn and so many others are trying to describe.

In Tarlow’s (1996) study of caring behaviors, the sixth described characteristic is a “feeling of care.” Seventy-five percent of participants in Tarlow’s study mentioned that when they perceived care it was something they felt inside. According to Tarlow, feelings and sentiments are part of what comprises the motivation to extend care, and both parties, the teacher and the student, describe it as something that they feel. This study had similar findings.

**Building Appropriate Relations**

The most meaningful relationships in the lives of people are those relationships in which individuals know and understand each other. And in building appropriate caring relationships in college classrooms, time invested by professors in knowing and understanding their students pays great dividends. Students perceive care when their professors who ask questions about the lives of their students, show interest in activities, background, and hobbies of students, and generally seek to know them better.

According to participants, building appropriate relations occurs as professors talk about subjects other than classroom topics with them. These relations are also
strengthened as professors share information about themselves with students. Students perceive care from their professors when they attempt to come to know their students as people, not just as students.

Several participants in this study made it clear that large investments of time weren’t necessary for this caring action to be effective. They did not expect complete interviews or questionnaires. One or two questions were often all that was needed for students to perceive that professors care.

The timing of the attempts to know students better also did not seem to matter. Professors could ask students to share about themselves in class. Discussions that occurred before or after class were also prime opportunities for professors to seek to know their students on a deeper level. Professors could also ask these questions of students through email correspondence.

Participants shared many examples of questions professors could ask to prompt perceived care. Questions about hobbies, interests, majors, roommates, family, hometowns, opinions on current issues, dating, and feelings and attitudes about the class were all effective. Generic open-ended prompts such as “Tell me a little about yourself” were equally effective.

Professors interviewed in this study explained how knowledge of student’s lives and concerns had provided them meaningful ways to extend care towards students. They made it clear that sincerity was essential; questions asked flippantly or insincerely failed to communicate care. Professors explained that utilizing active listening techniques while students shared information about themselves was an important part of the process.
Once a professor knew and understood information about their students, it was beneficial for them to connect classroom lectures and activities to this knowledge. Taking the time to prepare lessons and activities to specifically apply to student’s lives was strongly connected to students perceiving care from their professor.

Students explained that mutual respect is a natural product of the strengthening of appropriate relations. Such respect makes the classroom experience much more enjoyable for students and professors. Students explained that they perceived care when this respect, born of appropriate relationship building, existed in class.

Students and professors reported that when professors asked the types of questions that helped them know their students better, professors were much more likely to respond to student questions and needs positively.

Engrossment in student welfare, including learning their interests and concerns, is a fundamental way to express care (Smith & Emigh, 2005). Research has also shown the positive outcomes that result when professors communicate with students outside the boundaries of class (Jaasma & Koper, 1999). Valenzuela (1999) found that attempts by teachers to learn and understand about the families of students, as well as seeking for ways to connect with student interests and hobbies helped students feel cared for. Noddings (1988) explained that confirmation of caring relationships occurred when teachers build appropriate relations with students through consistent effort and sincerity.

The results of this study validate this previous research and reinforce the positive benefits that result when professors seek to sincerely build and strengthen appropriate relationships.
Responding to Student Questions and Concerns

Results of this study demonstrate that students perceive care when their professors take the time to respond to the questions and concerns they struggle with while in their class. Care is shown, as perceived by the participants, when professors are actively interested in student attitudes about what they are studying and how they are performing. Professors attempting to display care should question students, seek out those who are struggling, be perceptive to verbal and nonverbal cues given by students in class, and reach out via email or in person to offer students help.

When students have questions in class, professors can increase perceived care by taking the time to listen to them carefully, and respond to them with kindness and thoughtfulness, avoiding negative and condescending dialogue. Students indicated that they appreciated when a professor was willing to let a student question take the lesson in a different direction than the professor had originally planned. Professors should welcome student questions, answer them with empathy and understanding, be flexible and adapt lecture structure if needed and follow-up with students if necessary; doing so positively impacts perceived care.

Students explained that professors didn’t need to know the answer to every question that occurred in class. They appreciated when a professor would explain that he did not have the answer, but assured them that they would find out. Professors who took time to research student questions impressed students; they appreciated the time and effort involved and felt cared for.

Professors, during the interviews in this study, agreed that they prompted
perceived care by the way they dealt with student questions and concerns. These professors displayed empathy for students and the struggles they face in college, and these empathetic feelings, coupled with their expressions of caring for students, prompted them to invest considerable time and effort in responding to student questions and concerns. They noticed that students performed better in class when this happened, and felt that their overall satisfaction with the course increased.

Professors can damage student/teacher relationships if they are unduly rigorous or inflexible. Though no professor in this study advocated complete leniency, they did speak clearly about the importance of adapting, changing, altering, adjusting, and modifying in order to accommodate student needs and concerns.

Students explained that a positive, warm, and caring attitude displayed by professors when they listened to and dealt with student needs and concerns was appreciated, and prompted perceived care.

Students and professors explained that when professors cared enough to respond to student questions, concerns, and needs and adapt accordingly was connected to perceived care, but also a host of other positive educational outcomes. Students enjoyed class more, felt more motivated to attend and succeed in the course, felt more satisfaction in the course, felt that a stronger appropriate relationship existed between professor and student, and a safe, warm, comfortable learning environment existed in the classroom.

The body of caring research supports these findings. The more a teacher cares and responds to student concerns the more likely a student is to attend and care about how they do in class (Teven & McCroskey, 1997). One important aspect of caring, as defined
by Oliner and Oliner (1995), is for the teacher to invest whole heartedly in a students’ welfare and success, and do whatever is necessary to help them succeed. The second of Tarlow’s (1996) eight caring characteristics is to be completely invested in the welfare and success of students. Kohn (1991) discussed the importance of including students in decision making processes in class, and that this inclusion and a willingness on behalf of the teacher to adjust to student input was important to perceived care. Care has been defined as a teacher becoming completely immersed in another’s welfare (Oliner & Oliner, 1995).

Wentzel (1997) proposed that if a teacher truly cares for her students, she will seek out those who need help and to whatever is necessary to increase their learning and understanding of class topics. When student problems and concerns arise, care is perceived when a teacher strives to be understanding and is responsive to student needs, and displays empathy (McCroskey, 1992).

This aspect of perceived care may be best described by Noddings (1992). She theorized that care is best displayed by a motivational shift by educators; they cease to place their own needs and concerns as their highest priority and instead place the needs and concerns of the students first. Indeed, as Susan explained, “Professors really care when they will go to that extent to help you with your questions and concerns” (Interview, 9/13/2014).

**Engaging and Applicable Lectures**

As shown above, students perceive care when professors listen to and respond to student questions and concerns. Caring professors strive to understand their students and
adjust class accordingly.

In a similar manner, students perceive care when professors display effort in class to make classroom time enjoyable, engaging, and applicable to students. The effort professors make to add variety and applicability to lectures prompts perceived care.

Based on student responses, students can sense and differentiate between lectures that are lifeless, lacking in energy and enthusiasm, and irrelevant to students and those that have been carefully and thoughtfully planned. They prefer lectures that contain activities that invite participation and engagement, and have been planned to include segments that connect with students’ lives.

Students notice the time and effort involved in making classroom lectures engaging. That time spent and effort made is what enhances perceived care for them. They perceive that student enjoyment of the class is a priority to professors. They feel that the professor wants them to be an active part of the class, desires for them to learn as much as possible, and wants to teach in a way that accommodates various learning styles of students. And they perceive care when this occurs.

Professors desiring to prompt perceived care by planning and delivering engaging and applicable lectures should follow several recommendations revealed in this study. They should seek to know and understand their students. They should strive to connect with student interests, majors, and hobbies with lectures and classroom activities. Students noticed and appreciated when professors took the time to build and entire section of a lesson to specifically apply to one or several students’ lives or interests.

Professors should also use object lessons and classroom discussion effectively.
They should plan interest grabbers, and encourage class participation and discussion. The sharing of personal experiences and stories by professors was also mentioned by students as great ways to make lectures more engaging. Attempts should also be made to adjust presentation methods to accommodate different learning styles that may exist in class. “Stand-and-deliver” methods of teaching fail to prompt perceived care among students.

Professors who seek to increase perceived care also monitor their class while they are teaching and make adjustments if students seem disengaged. They notice if students seem bored and disinterested, and do what is necessary to bring them back and engage them in the lesson.

Research supports the caring aspect of engaging and applicable lessons. Caring is perceived in how a teacher teaches; they teach in a “special” way that reaches and engages students, they make class interesting, and assure that students are not bored (Wentzel, 1997). Care is often perceived when class in engaging and fun (Rogers & Webb, 1991).

**Additional Caring Behaviors**

Other caring behaviors were mentioned in the study, though not with the frequency of the above examined examples. These factors also deserve discussion. Class size was mentioned by several participants as a factor influencing their ability to perceive care. Participants consistently mentioned that care was easier to perceive in smaller classes. One clear way to increase students’ ability to perceive care, therefore, is for administration in colleges and universities to make possible steps to decrease class size.
Class size, of course, is a factor that is beyond student and professor control to influence. The behaviors mentioned in this study can still be modified and modeled however, despite the class size, to maximize the perception of care in their classrooms.

**Comparisons with Pilot Study**

In a pilot study that was conducted in order to gather preliminary data to inform the current study, four students at a major university were invited to document their thoughts and perceptions about caring by their professors, and were asked to pay particular attention to what caring behaviors their professors took. As a result of the qualitative analysis, five categories of caring behaviors were discovered: efforts by professors to know student names, efforts to display care and concern during office hours, efforts in knowing and understanding students, efforts to create interesting and applicable lessons, and efforts to address student concerns during class.

An objective of the current study was to discover if the results would reinforce the findings of the pilot study and at the same time produce other data that would evidence additional groups of behaviors that influenced perceived care.

Each of the five categories of caring that were discovered in the pilot study were also found in the current study, and additional insights into how each of the five influenced perceived care were revealed, as detailed above.

Three additional groups of caring behaviors appeared in the current study: Verbal expressions of care, nonverbal expressions of care, and the existence of a climate or ‘feeling of care.’ In addition, the use of humor, class size, and class rigor were found to
influence perceived care, though these three were not mentioned with the frequency of the other eight groups.

**Implications for Practice in University Settings**

Several applications for the implementation of the results of this study are evident.

First, a discussion of a pedagogy of caring should enter into discussions of effective college teaching, and the focus of that discussion should entail how to prompt the practice of the caring behaviors mentioned in this study by professors.

In addition, a measure of these caring behaviors should be included then considered in the tenure granting process for professors. Among the several factors considered when granting tenure, it is clear that the ability to exhibit these behaviors and increase perceived care in their classrooms is an important component of the overall ability of a professor to succeed.

Finally, the ability for a department or university as a whole to receive accreditation should include perceived care as an evaluating factor.

**Implications for Further Research**

The eight groups of behaviors described in this study were shown through qualitative analysis to positively impact college students’ perception of care by their professors. Several questions naturally arise from the conclusions of this study that invite further inquiry and research.
First, how powerfully does each of these eight factors impact perceived care? A research study that seeks to know, quantitatively, the strength of the correlation between each of the behaviors and if a teacher is perceived as caring would provide important data as to which behaviors a professor should concentrate on when attempting to increase perceived care in their classrooms. The eight behaviors described in this study could be broken down in to descriptors of that action, placed in a scale with an appropriately designed Likert-type scale asking students to rate their professors on displaying the caring behaviors, and then the scores from the scale could be tested for correlation with the extent to which the professor is perceived to be caring.

In addition, the group of behaviors participants described as the ability to ‘feel’ care by professors warrants additional study. Is the feeling being described by participants simply perception of comfort, safety, and wellbeing that comes from being in the presence of an approachable and caring adult? Is the “feeling” of care the sum result of professors effectively displaying caring behaviors? Do all students “feel” the presence of care in the same way, and how do they describe it? What further details could research provide about the description, presence of, and results of this feeling of care being present in class?

The knowledge base concerning the other groups of learning behaviors would also benefit from further research. For example:

1. What phraseology best communicates verbal care to college students?
2. Which nonverbal caring behaviors are most highly correlated with perceived care in college classrooms?
3. Which behaviors displayed during office hours have the highest affect in raising perceived care?

4. Which questions can professors ask to help college students perceive care as they strive to build stronger appropriate relation with them?

5. What lesson activities best communicate care to college students?

6. Which approaches to answering college student questions and concerns is most strongly correlated with perceived care?

7. What methodology concerning knowing of college student names best lends itself to increasing perceived care in class?

These questions, when researched, will add valuable data to the construct of perceived care as experienced by college students, and provide additional insight in helping professors fashion effective patterns of displaying care to their students.

**Conclusion to This Study**

As stated at the beginning of the current study, a focused study on which caring behaviors are most helpful in increasing perceived care among college students is a needed piece in the caring literature. Though caring research has yielded meaningful results when applied to elementary and secondary classrooms, relatively little has been done inside of college classrooms, despite the fact that college students care a great deal if their professors care about them (Meyers, 2009). The literature also clearly showed that caring is linked to motivation for students attend and perform well in their classes.

This study has provided data and analysis considering eight themes of caring
behaviors that significantly impacted perceived care, as revealed by student and professor participants, have emerged from this study. This analysis has detailed these key findings in a qualitative format that provides rich description and insight, including personal experiences and opinions from participants about their thoughts and feelings regarding perceived care. Participants also mentioned repeatedly that perceiving care from their professors helped them feel more motivated to attend and succeed in class; these connections however were not the purpose of this study and were not highlighted as such. However, studying these connections would be a relevant and meaningful area for further research.

Furthermore, this study provides relevant suggestions to professors teaching in college settings for applying the data provided into their practice. These suggestions, when followed, have the potential to increase students’ perceptions that their professor cares for them.

This study will conclude with a description of the phenomenon of perceived care and those behaviors that influence it in college classrooms.

As evidenced in this study, caring matters to college students. As described by student and professor participants, college students are motivated to succeed, are more likely to attend, and feel more satisfaction in classes where they perceive that their professors care for them. Current caring research supports these findings.

Students perceive care when their professor tells them that they care. Verbalizing this fact to students is an action that they appreciate. They listen to these statements, and are likely to attribute good intent and well-meaning when professors say them.
Students also pick up on nonverbal forms of communication. They perceive care when professors smile at them, make eye contact with them, and vary the tone of voice in which they speak to students. Facial expressions, to students, are powerful indicators of perceived care.

Students appreciate when professors make attempts to know them by name. They consider this effort an investment in an appropriate relationship, and these efforts prompt perceived care to them. It is interesting to note that professors do not need to successfully know every name in class. It is the effort to attempt to learn names that indicate to students that professors care.

Students perceive care when their professors make appropriate attempts to learn more about them on a personal level. When professors seek to know information about student hobbies and interests, families, friends, majors, and concerns, they perceive such seeking as a sign that the professor cares. Students and professors indicate many positive outcomes when this appropriate relation, which implies perceived care, exists in class.

Students describe a feeling of perceived care. They indicate that they can actually feel an emotional aspect from their professors, which students attribute to the professor caring about them. This feeling, which students describe as emanating from the professor and being controlled by her, is an important and fundamental aspect of perceived care. Many participants explain that other caring behaviors, without the presence of the feeling of care, are insignificant or labeled as insincere.

Students describe effective use of office hours as an important factor that enhances perceived care for them. They value the one-on-one time that professors spend
with them, especially when professors attend to them with their full interest and utilize this time to guide and help.

Students perceive care when their professors listen to, attempt to understand, and then strive to make adjustments in class for student problems and concerns. Students also perceive care when their professors expend effort to make class time engaging and applicable to students. They appreciate attempts by professors to connect class topics to meaningful events and concerns in their lives. When professors care about how the students are enjoying and engaged in class, and make every attempt to assure these two experiences, students perceive that their professors care for them.

When these eight factors are effectively employed in college classroom settings, students perceive care and experience the positive educational outcomes as detailed above. Further research invites exploration of these eight categories, and application of this study and future research has the potential to add great benefit to the practice of professors and the experience of students in college classroom settings.
REFERENCES


APPENDICES
Appendix A

Bracketing Interview
BRACKETING INTERVIEW

1. Why did you pick this phenomenon to study?

I chose to study the aspect of caring because early on in my doctoral studies, I did some serious introspection about those factors that I felt influenced learning the most. I monitored students in my own classroom, and monitored what I thought as I engaged in my classes at the university. I reflected on teachers and classes that had had the greatest impact upon me. I came to the realization that teachers that had taken a personal interest in me and displayed care towards me as an individual had helped me the most. The classes those teachers taught were of the most interest to me. I did better in those classes. And I retained the information much longer and applied it more often.

I became convinced after doing initial reviews of the caring literature that this aspect perhaps had a greater influence on learning than any other. I wanted to know why, and I wanted to know why I felt that caring less in my college classes. In addition, I wanted to know what college students and professors thought about the importance of caring, and immediately wanted to know what caring behaviors made the most difference to college students.

2. What has been your experience with the phenomenon?

Early in my teaching career I realized that I tried to teach like the teachers who had influenced me most in my life. Looking back, I realize now that caring for students was what these ‘super’ teachers had in common, and I tried to emulate it. I felt that my efforts to display care for my students in the classroom made a huge difference to them, both in positive educational outcomes but also in our mutual enjoyment of the course. To sum things up, I recognized that the most influential teachers in my life cared for me, and I seemed to be most effective in my own teaching when I displayed care to my students.

3. What biases do you bring to the study as a researcher?

I recognize that the investment I have put into my research, in addition to the strong feelings I had before I even started, has imbued me with some bias about the importance of care and its impact in the college classroom. I recognize that there are some students, and teachers, who may not place the importance that I do on the importance of care. I also recognize that caring, when put to empirical research, may not have the impact that I believe it does. I will honestly try to
research with an objective eye and look to draw conclusions that do not reflect my personal bias.

4. **What do you think you will find in this study?**

I believe that the study will reinforce what I discovered in my pilot study; college students care if their professors care about them. In addition, I expect that the five caring behaviors detailed in the pilot study will be strongly reinforced. In addition, I expect that two to three other caring behaviors will be found to be strongly impactful upon students perceiving that their teachers care about them. I am excited to see what these will be.

I am also looking forward to the insight of professors about care and caring behaviors. I expect that professors will agree that knowing names and office hours are indeed great ways to show they care. I also expect wonderful insight into caring behaviors they have attempted at the post-secondary level that I have not yet considered.
Appendix B

Interview Protocol
PROFESSOR INTERVIEWS

Today I will be conducting an interview with you about your teaching philosophy and practice. The data I gather will provide important insight on an educational issue. Before we begin, may I ask you a couple of questions?

1. How long have you taught at the university level?
2. What do you enjoy most about teaching?
3. What aspects of teaching at this level are the most challenging?
4. What is your philosophy towards teaching?
5. Do you have any questions or concerns about the observation I will be performing?
6. Is it important for your students to perceive that you care about them? Will you please explain your answer?
7. In your opinion, what behaviors can a professor show that would increase students’ perception that their professors care about them?
8. What things must exist in a college classroom for the class environment to be considered ‘caring?’
9. Do you have any experiences that may shed light on the aspect of care in the classes you have taught?

STUDENT INTERVIEWS

I appreciate this opportunity to discuss your experiences in your classes. Please feel free to share all of your thoughts and feelings in regard to the following questions:

1. Would you share with me if you agree or disagree with the following statement: It matters if a professor cares for her students.
2. Would you share with me your feelings as to why you agree or disagree?
3. If a professor were to care for her students, how would you know?
4. Do you perceive that your current professors care for their students? Can you please explain to me why you feel this way?
5. What specifically can a professor best do to communicate that he or she cares about you as a student?
6. What behaviors from your professors have most powerfully communicated care to you?
7. In your journal, would you be willing to please document your answers to the following questions:
   a. In what ways does a caring environment in your classroom, or lack of a caring environment in your classroom, impact your role as a student?
   b. Do you feel that his professor cares for you? What has this professor done or not done that makes you feel that way?
   c. In what ways does this professor attempt to display care towards her students?
   d. What things does the professor do that shows she has good intentions and means well for students?
   e. Does this classroom feel like it has a caring atmosphere? What factors influence your perception in this regard?
Appendix C

External Audit
EXTERNAL AUDIT

I hereby attest that this study meets the validity requirements for qualitative inquiry. I have performed an external audit examining the audit trail which consists of raw data, analyzed data, records of study processes, and theoretical framework. In my opinion the researcher has followed prescribed and recognized qualitative methodology for establishing trustworthiness.

Joseph Ribera, M.Ed
Curriculum Designer
School Improvement Network
Appendix D

Taxonomic Analytic Scheme
## Taxonomic Analytic Scheme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selections from Participant Interviews (Jocelyn)</th>
<th>Groups of Caring Actions</th>
<th>Key Findings</th>
<th>Research Sub-Questions</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teachers who care teach with effort, they teach with emotion. That emotion comes through the way they talk, whether they change their voice tone.</td>
<td>Effective Use of Office Hours</td>
<td>Response to Student Questions and Concerns</td>
<td>What about eye contact influences perceived care?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professors should tell you, they care. There's feeling and concern in the words they say, but it's more than that. It's how they say it. There's a look a professor has when they care about you and the subject and wants you to succeed.</td>
<td>Non-Verbal Expressions of Care</td>
<td>Students perceive non-verbal care when professors use hand gestures and actions</td>
<td>What voice qualities prompt perceived care in students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You can feel it when the professor cares for you. Well, it's just in the way they interact with the class. You know, you can tell when someone cares about you. It's the way they talk to you, the look they have in their eyes, and the way they handle themselves around you.</td>
<td>Verbal Expressions of Care</td>
<td>Students perceive non-verbal care when professors make appropriate eye contact</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It's great when a professor hears you, understands your problem, and then does everything in their power to help you out, and care you do well, understand and help us.</td>
<td>Attempt to Build Appropriate Relation</td>
<td>Students perceive non-verbal care when professors show empathy and support in their presence</td>
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<td>I think the feeling I'm trying to describe probably exists because the professor is doing all of the other things right. He talks to you. He's interested in you. He wants to understand your life and what's going with you. He reaches to us. Because he understands us, and he helps us with all of our questions and problems. So the feeling of care is there because all of those other things are there. When someone cares for you feel it. It's the emotion you feel because of all the things that he does.</td>
<td>Knowing Student Names</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Engaging and Applicable Lessons</td>
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<td>A &quot;Feeling&quot; of Care</td>
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<td>Use of Humor in Class</td>
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<td>Effects of Class Size</td>
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CURRICULUM VITAE

ANDREW SHAYNE LARSEN

1. Academic Degrees

Ph.D. Utah State University, Curriculum and Instruction, 2015

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2. Professional Experience

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1995-2000 Principal, Cokeville LDS Seminary

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2005-2010 Member, Area Training Council, Planning, coordinating staff development activities for 70 teachers across Northern Utah.