

What Matters Most? Gen Z Preferences for Faculty-Student Rapport

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ABSTRACT

Generational diversity has often posed challenges for the long-established system of higher education, entrenched in tradition, honoring long-standing norm and ritual. Balancing the conventions of an esteemed and beloved institution with the changing needs of today's students has posed uncomfortable challenges for many of the academy. As colleges and universities continue to enroll students of Generation Z, identifying generational differences that impact student connections, motivations, commitment, and persistence is an imperative research endeavor. This basic qualitative study aimed to expand the existing research on knowledge of Generation Z preferences for faculty-student rapport. This research examined the perceptions and preferences of Generation Z students' classroom experiences related to instructor-student rapport, faculty caring, and both classroom and faculty communication. Data were collected in two study phases through both diary entries and semi-structured interviews. Student research participants were enrolled in an introductory communication studies courses at a southeastern public Research I institution. Findings from the study were examined through the lens of Mottet's Rhetorical and Relational Goal Theory. Significant themes throughout findings include rapport and faculty communication, rapport and rhetorical behaviors, and rapport and environment with the addition of a fourth theme identified in phase 2 findings: barriers to rapport and subsequent impacts on the student and classroom experience. A cross-analysis of both phases of data indicated the significance of six categories of findings including open, respectful communication, positive communication, student engagement, faculty interest in student lives, demonstrated compassion, and helpful,

detailed faculty feedback. The study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of Gen Z student classroom needs and provides specific research on the preferences of Generation Z students as members of the higher education community.

Keywords: Generation Z, Gen Z, instructor-student rapport, faculty-student rapport, rapport and faculty communication, rapport and rhetorical behaviors

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Generational diversity has often posed challenges for the long-established system of higher education, entrenched in tradition, honoring long-standing norm and ritual. Balancing the conventions of an esteemed and beloved institution with the changing needs of today's students has posed uncomfortable challenges for many of the academy. Born between 1995 and 2010 (Chicca & Shellenbarger, 2018; Loveland, 2017; Seemiller et al., 2020; Wright & Nichols, 2021), Generation Z established an overwhelming presence on college and university campuses throughout the country (Seemiller & Clayton, 2019) and is more diverse than any previous generation (Chicca & Shellenbarger, 2018; Giunta, 2017; Parker & Igielknik, 2020; Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Turner, 2015; Wright & Nichols, 2021). The sheer size of Gen Z has commanded attention, as the group represents a significant faction of the populace, comprising roughly 24% of the U.S. population (Chicca & Shellenbarger, 2018). Researchers have contended that the shifting face of higher education is a call to educators to adapt processes, programs, approaches, and curricula to align more closely with the motivations, characteristics, and learning preferences of Generation Z (Chicca & Shellenbarger, 2018; Frisby et al., 2017; Giunta, 2017; Han & Rideout, 2022; Huddy, 2015; Kim & Lundberg, 2016; Kroeper et al., 2022; Loveland, 2017; Mohr & Mohr, 2017; Moore, 2022; Rickes, 2016; Seemiller & Clayton, 2019; Seemiller et al., 2020; Tinto, 2017; Whitten et al., 2020; Wright & Nichols, 2021).

Scholars have asserted that the university's model of yesterday is not working (Wright & Nichols, 2021), which has posed a challenge to tenured faculty that long ago determined their teaching style, methods, and approach to classroom management. Generational shifts posed even more complicated challenges in the areas of engagement and retention, as many tendencies of new undergraduates were incongruent with those of the faculty teaching their courses (Miller & Mills, 2019). Giray (2022) asserted that the needs, expectations, and interests of Generation Z students were distinct from previous generations, requiring new methods of engagement and connection. Mohr and Mohr (2017) recognized that "meeting students where they are may not always be easy or comfortable" (p. 93). The unique beliefs, attitudes, social norms, and behaviors that Generation Z brought to the higher education landscape will impact education and practice for many years to come (Chicca & Shellenbarger, 2018).

In this chapter, I establish the problem compelling this study and explore the purpose of the research, the driving research questions, and the significance of the inquiry and investigation of Generation Z student preferences for faculty-student rapport. I begin with the establishment of the problem that necessitates further study and investigation.

Statement of the Problem

The critical impact of faculty encouragement and investment on Gen Z's student success has been well-established throughout literature (Han & Rideout, 2022; Huddy, 2015; Kim & Lundberg, 2016; Kroeper et al., 2022; Loveland, 2017; Mazer, 2017; Mohr & Mohr, 2017; Moore, 2022; Seemiller et al., 2020; Tinto, 2017; Whitten et al., 2020). Positive faculty-student interaction and perceptions of faculty support increased levels of classroom engagement for the Gen Z student, encouraged student academic achievement,

and fostered cognitive skill development (Buskirk-Cohen & Plants, 2019; Han & Rideout, 2022; Kim & Lundberg, 2016; Kroeper et al., 2022). Gen Z's perceived faculty understanding encouraged classroom comfort and students' sense of belonging, empowered student learning and development and encouraged student persistence (Han & Rideout, 2022; Kim & Lundberg, 2016; Miller et al., 2019; Moore, 2022; Pasquale & Pickerd, 2022; Whitten et al., 2020). The attitudes and values of faculty had a direct and profound impact (whether positive or negative) on classroom environment, messaging, and pedagogies that shaped the way that today's students engaged in learning (Frey & Lane, 2021; Kaufmann, 2020; Tinto, 2017; Walker & Gleaves, 2016). The considerable influence of faculty and the classroom experience in the narrative of Gen Z's overall student success denoted a necessity for research on how strong faculty-student relationships were created and what factors Gen Z students identified as important to the establishment of positive faculty-student rapport in the classroom.

The idea that different instructor behaviors serve different functions, impacting students in different ways is not novel, but reflection on the power of instructor choices and the impact of those choices on today's learners laid the groundwork for researchers to examine the complexities of classroom communication more carefully (Frisby & Housley Gaffney, 2015; Huddy, 2015; Kim & Lundberg, 2016; Kroeper et al., 2022; Pasquale & Pickerd, 2022) as it related to the needs of Generation Z students. Seemiller et al. (2020) noted that today's students valued professors who expressed a genuine enjoyment in teaching and were further energized by instructors' expressed excitement. Instructors who were passionate and communicated enthusiasm helped Gen Z students to enjoy the

process of learning (Seemiller et. al, 2020). Faculty were powerful actors in the classroom whose praise and encouragement could convey belief in a growth mindset, communicating that students were capable of growth, learning, and academic success (Kroeper et al., 2022). As noted above, the notion that instructor behaviors served different functions for Gen Z students laid the foundation for researchers to rethink the complexities of classroom communication (Frey & Lane, 2021; Kroeper et al., 2022; Mazer, 2017; Moore, 2022). To support and inform pedagogy and constructively adapt training on teaching and learning, literature confirmed the importance of a greater developed understanding of this generational cohort in various aspects of the higher education journey (Chicca & Shellenbarger, 2018; Frisby et al., 2017; Giunta, 2017; Han & Rideout, 2022; Huddy, 2015; Kim & Lundberg, 2016; Kroeper et al., 2022; Loveland, 2017; Mohr & Mohr, 2017; Moore, 2022; Rickes, 2016; Seemiller & Clayton, 2019; Seemiller et al., 2020; Tinto, 2017; Whitten et al., 2020; Wright & Nichols, 2021).

While student engagement has been explored in numerous research facets, and student generational differences continue to be examined, authors articulated that academic research related to the needs and expectations of Generation Z students was insufficient (Chicca & Shellenbarger, 2018; Giunta, 2017; Miller & Mills, 2019; Wright & Nichols, 2021). Colleges and universities did not have definitive research on the specific needs of Generation Z students in their classrooms and could not, therefore, authoritatively determine that they were engaging, connecting with, and meeting the classroom needs of this generation of students. As higher learning institutions across the country place a renewed focus on student success and retention, they would be wise to

continue to invest in an exploration of how faculty impact the student experience (Han & Rideout, 2022; Kim & Lundberg, 2016; Kroeper et al., 2022; Miller & Mills, 2019; Mohr & Mohr, 2017; Moore, 2022; Tinto, 2017; Whitten et al., 2020). Literature has indicated that early alert systems, tutoring, and other support mechanisms were important, but were not sufficient for success if in-class engagement did not occur (Miller & Mills, 2019; Tinto, 2017). Faculty must consider generational differences, work to learn more about the needs and values of students, and invest effort to teach, support, and understand the generation of learners in today's university classroom (Han & Rideout, 2022; Kim & Lundberg, 2016; Mohr & Mohr, 2017; Whitten et al., 2020). Identifying which generational differences had the most profound impact on student connections, motivations, commitment, and persistence was an important step and imperative research need.

It was important that higher education faculty look at in-class practices (Miller & Mills, 2019) to encourage engagement and motivation to learn, and further explore the critical aspects of instructor-student rapport (Han & Rideout, 2022; Huddy, 2015; Kim & Lundberg, 2016; Moore, 2022; Pasquale & Pickerd, 2022; Seemiller et al., 2020; Tatum, 2021; Whitten et al., 2020). Literature has confirmed that constructs of rapport included a mutual, trusting bond that included enjoyable interactions and a personal connection (Frisby & Housley Gaffney, 2015). Research indicated that Generation Z preferred instructors who were relatable, personable, and respectful of students, and were willing to share personal aspects of their life with their classes (Seemiller et. al, 2020). Trust was established as a preferred trait of those in leadership, and faculty who demonstrated

emotional vulnerability, helping to establish a trusting classroom environment, encouraged stronger faculty-student rapport with today's students (Huddy, 2015; Pasquale & Pickerd, 2022). Studies also suggested that rapport might play a critical factor in learning (Frisby & Housley Gaffney, 2015; Kim & Lundberg, 2016), which established a clear necessity for further research in this area. The classroom climate established by an instructor helped students to feel more comfortable asking questions and participating in discussions (Han & Rideout, 2022). Connections between the community established in a learning environment and the learning that occurred have been firmly established (Pasquale & Pickerd, 2022). Gen Z students who interacted more frequently with faculty developed a stronger sense of belonging which naturally facilitated classroom engagement and a sense of community (Kim & Lundberg, 2016; Moore, 2022). Authors have confirmed that as today's students, "enter the classroom with evolving social and psychological needs, explorations of instructor-student rapport will remain relevant and vital for the field of instructional communication" (Tatum, 2021, p. 247).

Research has indicated that effective teaching, built on a core of caring, was an important factor for Gen Z students, and should be a central priority for student success work on higher education campuses (Buskirk-Cohen & Plants, 2019; Cameron & Pagnattaro, 2017; Goldman et al., 2017; Han & Rideout, 2022; Huddy, 2015; Mazer, 2017; Miller & Mills, 2019; Moore, 2022; Rickes, 2016; Walker & Gleaves, 2016; Whitten et al., 2020). Rickes (2016) affirmed that the presence of caring professors was one of the top three factors considered by Gen Z students when selecting a college. Also

widely noted, positive learning experiences in the college and university classroom were impacted by faculty efforts to communicate care (Goldman et al., 2017; Miller & Mills, 2019; Walker & Gleaves, 2016). Gen Z students valued relatability and approachability in their professors and appreciated faculty who fostered human connection (Cameron & Pagnattaro, 2017; Miller & Mills, 2019). Confirmation from a faculty member who demonstrated interest in a student and their perspectives was associated with enjoyable classroom interactions and a feeling of personal connection by Gen Z students (Tatum, 2021; Walker & Gleaves, 2016). Beyond general rapport with faculty, an important predictor of academic achievement in first-year Gen Z students was the presence of supporting and caring faculty members (Han & Rideout, 2022). Astin (1993) noted the mere perception of availability and concern could support student persistence, which demonstrated the far-reaching impact of faculty care on today's student experience. Studies also sustained the concept that greater emotional support led Gen Z students to greater emotional and cognitive interest, and further classroom engagement (Mazer, 2017). An exploration of the impact and reach of faculty care on Gen Z students provided a more thorough understanding of what was identified as care by today's student and what factors Gen Z students identified as important to building strong faculty-student rapport.

The power of the classroom experience goes far beyond faculty expertise and student preparation. Researchers have identified that student perceptions of both faculty care and faculty-student rapport had a significant impact on the motivation, persistence, and success of Gen Z students (Chittum et al., 2017; Whitten et al., 2020). A 2016 study

identified connections between frequent interactions with faculty and a greater sense of belonging and academic self-challenge, both of which were linked to cognitive skills development – a powerful indication of the importance of faculty-student rapport for the Gen Z students now flooding university campuses and classrooms (Kim & Lundberg, 2016). While current literature supported the important impact of teacher caring on the success of Generation Z students, “little research has connected the two areas” (Miller & Mills, 2019, p. 79). Generation Z has brought high expectations for learning and engagement (Loveland, 2017) to the higher education classroom. Developing successful strategies to actively engage these students would require higher education institutions and their faculty to set the stage for change and innovation (Wright & Nichols, 2021). Inquiry that focused on the in-class preferences of Generation Z students would add to the literature addressing the shortcomings noted by Chicca and Shellenbarger (2018), Giunta (2017), Miller and Mills (2019), and Wright and Nichols (2021).

Pasquale and Pickerd (2022) suggested that trust and vulnerability contributed to building connections between faculty and Gen Z students while Miller and Mills (2019) found that Gen Z students gleaned perceptions of faculty care from their approach to teaching. There was little scholarship, however, that explored the specific factors that today’s students identified as building blocks for faculty-student rapport and faculty care. More research was needed to discern what factors were important for Generation Z students in fostering positive faculty-student rapport. Miller and Mills (2019) concurred stating, “although we know that caring matters and requires effort on the part of those teaching, we know little about how students in higher education conceptualize caring” (p.

81). To be effective in encouraging student engagement and success, higher education must ascertain which factors and influences aid in creating and strengthening faculty-student rapport for Gen Z students.

This research will be placed in the literature as an exploration of what factors Generation Z students identify as significant to the establishment of instructor-student rapport, faculty caring, and effective faculty-student communication.

Purpose of the Study

This study aimed to expand the existing research on knowledge of Generation Z preferences for faculty-student rapport utilizing a two-phase, basic qualitative study at a southeastern Research I institution. Research conducted examined the perceptions and preferences of Generation Z students' classroom experiences related to instructor-student rapport, faculty caring, and both classroom and faculty communication. The study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of Gen Z classroom needs and contributes specific research on the preferences of Generation Z students as members of the higher education community.

Research Questions

This research was guided by the following questions:

1. How do Gen Z students describe their interactions related to instructor-student rapport?
2. What do Gen Z students characterize as most significant in the establishment of meaningful instructor-student rapport?

Significance of the Study

Higher education is a field strongly rooted in tradition. Much of the convention, ritual, and pomp and circumstance is celebrated by students, faculty, and alumni alike, but these beloved traditions have also presented challenges. Institutions steeped in historic tradition, along with their systems, processes, and instructional delivery, are often slow to change. This can pose a challenge not only to the future success of the institution, but to the success of the new generations of students walking their campuses. The new perspectives, interests, and needs of each generation can pose challenges to existing structures to provide effective instruction, engage students successfully, and convey meaningful care. Many tendencies of a new generation of students were not compatible with the expectations of the faculty who teach their classes and run their classrooms (Cameron & Pagnattaro, 2017). This study and its findings will benefit higher education institutions as they strive to meet the needs and expectations of today's students and innovate their campuses for the next generation.

Additionally, studies exploring the preferences of Generation Z students and how they learn were limited (Wright & Nichols, 2021). While observations and popular literature indicated that Gen Z students thrived in a diverse community that valued relevance and flexibility (DeWitte, 2022), academic research on the classroom needs and preferences of today's students was scarce. Clearly, Gen Z students approached life differently, having unique ideas about the future, and different values than previous generations (DeWitte, 2022). This study contributes to scholarly research on the preferences of Gen Z students related to faculty-student rapport and faculty care,

contributing to faculty and institutional understanding of what matters in classroom management, teaching style, and instructional technique when working to meet Gen Z students uniquely where they are.

Definition of Terms

To clarify perspectives and research goals throughout the study, the following definitions of key terms were used:

1. *Generation Z (or Gen Z)* - Born between 1995 and 2010 (Chicca & Shellenbarger, 2018; Loveland, 2017; Seemiller et al., 2020; Wright & Nichols, 2021)
2. *Rapport* - “Rapport is an overall perception of the instructor and encompasses the belief that there is a mutual, trusting, and prosocial bond, including a personal connection and enjoyable interactions. We argue that rapport is different than immediacy because it is the overall impression or feeling about the relationship, not a behavior.” (Frisby & Housley Gaffney, 2015, p. 341).
3. *Faculty Caring* – “Caring teaching in practice appears to comprise two main pedagogic elements - the active fostering of and maintenance of pedagogic relationships above all else, and within these, the privileging of trust, acceptance, diligence and individual attentiveness.” (Walker & Gleaves, 2016, p. 65-66).

These terms were utilized throughout the study and the above definitions helped to provide clarity on study constructs and concepts.

Delimitations

I delimited this study to an examination of the perceptions of Generation Z students; accordingly, findings and results cannot be generalized to include students who

fall outside of Generation Z (designated birth years are 1995-2010). Additionally, the study was delimited to Gen Z students enrolled in a large, four-year, urban, public, Research I university in the South so results cannot be generalized to groups extending beyond those designations and parameters. Students enrolled in introductory communication studies courses at the university were selected for the study due to the small class size (classes typically capped at 23 students or less), the required nature of the course (because the class is required for most majors at the university, a diversity of student majors were represented), and the added importance of faculty-student and classroom rapport as it related to possible speech anxiety encountered by students in a public speaking, communication studies class with multiple speech presentations. Because of these unique class characteristics, results cannot be generalized to other general education classes with varying class sizes and educational curriculum.

Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 provided an overview and introduction to the research study. A deficiency in research exploring the preferences of Generation Z students related to faculty-student rapport was established. The statement of the problem, purpose of the study, and research questions, guided by observations and assertions found in the literature, established clear justification of the need for research specific to this generation of students. Chapter 1 further explored the significance of the study, defined key terms, and established clear delimitations in the approach to the research.

Following this chapter, Chapter 2 includes a detailed review of the literature exploring Generation Z student preferences for faculty-student rapport. Additionally, the

theoretical framework that was utilized to shape and guide the research is further presented and explored.

Chapter 3 details the methodological approach to the study and provides a rationale for the selected method of implementation. Specific elements of the data collection and analysis process are illustrated.

Chapter 4 presents the results of the study, revealing data collected by the methods presented in Chapter 3. Data gathered from both phases of the qualitative study are shared.

To conclude, Chapter 5 summarizes study findings and explores implications of the data collected, utilizing Mottet et al.'s (2006) Rhetorical and Relational Goal Theory as a framework. The significance of study findings and recommendations for future research and study are also provided.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study sought to both examine how Generation Z students perceived the establishment of instructor-student rapport and determine preferences and core components in its establishment. I begin my review of literature with an explanation of the search process. Next, I explore generational definitions and identified characteristics and preferences of Generation Z. The review also illustrates essential components of faculty interactions detailed in the literature. Final sections examine variables and elements that create meaningful rapport for students of Generation Z.

Search Process for Literature Review

This review of the literature began with searches for empirical research studies involving preferences of Gen Z students related to instructor-student rapport in the college/university classroom. Later searches explored the topics of care in the college/university classroom, the impact of instructor-student rapport on student learning and relational needs/preferences, empirical investigations of Gen Z student preferences and characteristics, and strengths and weaknesses of generational study. Electronic databases utilized focused on both higher education studies (ERIC from EBSCO) and communication research, specifically focusing on instructional communication literature (ONESEARCH and Academic Search Complete). The literature review produced 67 total sources encompassing the above topics.

All included research literature focused on Generation Z students, defined for this study as individuals born between the years of 1995 and 2010 (Chicca & Shellenbarger,

2018; Loveland, 2017; Seemiller et al., 2020; Wright & Nichols, 2021), Nine studies included highlighted both the established characteristics and preferences of Gen Z. Studies related to student perceptions of faculty care (22) and the relational needs of students in the college/university classroom (43) shared approximately 22 research articles in common. When reviewing the literature related to the impact of instructor-student rapport on student needs and expectations in the classroom, 33 articles highlighted the impact of rapport on student motivation, engagement, and learning, and 43 articles explored the impact of rapport on the relational needs of students, with close to 34 articles overlapping in their exploration of both factors through planned research study.

Generation Z Students

Defining a Generation

Rudolph et al. (2020) stated that “the sociological notion of a generation typically references a group of people born during the same time period who have shared similar life experiences during their formative years” (pp. 82-83). Pew Research Center’s 2015 definition of generations expanded generational perspective and established that generational study could be used to research the attitudes and behaviors for cohorts of individuals based on their age and/or location in the life cycle. Campbell et al. (2017) created a definition of generation based on the work of Gentile et al. (2013) and Mannheim (1952) that referenced generational impact, which stated that beyond the commonalities of cultural contexts and birth years, “these individuals both experience a shared historical and cultural environment and also shape culture in their own way” (p.

131). Anderson et al. (2017) asserted that “generations bring new ideas, new behaviors, and new ways of looking at the issues” (p. 245). If students of Generation Z identify drivers and motivations that contrast with previous cohorts (Anderson, et al., 2017), higher education will be remiss in failing to examine the inspirations, needs, and priorities of the students they serve on today’s campuses.

About Gen Z

Gen Z is more racially and ethnically diverse than any previous generation (Robinson, 2021; Seemiller & Grace, 2015) and is “one of the largest, if not the largest, cohort in history” (Carter, 2018, p. 2). Born between the years 1995 and 2010 (Chicca & Shellenbarger, 2018; Loveland, 2017; Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Seemiller et al., 2020; Wright & Nichols, 2021), Gen Z students largely occupy today’s college and university campuses. Students of Gen Z overwhelmingly view themselves as loyal, with an impressive 85% of student respondents self-identifying as such in a 2015 survey (Seemiller & Grace, 2015). Students of Generation Z also enthusiastically identify as compassionate, thoughtful, and open-minded (Seemiller & Grace, 2015). They value honesty in their leaders (Seemiller & Grace, 2015) and place a high priority on faculty caring (Miller & Mills, 2019). Importantly, Generation Z students also principally believe that “education leads to future personal success” (Seemiller & Grace, 2015, p. 98).

Gen Z students have expressed concern regarding the current state of politics, emphasized the importance of social justice and noted flaws in the U.S.’s ability to actualize liberty and equality for all citizens (Jovanovic et al., 2021). Students surveyed in 2021 felt strongly that partisan politics had contributed greatly to the devaluing of

minoritized groups (Jovanovic et al., 2021). Furthermore, Gen Z expressed a positive view of activism, civic engagement, and community connections and indicated that, “an investment of personal time to fulfill... [their] duty as citizens was not a burden” (Jovanovic et al., 2021, p. 134). Authors noted that students of Generation Z are motivated to make a difference for others in the larger community (Seemiller & Grace, 2015). Interestingly, Gen Z students have also emphasized the importance of being able to speak to others with varying views and expressed an intent to avoid “shying away from difficult conversations” (Jovanovic et al., 2021, p. 134) when presented with them.

Students of Generation Z prefer passionate and knowledgeable instructors that are both inclusive and empowering, and favor atmospheres that are encouraging of practical learning (Seemiller & Grace, 2015). Gen Z students expressed extremely high expectations for instructors in a variety of areas including content knowledge, strong teaching skills, and positive personality traits (Trammell & Aldrich, 2016). Today’s students have also expressed a strong desire for autonomy (Cooper & Frey, 2021) and a preference to be part of the decision-making process in the classroom (Seemiller & Grace, 2015). Gen Z also appreciates teachers who encourage active engagement in learning (Cheema & Zhang, 2021), as they desire to be a part of the learning process in cooperation with the instructor (Seemiller & Grace 2015). Preferences for positive, approachable, and friendly faculty were also expressed in the literature (Tramell & Aldrich, 2016).

Gen Z presents a diversity and complexity of learning styles (Cameron & Pagnattaro, 2017). Today’s students prefer a less authoritative and more facilitative

approach to instruction (Seemiller & Grace, 2015). They expressed desire for an academic environment that includes hands-on learning with both engagement and support (Seemiller & Grace, 2015). Scholars have also noted that students of Generation Z may even listen differently than generations of the past (Ojeda-Hecht & Parks, 2021). Ojeda-Hecht and Parks (2021) found that listening for Gen Z is evaluative and involves communicative activities aligned with the evaluative process including arguing, critical analysis, conceding, and answering. Authors noted that this approach to listening can differ from other, older generations, and can pose potential challenges in an instructional space (Ojeda-Hecht & Parks, 2021).

Today's students also place value on the applicability of course content and classroom conversations (Loveland, 2017; Seemiller & Grace, 2015). Scholars have asserted the importance of providing relevant and transferable learning experiences for Generation Z as study findings have indicated that preparing for the future is an imperative for today's students (Lieberman, 2021; Seemiller & Grace, 2015). Literature also noted that students of Generation Z appreciate and prioritize clear connections between academics and future professional tasks and responsibilities (Cooper & Frey, 2021; Lieberman, 2021; Seemiller & Grace, 2015). Gen Z demonstrates a preference for applicable instruction directly relevant to everyday life and enjoys direct connections between course content and future career tasks and endeavors (Cooper & Frey, 2021). Additional exploration of Gen Z preferences identified a "desire to learn by doing and learn by applying" (Lieberman, 2021, p. 94).

Students of Gen Z favor connection and relationship with their instructors (Christman & McCall, 2021; Han & Rideout, 2022; Webb & Barrett, 2014). Gen Z students seek to feel understood by faculty, value personal connections, and appreciate demonstrations of both respect and compassion from their instructors (Kendall & Schussler, 2013; Webb & Barrett, 2014). A perceived understanding of the realities of student experiences and demonstrations of compassion contribute to feelings of positive faculty-student rapport for Generation Z (Kendall & Schussler, 2013). Today's students also value meaningful acknowledgement from their instructors, identified in the research as expressions of appreciation and praise, and/or care and concern (Christman & McCall, 2021). Students also felt acknowledged when they experienced a connection with a faculty member, shared an enjoyable or meaningful conversation with their instructor, or when they experienced faculty availability (Christman & McCall, 2021).

Dangers of Generational Study

Research has challenged both the validity of generational study, and the methodologies utilized to arrive at generational assertions. Authors have asserted that much of the research on generations is suspect and “many supposed generational effects are likely not generational at all” (Rudolph et al., 2020, p. 82). Findings which support oversimplifications of generational cohorts were found to be empirically limited, relying on assumptions and stereotypes above sound evidence (Schnapp et al., 2022). Scholars concur that generational studies across much of the academic literature are foundationally flawed (Parry & Urwin, 2017; Rudolph et al., 2020; Schnapp et al., 2022;).

To accurately conduct generational study, researchers must thoughtfully establish justifications for the generational variables being examined, understand the relationships of the variables, carefully hypothesize possible causal mechanisms, and utilize both literature and proper academic guidance when developing a study design, selecting methods, and determining the data analysis to be utilized (Costanza et al., 2017). Without a sound research foundation grounded in solid theory and practice, scholars have conveyed that application and interpretation of the research is problematic or even impossible (Costanza et al., 2017). Caffrey and Galoozis (2018) emphasized that “generational rhetoric is pervasive and powerful. It speaks to implicit and explicit biases related to age and life cycle. It also has staying power, despite the many meta-analyses and other scholarly research debunking elements of generational research” (p. 188). Authors have further cautioned that generational myths are frequently perpetuated, and it is the job of researchers to provide an accurate representation of the factors impacting any generationally related assertions (Jauregui et al., 2020).

A noted danger of identified birth cohorts for generational study is the communal assumption that individuals of certain generations have common memories and experiences (Parry & Urwin, 2021). Literature has conveyed that a generational assumption can often be based solely on birth year, neglecting to consider other variables that impact and form an individual’s experience (Parry & Urwin, 2021). Scholars have stressed that not all individuals in a generational category will fit into the exact stereotypes ascribed to their generational group (Weber & Urick, 2017). Researchers have further cautioned about the danger of stereotypes, emphasizing that “overly

simplified generational descriptions and explanations [are] too readily accepted to account for young people's behavior and development" (McDougall et al., 2023, p. 4).

Argument for the Study of Students by Generation

While some critics have pointed to the dangers of stereotyping as a negative effect of generational scholarship, robust and compelling generational study can effectively combat the danger of "othering" often noted throughout the literature. Authors have asserted that accurate knowledge of generational leanings can potentially help close the gap between students and instructors, encouraging faculty to recalibrate their approach to engaging today's learners (Mohr & Mohr, 2017). Scholars have also encouraged the prevention of "othering" by challenging faculty to remember it's important to consider that "learners of all generations need educational best practices" (Schnapp et al., 2022, p. 2). Emphasized in the literature, well designed generational research can assist in informing strategies and approaches for inclusion and can provide faculty a fresh perspective on what today's students value (Parry & Urwin, 2021). New understandings and perspectives of students on college campuses should implore faculty to respond and adjust to the needs of this "new generation of learners" (Lopez & Abadiano, 2023, p. 770).

An appropriate and balanced perspective provided a basis for developing a strong research-informed study examining the understandings, inclinations, and characterizations of Generation Z as it related to instructor-student rapport in the university classroom. Scholars have emphasized value in the study of generations if the research is executed properly, without preconceived notions (Parry & Urwin, 2021), and

appropriate methodological approaches are employed (Caffrey & Galoozis, 2018; Costanza et al., 2017; Jauregui et al., 2020; Parry & Urwin, 2017; Parry & Urwin, 2021; Rudolph et al., 2020; Van Rossem, 2021). In a workforce study, authors affirmed that while there were no abrupt cut-offs between generational cohorts in relation to workplace values and attitudes, there were noted generational differences in their findings (Campbell et al., 2017). Much of the success of a well-executed and empirically sound generational study seemed to rest in what Parry and Urwin (2021) identified as a pragmatic approach, “allowing a process of iterative formulation and testing of emerging theories in order to uncover the dynamics of generational change and difference” (p. 865).

Scholars have argued that acknowledging and examining the unique and specific needs of today’s generation could strengthen the classroom environment, student support services, and the overall student collegiate experience (Anderson et al., 2017; Carter, 2018; Chicca & Shellenbarger, 2018; Lopez & Abadiano, 2023; Miller & Mills, 2019; Mohr & Mohr, 2017, Shatto & Erwin, 2017). Studies have confirmed the value of continued generational research, noting that few publications have explored the interests, motivations, and priorities of today’s university students (Shatto & Erwin, 2017). While they cautioned practitioners to understand the limitations of specific categorical assertions, several authors acknowledged the value in working to better understand today’s generation, conceding flaws in the perspective that today’s students are no different than those of years past. Campbell et al. in 2017 maintained that,

Going to the other extreme and saying that generational differences do not exist is also not accurate. Generational differences often emerge from cultural change and just because cultural change is often linear and gradual does not mean it does not exist. (p. 137)

Authors further acknowledged that while scholars have often struggled in their ability to substantiate generational effects empirically, not all generational data presented in the literature is arbitrary and anecdotal (Costanza et al., 2017). Mohr and Mohr (2017) made an even stronger assertion when they stated that institutions need to “rethink who current students are and what they need and want as learners” (p. 85).

Faculty Interactions That Help Establish Instructor-Student Rapport

Faculty Communication

One important element of faculty-student interaction in the establishment of rapport is faculty communication. Today’s students felt a greater connection with faculty who communicated regularly and effectively (Guzzardo et al., 2021; Kirby & Thomas, 2022). Instructors who were viewed as available and accessible were also assessed as caring by respondents in multiple studies throughout the literature (Carr et al., 2021; Guzzardo et al., 2021; Kirby & Thomas, 2022; Miller & Mills, 2019). In a 2021 study, students expressed that “availability equated to caring” (Carr et al., 2021, p.8), and a significant number of respondents (40%) indicated that shorter response times demonstrated care and concern for students (Carr et al., 2021). Gen Z also placed notable value on faculty approachability and accessibility affirming that they feel cared for by instructors who are easy to talk to and communicate with (Miller & Mills, 2019; Sayers et

al., 2021). Relatedly, Gen Z students appreciated relationships in which faculty maintained open and accessible lines of communication (Schussler et al., 2021) and took initiative to reach out to their students outside of class (Carr et al., 2021).

While it is clear that students felt cared for by faculty who were good, consistent communicators (Carr et al., 2021; Kirby & Thomas, 2022; Schussler et al., 2021), the tone and spirit of the message being communicated was of equal importance. Findings indicated that students valued and took note of discernable care statements and words of encouragement shared by instructors (Carr et al., 2021; Generous et al., 2023; Sayers et al., 2021). Positive messaging that established value, mattering, and student worth was noted to be a powerful method of conveying care (Khalid, 2013). Research also indicated that faculty who made an effort to understand students, engaged before class, and offered encouraging messages were perceived by Gen Z students as nice, friendly, personable, and caring (Sayers et al., 2021).

In addition to positive messaging, Gen Z students expressed preferences for intentional, authentic, and genuine communication from their instructors. Studies have noted that strong interpersonal communication significantly impacted student impressions of instructor caring and suggested that Gen Z students were more likely to reach out to a professor they perceived as “warm” (Guzzardo et al., 2021; Sayers et al., 2021). When they described what felt like welcoming communication, students indicated the importance of having contact with faculty before the start of the term and affirmed that a welcoming email prior to the first day of class satisfied that expectation (Faulkner et al., 2021). Studies have also emphasized students’ preference for faculty who are authentic,

and accessible (Kirby & Thomas, 2022) as students expressed that conversations outside of class are particularly valued (Guzzardo et al., 2021). More frequent interactions with faculty also helped students to feel more cared for, regardless of the circumstances of those interactions (Carr et al., 2021). Further, faculty who conveyed a true concern for student learning and success, and expressed their desire for students to succeed, were recognized by Gen Z students in multiple studies as caring and supportive (Guzzardo et al., 2021; Khalid, 2013; Kirby & Thomas, 2022; Miller & Mills, 2019; Schussler et al., 2021).

Teacher Behaviors and Student Engagement

Extensive research that has affirmed the influence of faculty-student rapport and care on the Gen Z college student experience necessitated an exploration of impactful instructor behaviors that contributed to the establishment of both. Research clearly established that the choices faculty made when teaching and managing a classroom were instrumental to the student and educational context and had far-reaching effects. Efforts to utilize impactful behaviors can be fruitful for both student and instructor and the degree of rapport established. Authors noted that today's students preferred instructors to be personable, immediate, and committed to establishing a welcoming environment that understood and embraced unique student circumstances and situations (Faulkner et al., 2021). Student respondents in multiple studies expressed feeling closer to faculty who were both helpful and approachable (Carr et al., 2021; Guzzardo et al., 2021; Miller & Mills, 2019; Sayers et al., 2021).

Andersen (1979) asserted that nonverbal immediacy included nonverbal behaviors that lessen the perceived distance (emotional or physical) between students and instructors. The impact of immediacy and its ability to help establish both relationships and connections with Gen Z students has been detailed in the research (Frymier et al., 2019; Goldman et al., 2017). Instructors who used communication behaviors that were identified as supportive and immediate were viewed by students as both inclusive and welcoming (Faulkner et al., 2021). The significance and importance of nonverbal immediacy in the classroom was well-established throughout the literature (Bolkan et al., 2017; Bolkan & Griffin, 2018; Faulkner et al., 2021; Frisby & Housley Gaffney, 2015; Frymier et al., 2019; Goldman et al., 2017; Johnson & LaBelle, 2017; Myers, Goodboy, & Members of COMM 600, 2014). Authors also noted the widely inclusive benefit of instructor immediacy, as immediacy behaviors could be conveyed class-wide and were not limited to individual interactions (Frymier, 2019).

While they explored important instructor behaviors that impacted faculty-student rapport, one author emphasized that “students need to know that they are important to the professor and being taken seriously by them” (Khalid, 2013, p. 23). Students of Gen Z indicated throughout the literature that faculty who set high, but reasonable expectations for learning were faculty who cared about them and cared about their learning (Khalid, 2013; Kirby & Thomas, 2022). Authors also confirmed that students wanted to feel listened to and that their opinion mattered (Geier, 2021; Guzzardo et al., 2021; Khalid, 2013). When faculty solicited feedback during class discussions and listened and attended to student needs and perspectives, students in multiple studies identified their actions as a

demonstration of care (Khalid, 2103; Miller & Mills, 2019). Today's students have also indicated they identified elements of faculty care when instructors demonstrated a passion for teaching through engaged discussion and interactive approaches (Sayers et al., 2021; Seemiller et al., 2020). Findings specified that utilizing fun activities while teaching created energy in the classroom and interest in material but also confirmed care for students present (Miller & Mills, 2019; Sayers et al., 2021). Enthusiasm, humor, and regular interactions that encouraged both student enthusiasm and student engagement also contributed to feelings of care (Guzzardo et al., 2021; Miller & Mills, 2019).

Sharing information and class content in a relevant manner was proven to be an important instructor behavior in the establishment of rapport throughout the literature. Student study participants indicated they appreciated when instructors connected content from the course to the individual interests of students in relevant ways (Leftwich et al., 2022, Seemiller et al., 2020). When required to rank preferred instructor characteristics, Gen Z students identified competence, clarity, and relevance as top instructional priorities (Goldman et al., 2017). Research also concluded that faculty who effectively highlighted the usefulness of class content were able to counteract the negative impacts of excessive talkativeness, as students were more forgiving when extra information was relevant and applicable to discussions (Sidelinger & Bolen, 2016).

Detrimental Instructor Behaviors

While positive rapport and relationship with an instructor was noted to create successful student and classroom outcomes for Generation Z, some studies explored instructor behaviors that negatively impacted the instructor-student relationship and

impeded the establishment of positive rapport. Research findings indicated that when communication was not adjusted to meet student needs, students experienced non-accommodation (Frey & Lane, 2021). Authors explained that “instructors who are perceived to communicate inappropriately (i.e., non-accommodate) are less likely to meet students’ affective expectations and goals” (Frey & Lane, 2021, p. 226). Participant perceptions of non-accommodation were linked to nonverbal responsiveness and perceived lack of student support and resulted in both decreased satisfaction with faculty communication and less fluency in processing course content (Frey & Lane, 2021). These findings indicated the importance of appropriate and responsive faculty communication for Gen Z students.

Lecturing misbehaviors were also demonstrated to negatively impact the classroom learning environment (Kaufmann, 2020). Students identified dry, boring, and confusing lectures as communication misbehaviors by instructors (Kaufmann, 2020). Even more detrimental, Gen Z students who experienced faculty communication that was perceived as biased, confrontational, or inequitable, were “likely to report that the learning environment was unhelpful, unhealthy and unengaging” (Kaufmann, 2020, p. 191). Gen Z was apprehensive when faced with aggressive, power-laden, and hostile interactions and felt unsafe offering opinions, ideas, and contributions in such class environments (Kaufmann, 2020). These dangerous misbehaviors seemed to discourage student learning and classroom involvement entirely (Kaufmann, 2020).

Motivation and Learning

Throughout the research, the presence or absence of positive instructor rapport was demonstrated to be an important element in the student classroom experience.

Research indicated that student-focused choices related to rapport, relationship, and engagement impacted student motivation and resilience for students of Generation Z (Frisby et al., 2020) and predicted both student participation and state motivation (Frisby et al., 2017). Authors examined how instructor behaviors “catch” and “hold” interest and consequently encouraged student engagement (Bolkan & Griffin, 2018). Both “catch”, and “hold” actions proved valuable to motivation as researchers noted that the “catch aspect of student interest motivated students to pay attention in class, [while] hold interest helped students develop a more deep-seated motivational orientation toward their coursework” (Bolkan & Griffin, 2018, p. 280). Relatedly, when they explored the impact of faculty on motivation and student success for Gen Z, authors concluded that when faced with academic challenge, communication satisfaction and rapport were both associated with hope and academic resilience (Frisby et al., 2020). Scholars also noted that memorable, motivational messages encouraged engagement, improved focus on learning, and helped enhance rapport by demonstrating care, compassion, and concern for students (Generous et al., 2023; Kaufmann et al., 2021).

The impacts of faculty-student rapport and instructor behaviors on the student learning process have been widely studied (Bolkan et al., 2017; Bolkan & Griffin, 2018; Frey & Lane, 2021; Frisby, 2019; Frisby et al., 2017; Frisby & Housley Gaffney, 2015; Frymier et al., 2019; Kaufmann & Frisby, 2017; Mazer, 2017; Myers, Goodboy, & Members of COMM 600, 2014; Sidelinger et al., 2015). When they examined what made learning enjoyable for today’s students in the higher education classroom, researchers determined that a passionate instructor made learning easier, even for classes identified

by students as boring or difficult (Seemiller et al., 2020). Students also shared that faculty who were excited about teaching helped them to be excited about learning (Seemiller et al., 2020). Other findings indicated that a connection with the instructor made connecting to the subject matter easier (Seemiller et al., 2020).

When exploring the impact of instructor behavior and rapport on learning, the influence of instructor and message clarity is an essential component. Mentioned frequently throughout the literature (Bolkan et al., 2017; Goldman et al., 2017; Myers, Goodboy, & Members of COMM 600, 2014; Myers et al., 2018; Sidelinger et al., 2015; Titsworth et al., 2013), research confirmed that clarity (or lack thereof) was an important variable that impacted today's students' perspectives of their instructor, the classroom experience, and the learning process. Studies asserted that clarity impacted student impressions of faculty and was a preferred behavior noted by undergraduate Gen Z students (Goldman et al., 2017; Myers et al., 2018). Researchers also observed that students paid more attention to a "high-clarity/high-immediacy lecture" (Bolkan et al., 2017, p.141) resulting in higher student scores on tests of retention (Bolkan et al., 2017). Relatedly, student study participants were more likely to report motivation, communication satisfaction, and higher instructor affect when humor and clarity were identified as instructor traits/methods (Myers, Goodboy, & Members of COMM 600, 2014).

The impact of the attitude conveyed by an instructor proved to be poignant and far-reaching as it related to student learning for Generation Z. One study noted that "students who perceive their instructors to endorse growth (vs. fixed) mindset beliefs

report better classroom experiences (e.g. greater belonging, fewer evaluation concerns) and, in turn, engage in more behaviors that promote academic success (e.g. class attendance and engagement)” (Kroeper et al., 2022, p. 371). Other researchers confirmed that faculty evaluated by their students as supportive, competent, and caring created an environment with high perceptions of perceived learning and high academic expectations (Kirby & Thomas, 2022). Further, authors asserted that Gen Z students who identified the presence of positive rapport with their teacher appeared more likely to engage in self-regulated learning, communicating with peers and their instructor outside of the classroom (Sidelinger et al., 2015).

Meaningful Instructor-Student Rapport for the Gen Z Student

Rapport and Caring

Throughout the literature, authors asserted that instructor care was a significant influence on the establishment and maintenance of instructor-student rapport (Faulkner et al., 2021; Johnson & LaBelle, 2017; Kaufmann & Frisby, 2017; Leftwich et al., 2022; Myers, Goodboy, & Members of COMM 600, 2014) for today’s students. In Frey and Lane (2021), Frisby and Myers (2008) explained that “rapport reflects students’ perceptions of the quality of the connection they have with an instructor and is positively related to important classroom outcomes” (p. 226). Demonstrations of care could include numerous instructor traits and behaviors that encompassed emotional interest and support, displays of concern for the whole student (personal interactions), and aspects of face. Validating the importance of the individual student and establishing a pattern of

respect for unique student identities and perspectives was an important element of faculty care for Generation Z.

Researchers suggested that care, compassion, and respect were principal elements in the establishment of rapport (Webb & Barrett, 2014). Study participants repeatedly noted uncommonly attentive instructor behaviors as important to the establishment of rapport and noted the value in treating learners as distinct individuals (Webb & Barrett, 2014). Authors observed that caring instructors often helped students feel a sense of belonging, especially those historically considered “at the margins of higher education” (Kirby & Thomas, 2022, pp. 375-376) including women in male-dominated content areas, racial and ethnic minorities, and first-gen or non-traditional students. Caring, confirming behavior was consistently noted as important for today’s students and identified as a contributing factor to enhanced learning outcomes in multiple study results (Myers, Goodboy, & Members of COMM 600, 2014; Leftwich et al., 2022).

Scholars also asserted that instructors who demonstrated respect for students as individuals, with distinct feelings and interests, demonstrated care and strengthened feelings of rapport for Gen Z (Burk & Pearson, 2022; Faulkner et al., 2021; Johnson & LaBelle, 2017; Leftwich et al., 2022; Tatum, 2021). Half of the students in a 2021 study indicated that they felt cared for by faculty when the instructor made efforts to know them on a personal basis (Carr et al., 2021). One third of student participants in a different 2021 study indicated that instructors who were responsive to student interests and got to know them personally made them feel valued as an individual and experienced what they perceived as faculty care (Sayers et al., 2021). Research emphasized that

important interactions occurred between instructor and student in the classroom and greatly impacted perceptions of care and rapport for Gen Z students (Burk & Pearson, 2022).

When feedback was sought, an instructor who listened intently and considered student opinions and perspectives helped today's students to feel cared for and respected. Studies noted that students of Gen Z wanted to know that they were important to their instructor and were being taken seriously (Khalid, 2013). Relatedly, students on today's campuses placed value on being treated (by faculty) as equals with important and valued opinions (Leftwich et al., 2022; Flanigan et al., 2023). Investigators asserted that having a sense of choice and/or control over classroom policies helped Gen Z students to feel a sense of autonomy and control in their learning process (Flanigan et al., 2023). Recognition and respect from instructors helped students of Gen Z to feel cared for in the learning environment (Guzzardo et al., 2021; Khalid, 2013; Miller & Mills, 2019).

Confirmation and Validation

Face support, confirmation, and validation were also identified throughout the research as important elements of instructor-student rapport. Burk and Pearson (2022) explained that "positive face refers to individuals' needs to feel included, appreciated, and approved of by members of a social group" (p. 219) while "negative face refers to the individual's need for his/her autonomy and abilities to be respected" (p. 219). Authors asserted that face support could be utilized by instructors to affirm or deny a student's identity within the classroom environment (Burk & Pearson, 2022). Faculty choices as they managed student face needs, facilitated student interactions, and provided feedback

within the classroom had a significant impact on Gen Z students' negotiated social identities (Burk & Pearson, 2022). Studies asserted that perceived positive instructor rapport helped students trust that faculty would be sensitive to face needs, honoring their identity (Frisby et al., 2014).

While academic literature has extensively explored the connection between immediacy and cognitive learning, research also indicated that immediate, confirming, and validating behaviors played an important role in satisfying today's students' relational needs. Study findings confirmed that feelings of rapport were strengthened when students believe they were seen as a person and not a number (Tatum, 2021). Supportive and immediate instructor communication behaviors also helped to create a welcoming and inclusive classroom for students of Generation Z (Faulkner et al., 2021). Students also expressed feelings of inclusion when faculty knew their name, used preferred student pronouns, checked in regularly, and demonstrated an understanding of students' individual and personal situations (Faulkner et al., 2021). Importantly, findings also suggested that "student identities are validated when instructors see and treat students as capable learners, respect them, and make them feel welcome" (Faulkner et al., 2021, p. 101). These assertions echoed the outcomes of studies that explored the importance of student face needs and respect for individual identity for today's generation (Burk & Pearson, 2022; Frisby et al., 2014).

The concept of mattering and being valued by the instructor was present in research findings that emphasized the importance of instructor communication that validated students as important and valuable members of the classroom and learning

environment (Mansson, 2016). Teacher confirmation was also determined to be an influencing factor in today's students' attitudes toward classroom communication (Burns et al., 2018). Scholars confirmed that students of Gen Z wanted to feel they were listened to and that their opinion mattered (Geier, 2021; Guzzardo et al., 2021; Khalid, 2013). The significance of confirmation in establishing and cultivating instructor-student rapport was further evident in the conclusions of a 2014 study when authors stated, "results of the study imply that, of the teaching behaviors examined in this study, engaging in confirmation and caring may be two of the most important ones" (Myers, Goodboy, & Members of COMM 600, 2014, p. 22).

Authenticity, Emotion Support, and Belonging

Data from Johnson and LaBelle's (2017) study "indicated that authentic teaching is perceived when teachers are viewed as approachable, passionate, attentive, capable, and knowledgeable" (p. 423). Instructors identified as authentic by study participants demonstrated care and genuine concern for students and communicated that students were an important and valued part of the learning process (Johnson & LaBelle, 2017). Conversely, inattentive, disrespectful, and unapproachable faculty were quickly assessed as inauthentic in their classroom environments (Johnson & LaBelle, 2017). To improve the quality of the student experience, faculty must develop trust, warmth, and admiration in the classroom (Tormey, 2021). Literature has emphasized Gen Z student penchants for faculty who are positive, friendly, approachable, and enthusiastic (Trammell & Aldrich, 2016). Faculty who communicated true, real, and honest interest in the subject, the

students, and their call to teach, were able to convey authenticity in an effective and impactful manner (Pasquale & Pickerd, 2022).

Supporting the emotional needs of Gen Z was an important element of establishing a caring faculty-student relationship to enhance and nourish rapport. This was often conveyed by demonstrated sensitivity to face needs (Burk & Pearson, 2022; Frisby et al., 2014) and established spaces that were safe to “help students to feel comfortable and supported” (Frisby, 2019, p. 501). Evidence suggested that a large part of student course satisfaction came from the emotional quality of the instructor and student relationship (Tormey, 2021). Scholars confirmed that when today’s students experienced greater support emotionally, they were burdened with less personal emotion work and were therefore more likely to experience positive emotions in class and offered greater opportunity for engagement in learning (Mazer, 2017; Titsworth et al., 2013).

Another important element of positive student rapport for Generation Z was an instructor’s ability to create a sense of belonging for individual students and the larger university classroom. Studies confirmed that an instructor’s communication skillset provided a significant contribution to students’ sense of belonging (Burk & Pearson, 2022). Students demonstrated higher levels of both sense of belonging and academic self-challenge when they experienced more frequent faculty interactions (Kim & Lundberg, 2016). Scholars also asserted that students who experienced belonging in their classroom were more likely to feel a sense of belonging at their college or university (Burk and Pearson, 2022) suggesting the powerful impact of the instructor in a student’s overall university experience.

Theoretical Framework

Overview of Rhetorical and Relational Goal Theory

Mottet et al.'s (2006) Rhetorical and Relational Goal Theory (RRGT) was identified as a valuable lens and framework for data collection and analysis. The foundation of Rhetorical and Relational Goal Theory is the concept that students and instructors each bring their own needs and goals to the university classroom. Theorists asserted that while students possessed academic and relational needs in the learning environment, instructors pursued both rhetorical and relational goals when working to teach effectively (Mottet et al., 2006). Theoretical scholars explained,

When emphasizing rhetorical goals, teachers focus on influencing students to learn and understand the content as presented by the teacher. These teachers are often described as more teacher-centered. They have an agenda or a plan for what they want students to do and learn, and direct students along that path. Relational goals involve the type of relationship the teacher wants to have with his or her students.” (Mottet et al., 2006, p. 267)

Authors continued, “teachers who emphasize relational goals often view learning as something the teacher and the students do together. This has been described as a student-centered teaching approach” (Mottet et al., 2006, p. 267).

Further examination and exploration of the framework included assertions that faculty can be focused on both rhetorical and relational goals concurrently (Mottet et al., 2006). Xie and Derakhshan (2021) illuminated elements of the theory in this way, “successful teaching is the result of specifying appropriate rhetorical and relational goals

and utilizing suitable communication behaviors to accomplish those goals” (p. 2).

Research supported the concept that the rhetorical and relational behaviors of instructors served different purposes, bearing importance and a significant impact on the student experience and a student’s overall impression of their instructor (Myers et al., 2018b).

Scholars also stressed that, “collectively... results suggest that when students perceive their instructors as using a variety of rhetorical and relational teaching behaviors simultaneously, their learning outcomes can be enhanced” (Myers, Goodboy, & Members of COMM 600, 2014, p. 21).

Rhetorical/Academic Elements in the Classroom

Theorists noted that students possess essential academic needs in the classroom, and for some, those academic and rhetorical needs take priority over relational ones (Mottet et al., 2006). Many of the characteristics students identified as instructor care throughout the literature highlighted the rhetorical teaching behaviors of their faculty. Studies noted that faculty “attending to student learning” (Schussler et al., 2021, p. 7) through traditional teaching practices, for example, answering questions, presenting material in a detailed manner, and slowing the pace of new material as necessary, was viewed by students as caring and helpful (Miller & Mills, 2019; Sayers et al., 2021; Schussler et al., 2021). A large percentage of participants (84%) in a 2021 study indicated that faculty who improve convenience for students (by making course materials easily accessible) were caring instructors (Carr et al., 2021). Additionally, students in multiple studies disclosed feeling more connected to instructors who were competent, prepared,

and organized (Kirby & Thomas, 2022; Miller & Mills, 2019), all traits that are traditionally affiliated with rhetorical teaching behaviors.

Studies also explored the concept of pedagogical care as a way in which faculty helped students to feel cared for and valued (Buskirk-Cohen & Plants, 2019). Examples of pedagogical care included adjusting or clarifying a course assignment, revisiting a topic identified by students as confusing or complicated, or being suitably responsive to student needs (Khalid, 2013). The practice of utilizing space in pedagogy was also identified as a kind of faculty care. Authors indicated that “creating ‘pedagogical space’ means being flexible or willing to adapt course policies and requirements to students’ needs or unique characteristics so they can feel supported in their efforts for academic success” (Guzzardo et al., 2021, p. 48). Instructors who demonstrated flexibility in response to student needs or circumstances were also perceived as caring (Carr et al., 2021; Khalid, 2013; Miller & Mills, 2019).

Relational Elements in the Classroom

The importance of faculty efforts to meet the relational needs of their students was widely emphasized in the research. Studies stressed that students frequently identified the relational efforts of faculty as an expression of care. Students shared that they valued getting to know faculty beyond their role as instructor and appreciated when instructors shared some personal aspect of their lives, for example, a hobby, their hometown, or information about their family (Khalid, 2013). Scholars also noted that satisfying relational needs could further empower students to meet and accomplish their academic goals (Frisby et al., 2020; Mazer, 2017; Titsworth et al., 2013).

Various studies reinforced the importance of instructional balance in pursuit of both relational and rhetorical goals when seeking to establish positive rapport (Chesebro & Lyon, 2020; Frisby et al., 2014; Frisby et al., 2020; Frisby & Munoz, 2021; Generous et al., 2023; Goldman et al., 2017; Kaufmann & Frisby, 2017; Leftwich et al., 2022; Mansson, 2016; Myers et al., 2018a; Myers et al., 2018b; Myers, Goodboy, & Members of COMM 600, 2014; Trammell & Aldrich, 2016). Noting the dangers of imbalance, researchers noted that the absence of faculty effort to preserve relational goals during disruptive student incidents seemed to negatively impact rapport for students (Chesebro & Lyon, 2020). Study conclusions indicated that faculty who handled disruptions by diminishing student voices, reacting strongly, and insisting on their own opinion and/or interpretation were identified as ineffective by Gen Z students (Chesebro & Lyon, 2020). Conversely, students specified that caring, friendly, and encouraging faculty helped them to feel more comfortable discussing the communication apprehension they were experiencing in the public speaking classroom (Meluch & Starcher, 2019).

Rapport and RRG T

The impact and significance of positive instructor-student rapport in the college classroom was widely supported by scholars (Frisby 2019; Frisby et al., 2014; Frisby et al., 2017; Frisby et al., 2020; Frisby & Munoz, 2021; Johnson & LaBelle, 2017; Kaufmann et al., 2021; Leftwich et al., 2022; Sidelinger et al., 2015; Tatum, 2021). Frisby et al. (2017) identified rapport as “an important relational strategy for instructors to employ which can elicit positive student outcomes” (p. 190). Studies also indicated that Gen Z students had high expectations for instructors and the rapport they established,

expecting faculty to demonstrate effective teaching skills, strong knowledge of content, and warm, encouraging personality traits (Trammel & Aldrich, 2016). The varying academic and relational elements of effective faculty-student rapport presented in the research reinforced the use of Rhetorical and Relational Goal Theory as a lens through which to study rapport in the higher education classroom.

Studies Framed in Rhetorical and Relational Goal Theory

A review of select research studies that utilized Rhetorical and Relational Goal Theory to frame their research and findings will help to highlight the value of this theoretical framework in examining instructor-student rapport and impactful faculty behaviors. In Goldman et al.'s 2017 study, participants were given a list of 10 effective teaching characteristics and behaviors and asked to design their desired instructor. Students were asked to budget and place value on the most important instructor characteristics and behaviors (Goldman et al., 2017). Findings indicated that study participants placed high priority on rhetorical needs including instructor expertise, clarity, and the ability to present material in a manner that was relevant (Goldman et al., 2017). Researchers further noted that while rhetorical behaviors were prioritized consistently, two relational behaviors were identified as teaching luxuries by student participants: teacher immediacy and self-disclosure (Goldman et al., 2017). Framing instructor characteristics and behaviors in RRGTT provided an intriguing and insightful exploration of college student preferences related to impactful teaching practices.

A 2016 study by Mansson explored impacts of the effective use of relational and rhetorical teaching behaviors on students' comfort in expressing performance concern. Findings concluded that students who had instructors perceived to be high in relevance,

clarity, caring, and confirmation expressed concerns about academic performance more often than students with instructors perceived as “low” in the same categories (Mansson, 2016). While clarity and relevance fell into the category of rhetorical teaching behaviors, confirmation and caring would be identified as faculty behavior that addresses student relational needs. These conclusions reinforced the idea that a balance of rhetorical and relational behaviors was effective in establishing faculty-student rapport that encouraged students to more readily express concerns to their instructor.

A 2020 study utilized RRG T to investigate instructor management of disruptive student behaviors (Chesebro & Lyon, 2020). Study participants were asked to describe a disruptive classroom incident that was or was not handled effectively by a faculty member (Chesebro & Lyon, 2020). Findings indicated that instructors who handled disruptions most effectively utilized a balanced approach to managing both rhetorical and relational goals during the incident (Chesebro & Lyon, 2020). Study conclusions noted “the importance of being attentive to both rhetorical and relational issues as effective guiding principles to resolve [disruptive classroom] incidents well” (Chesebro & Lyon, 2020, p. 152).

Use of RRG T

Numerous studies have highlighted the importance of both rhetorical and relational instructor behaviors in the establishment of positive faculty-student rapport (Chesebro & Lyon, 2020; Goldman et al., 2017; Kaufmann & Frisby, 2017; Mansson, 2016; Myers, Goodboy & Member of COMM 600, 2014; Xie & Derakhshan, 2021). Mottet et al. (2006) asserted that “when students’ academic needs and relational needs are

met, students will be more satisfied with their classroom experience” (p. 269). Defining the perceptions and identified needs of today’s students through this framework more clearly defined the steps necessary to create a satisfying educational experience for the Generation Z students currently engaging on college and university campuses. Student insights and perspectives contemplated through this theoretical lens provided clarity of both demonstrated student needs and preferences in the college classroom as it related to faculty-student rapport. The exploration of the preferences of Generation Z students related to faculty-student rapport and faculty caring was strengthened by a foundation in RRG. These categorical insights assisted in providing practical recommendations and applications for higher education faculty and practitioners who work to meet the needs of Generation Z learners.

Conclusion

This review of the literature outlined basic elements of generational study and summarized how scholars have depicted the traits, needs, motivations, and expectations of Generation Z. The chapter also explored aspects of instructor-student rapport and elements that create more meaningful relationship between student and instructor. Mottet et. al’s (2006) Rhetorical and Relational Goal Theory was also presented as a suitable lens for the study of instructor-student rapport in the higher education setting. With mounting pressure to retain students and an increased recognition of the “myriad of ways that faculty contribute to student success” (Miller & Mills, 2019, p. 81) scholars have asserted that institutions would be remiss if not acknowledging the unique expectations of Generation Z students. (Miller & Mills, 2019).

Gen Z has expressed preference for faculty who are authentic, and accessible (Kirby & Thomas, 2022). Scholars have noted that greater levels of hope, pride, and joy were reported when students identified the presence of emotional support from their instructor (Titsworth et al., 2013). The literature indicated that establishing positive rapport with students was much less complicated than many would perceive (Frisby et al., 2024) and has established the powerful impact of both modest instructor efforts and mindful teaching methods. I incorporated observations and conclusions of the presented scholarly literature while illustrating and expounding on my established research methodology in Chapter 3.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

My review of the literature in Chapter 2 explored generational definitions and identified significant characteristics and preferences of Generation Z. The chapter also illustrated essential components of faculty interactions and examined important elements of the establishment of meaningful faculty-student rapport for Gen Z students. Informed by the literature, in this chapter I have described my methodological decisions, and provided rationale for those determinations based on the purpose of my study and the exploration of my established research questions. Explanations include research choices regarding the study's sample, site, and included participants. I also detail data collection and analysis processes, exploring methods of verification to provide confidence in the quality of research to be conducted. This research was guided by the following questions:

1. How do Gen Z students describe their interactions related to instructor-student rapport?
2. What do Gen Z students characterize as most significant in the establishment of meaningful instructor-student rapport?

Research Design and Rationale

I conducted a basic qualitative study working with students at a southeastern public Research I institution. My study focused on the perspectives, experiences, and preferences of Gen Z students related to faculty-student rapport in the university classroom.

Scholars have emphasized “the key idea behind qualitative research is to learn about the problem or issue from participants...” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 182). Authors have also asserted that qualitative research can allow investigators to “focus on learning the meaning that the participants hold about the problem or issue...” (Creswell & Creswell 2018, p. 182). Recognizing the complexity of individual meaning (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) in the establishment of faculty-student rapport and instructor/student relationship, qualitative inquiry offered the capacity to study multidimensional aspects of classroom rapport without predicted value or significance. Grant and Lincoln (2021) noted that “social constructions are shaped by people’s social interactions and influenced by their attitudes, values, beliefs, prejudices, biases, stereotypes, and the like” (p. 4). Acknowledging that individual perspectives and generational characteristics can impact the establishment and understanding of classroom rapport, a qualitative approach to the research was appropriate. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) affirmed that “qualitative research is based on the belief that knowledge is constructed by people in an ongoing fashion as they engage in and make meaning of an activity, experiences, or phenomenon” (p. 23). This perspective aligned closely with the purpose of my study as I sought to explore the phenomenon of faculty-student rapport.

Basic qualitative study has been noted to be an appropriate methodology for researchers seeking to explore the worldviews and perspectives of study participants (Merriam, 2002; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Recognizing that the foundation of my study required investigation into the classroom experiences of students and an exploration of the construction and interpretation of those experiences, I chose to conduct a basic

qualitative study for my research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Worthington, 2013). Seeking to assess, analyze, and understand the establishment of valuable faculty-student rapport in the context of the university classroom created a suitable investigative scenario for a basic qualitative research method. To answer my research questions, I sought to make meaning out of student experiences and ascertain important elements of the perceived value of shared experiences (Worthington, 2013). Acknowledging that varying social realities can influence the constructs of study participants, I utilized multiple aspects of the constructivist approach through participant observations (recorded in journals/diaries) and follow-up participant interviews as data collection methods (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Below is a diagram of my research approach (Figure 1).

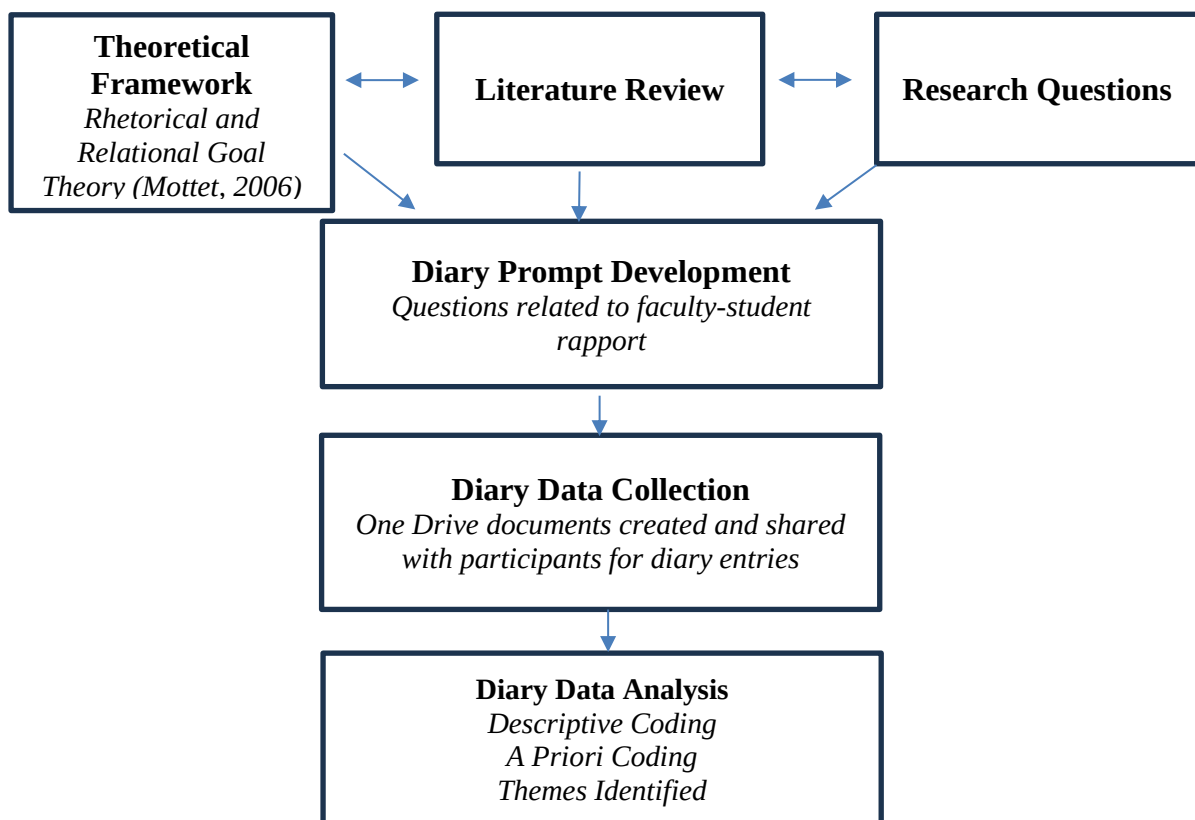


Figure 1 Visual Representation of Research Design

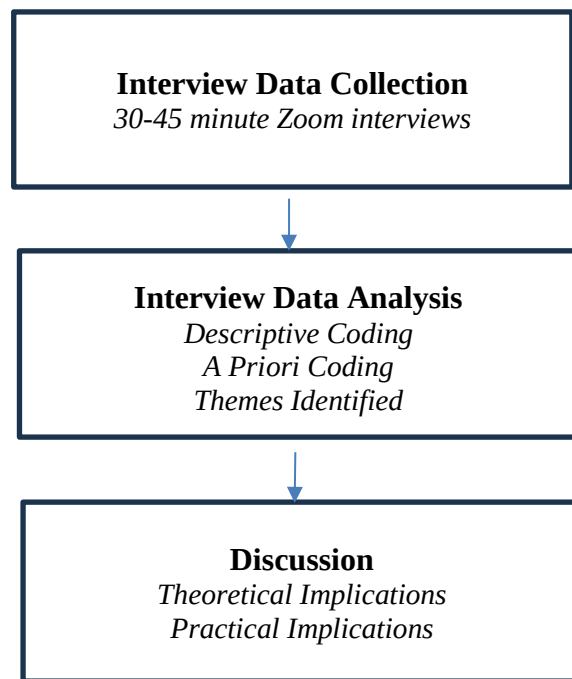


Figure 1 Continued

Sample

I employed a purposeful sampling approach to identify individual study participants that represented both Generation Z (students born between 1995 and 2010) (Chicca & Shellenbarger, 2018; Loveland, 2017; Seemiller et al., 2020; Wright & Nichols, 2021), and students enrolled in a general education communication studies course at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. A purposeful sample strategy was employed to gather participants for my study as my research sought to reflect “the average person, situation, or instance of the phenomenon of interest” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 97). Authors have also noted that a purposeful sampling method utilizes a specific sample of individuals from which an understanding and insight about the research question can be uncovered (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Seidman, 2019).

Purposeful sampling was also referenced in the literature as a commonly used approach by educational researchers (Stratton, 2024). Patton (1990) asserted that the strength of purposeful sampling is the opportunity to select cases that are information-rich for in-depth study. Patton (1990) further emphasized that the concept provides researchers the ability to learn from perspectives central to the research purpose, therefore referred to as purposeful sampling. Based on my population of interest, a purposeful sampling approach was appropriate as it offered the ability to select participants based on specific characteristics and experiences (Stratton, 2024) to explore perspectives related to faculty-student rapport.

My study focused on the experiences of Gen Z students enrolled in a required general education communication studies course at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. This course is required for most university majors and therefore offered an appropriate cross-section of student perspectives. In phase 1 of my research, I communicated with faculty of both offered communication studies general education courses, seeking volunteers from various course sections to complete diary entries (with a goal of 15-24 total study participants). To review my email to faculty, and the Canvas announcement, and the script provided for student participant recruitment, please see Appendices A, B & C. Diary entries explored student perceptions and preferences related to how they experienced faculty-student rapport over a two-week period (See Table 1). This allowed me to examine the establishment of rapport for students in two courses with similar themes but variations in assignments and content. Phase 2 of my research consisted of semi-structured individual interviews focused on the content gathered

through diary entries, with a sample of participant volunteers who agreed to continue participation in the study at the conclusion of phase 1 (with an initial goal of 7-12 interview participants).

Table 1

Study Sample Details

**5 students did not disclose which Communication Studies class they were enrolled in*

Class title	Course description	Number of study participants
CMST 210 – Public Speaking	Preparation and delivery of informative and persuasive speeches. Topics include research, organization, adapting to an audience, topic selection, reasoning, and evaluating the discourse of others.	*7-12
CMST 240 – Business and Professional Communication	Basic principles of communication within organizations. Topics and activities may include organizational/communication theory, group problem solving, case studies, interviewing, and formal presentations.	*7-12

Site and Participants

Site

Students who contributed diary entries and participated in individual interviews for my study were enrolled in a required general education communication studies course at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK). A large, public, Research I university located in the Southeast, UTK was founded in 1794, and is the state’s flagship university.

Douglass (2016) noted that the term “flagship university” often referred to a university that traditionally took “a leadership position in a growing network of public institutions” (p. 2) throughout the country in the mid-1800s. UTK is also a designated land-grant university (University of Tennessee, 2024) funded by federal support with the passage of the 1862 Morrill Act with a focus on agriculture and the mechanical arts (Croft, 2019). Because of these two distinctions, the university governance traditionally prioritizes access, creating a diverse student body representative of various cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, making the student body an attractive sample for generational research study.

The general education communication studies courses are required of most majors and therefore boast a large overall enrollment (numbering approximately 4,000 students a year). The large number of students and the diversity of majors and student backgrounds represented made these courses an attractive option for my research study. Additionally, the class size for both courses is limited to only 23 students by UTK’s Communication Studies Department. As perceived student learning is positively related with professor availability (Chapman & Ludlow, 2010), the smaller class size offered unique perspectives on student connections and experiences. Literature has emphasized that noted potential contextual influences of the study (like those indicated) are an important consideration, as sound qualitative research must account for situational effects which can impact participant perspectives (Korstjens & Moser, 2017; Seidman, 2019).

Participants

Participants for this study were Gen Z students enrolled in a required general education communication studies course at UTK. Gen Z represents close to 24% of the U.S. population (Chicca & Shellenbarger, 2018) and is largely the student makeup of traditional university college campuses throughout the country. The over 4,000 students enrolled year-round in an introductory communication studies class reflect over 10% of UTK's more than 38,000 undergraduate student enrollment (University of Tennessee, 2024).

My interest in the experiences of general education communication studies students at UTK was inspired by the unique dynamics of the courses. Due to the number of speeches required, class sizes are capped at 23 students to ensure ample presentation time is provided for student speakers. This smaller class size provided more opportunity for instructor-student interactions and the creation of strong instructor-student rapport. Also unique to these specific courses was the element of speech anxiety. Fear of public speaking is common, and students enrolled in general education communication studies courses present a minimum of five speeches throughout the term, which can create anxiety and discomfort for many students. I was interested to learn about students' perceptions of rapport in the communication studies classroom and the impact of positive (or negative) instructor-student rapport on a student's comfort and confidence level when completing speaking assignments.

This study sought volunteer participants from multiple introductory communication studies courses. I hoped to enroll 15-24 total study participants across

multiple class sections for phase 1 of my study (See Table 2). To review my email communication to potential study participants, please see Appendix D. Prior to beginning phase 1 of my study, students completed an Initial Study Questionnaire to verify the participant's birth year and verify that they were 18 years of age or older, for appropriate inclusion in the study. To review my *Initial Study Questionnaire*, please see Appendix E. After confirming that study participants were members of Gen Z, students completed diary entries responding to prompts regarding rapport they experienced with their faculty member in their communication studies classroom. During phase 2 of my study, I sought to work with 7-10 volunteers from the original group of study participants, to conduct semi-structured individual interviews that would clarify and expand on information shared in the initial diary entries. To review my *E-mail Invite for Phase 2 Participation*, please see Appendix F. Guetterman (2015) noted that information richness should be prioritized over sampling size in a meaningful qualitative inquiry. Seidman in 2019 also suggested that sufficiency is critical – one must determine that the number of study participants can sufficiently reflect a range of perspectives from the population. These perspectives influenced my decisions regarding study sample size.

Utilizing a network of general education Communication Studies faculty at the university, I purposefully identified possible student participants that met study criteria (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Seidman, 2019). Efforts were made to balance participant representation from classes led by both male and female faculty as multiple studies have noted potential gender bias in student expectations for university faculty (El-Alayli et al., 2018; MacNeill et al., 2015). Because interest in the study restricted balance of faculty

gender, I had to cede those efforts. Attempts were similarly made to balance the gender of student participants. Efforts were also made to balance representation from sections of both courses regarding the number of class meetings per week. I worked to include participants in classes that met both twice a week (on Tuesdays and Thursdays) and three times a week (Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays) to note any impact on rapport that have been a result of weekly faculty encounters.

I conducted an initial meeting with study participants to clarify study expectations (e.g., detailed diary descriptions, sharing candid and honest perceptions and expectations, etc.) and notified them of monetary incentives for completion of diary entries and interview participation, if selected. I also discussed established processes created to maintain and protect confidentiality of participant identity, diary entries, and individual interview responses. To review my scripted agenda for my *Meeting with Student Study Participants*, please see Appendix G. Authors have noted that “asking participants to join in a pre-diary focus group or survey study can help engender interest and later commitment to a diary study” (Hyers, 2018, p. 78). Student participant profiles appear in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Study Participants' Profiles

STUD.	STUDENT CLASSIFICATION	ACADEMIC MAJOR	ACADEMIC COLLEGE
1	Senior	Microbiology	College of Arts and Sciences
2	Sophomore	Kinesiology	College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences

Table 2 continued

3	Sophomore	Political Science & Sustainability	College of Arts and Sciences
4	Sophomore	Marketing	Haslam College of Business
5	Freshman	Finance & Accounting	Haslam College of Business
6	Junior	Neuroscience	College of Arts and Sciences
7	Freshman	Accounting	Haslam College of Business
8	Freshman	Biological Sciences	College of Arts and Sciences
9	Sophomore	Kinesiology	College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences
10	Junior	Political Science	College of Arts and Sciences
11	Sophomore	Finance & Supply Chain Management	Haslam College of Business
12	Freshman	Human Development & Family Science	College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences
13	Freshman	Psychology	College of Arts and Sciences
14	Freshman	Exploratory	College of Arts and Sciences
15	Freshman	Management	Haslam College of Business
16	Sophomore	Supply Chain Management	Haslam College of Business
17	Sophomore	Business Analytics	Haslam College of Business
18	Sophomore	Exploratory	College of Arts and Sciences
19	Sophomore	Kinesiology	College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences

Data Collection

Dezin and Lincoln (2018) asserted that “qualitative inquiry, which focuses on meaning in context, requires a data collection instrument that is sensitive to underlying meaning when gathering and interpreting data” (p. 10). Merriam and Tisdell (2016)

emphasized that “qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 6). To construct an accurate picture of participant meanings and experiences, data for the study was collected in two phases. During the first phase of the study, students were asked to complete diary entries reacting to specific diary prompts about their individual experiences with faculty-student rapport in their general education communication studies class (to include either CMST 210, Public Speaking, or CMST 240, Business and Professional Communication) at UTK. Phase 1 data collection began the 13th week of the term to provide ample time for the establishment of instructor-student rapport. Individual interviews in Phase 2 of the study were conducted during week 17 of the term (finals week), utilizing interview protocol created from significant themes represented in diary responses. Because this research was conducting during the spring term, most study participants had completed at least one full academic year of university course work. See Table 3 for more details on diary prompts and interview questions as they relate to the study’s research questions.

A basic qualitative study structure, analyzing both diary entries of study participants and the personal reflections of participants in a follow-up interview format, was utilized to explore the observations, perceptions, and preferences of Gen Z students related to faculty-student rapport in the university classroom. Corti (1993) noted that “the diary-interview method where the diary keeping period is followed by an interview asking detailed questions about the diary entries is considered to be one of the most reliable methods of obtaining information” (p. 1). This approach allowed me to

triangulate data exploring participant observations, experiences, opinions, and preferences using two varying forms of qualitative data.

Literature has confirmed the intriguing prospect of a diary-based research approach, noting the value of entries written in the participants' own words, highlighting what they personally feel is important and relevant (Alaszewski, 2006). This open-ended approach to data collection offers participants the opportunity to share thoughts, ideas, opinions, and perspectives freely, unconstrained by defined categories, instruments, or preconceived expectations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Duck (1991) asserted that diaries provide a strong base of description for naturally occurring social behaviors. The value of diaries as a method for data collection was also noted by Hyers (2018) who asserted that "...the method is as flexible as other qualitative methods and can be adapted to suit a variety [of] research questions" (p. vi). Collecting data from participants through this approach allowed Gen Z students to describe their experiences and preferences related to faculty-student rapport honestly and openly. Literature has also emphasized the "rich and compelling" (Hyers, 2018, p. vi) nature of data collected through diary entry, further bolstering this choice for data collection.

Several studies have utilized the diary-based research approach successfully for rich and detailed data collection. In Pearson and Child's (2008) study, researchers explored the influence of biological sex on student public speaking grades. The goal of the study was to account for previous experience and preparation time to determine if biological sex did truly impact class grades. Through journal entries at the beginning of class, students reported the time and effort they had exerted (since the previous class

meeting) to prepare for the upcoming speech assignment (Pearson & Child, 2008). In Thompson's 2008 study, student participants were asked to write detailed diary entries describing a supportive effort a fellow student made regarding academic help or support. The author stated that, "the diary logs proved extremely helpful in learning about the supporting interactions which occurred between students" (Thompson, 2008, p. 127). Another study utilized diary entries to determine what type of social support students engaged with as members of Collegiate Recovery Communities (support sources for college students in recovery) (Knapp et al., 2021). Study authors noted that the use of diaries for data collection permitted "researchers to identify the phenomena that matter at different times and contexts for a single individual as well as identify those phenomena that differentiate individuals from one another" (Knapp et al., 2021, p. 2).

Scholars have further asserted that interviewing is often the best "avenue of inquiry" (Seidman, 2019, p. 10) when seeking to determine student experiences and the meaning students assign to those experiences (Seidman, 2019). Qu and Dumay (2011) further noted that "interviews provide a useful way for researchers to learn about the world of others..." (p. 239). Literature has indicated that the accessible, flexible nature of a semi-structured interview provides the possibility of disclosing essential and frequently hidden features of human behavior (Qu & Dumay, 2011). Authors have also suggested that when paired as a research strategy, diaries and interviews can provide rich, supplemental information, clarifying participant experiences (Corti, 1993). In seeking to learn about the experiences of Gen Z students and their perspectives on faculty-student rapport, a combined data collection approach that utilized both diary entries and semi-

structured interviews allowed me to maximize discovery and helped me “elicit more elaborate [participant] responses” (Qu & Dumay, 2011, p. 246).

Table 3

Inquiries Based on Research Questions

Research Question	Diary Prompt(s)	Interview Question(s)
1. How do Gen Z students describe their interactions related to instructor-student rapport?	1, 4, 5	1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11
2. What do Gen Z students characterize as most significant in the establishment of meaningful instructor-student rapport?	1, 2, 3, 4, 6	1, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11

Diaries

The usefulness of diaries as a method for qualitative research has been confirmed by authors who have asserted, “solicited diaries can also increase the visibility and significance of routine or everyday processes which might be regarded as mundane aspects of everyday life” (Kenten, 2010, p. 3). Because rapport in the classroom may seem a basic, ingrained aspect of the classroom experience, asking students to focus on this aspect of their academic experience through diary reflections allowed analysis of a sometimes-overlooked aspect of the student experience. Asking students to reflect on their experiences each class meeting day also promoted sharper recollection of class occurrences and significant incidents or examples of strong or weak faculty-student rapport (Alaszewski, 2006). The diary method also provided opportunity for regular

student reflection on rapport over a more prolonged period of class meetings (Hyers, 2018).

Study participants were asked to complete diary entries on class meeting days for a two-week period. UTK undergraduate classes typically meet on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays for 50 minutes or on Tuesdays and Thursdays for 75 minutes. This means that students completed 4-6 diary entries based on the days their communication studies class met during the week. Participants were asked to complete a detailed response to the diary prompt each class meeting day, related to their individual experience with faculty-student rapport in their general education communication studies class.

Prior to beginning diary entry data collection, I held both individual and group Zoom meetings for study participants to provide specific instructions on diary entry, expected detail/length of personal diary reflections, and participant incentives for successful completion of phase 1 of the study. I also clarified that a portion of study participants would be selected for phase 2 of the study and explained additional incentives for participation in phase 2. I confirmed participants' consent to study participation by securing a signed consent form created with guidance from the University of Tennessee Institutional Review Board Informed Consent Template (2018). To review my Participant Consent Form, please see Appendix H.

A Microsoft form was utilized to collect diary entries, and prompts were sent to student participants on the day of their communication studies class meeting for a period of two weeks. The diaries were maintained in a Microsoft One Drive file that restricted access to only the study participant and the researcher through sign-in and password

protection. This prohibited outside access to diary entries and protected participant and data privacy and confidentiality. This method of diary entry also allowed me to read entries as they were submitted and provided the opportunity to send reminders to students who had not completed their diary entry for that day’s class meeting. Creating an electronic form for diary entry promoted easier completion of diary entries for participants as students frequently use an electronic platform for academic collaboration on papers and projects. A 2016 survey of over 350 students from 40 higher education institutions throughout the U.S. indicated that 78% of today’s students use Google Docs to collaborate when writing group papers for academic assignments (Richman, 2016). A familiar electronic format for diary submission made completing diary entries easy and accessible for study participants. Digital entries collected via a Microsoft form facilitated an easier and more efficient process for data analysis in later stages of the project.

Diary prompts were created based on the study’s research questions and related research. The table below details both the research questions and themes related to each developed diary prompt (See Table 4). To review my completed Diary Prompts including the definition of rapport shared with study participants, please see Appendix I.

Table 4

Diary Prompts Based on Research Questions & Research Themes

Research Theme Abbreviations: FC= Faculty Communication, TBSE= Teacher Behaviors & Student Engagement, DIB= Detrimental Instructor Behaviors, ML= Motivation & Learning, RC= Rapport & Caring, CV= Confirmation & Validation, AEB= Authenticity, Emotion Support & Belonging

Diary Prompt	Research Question(s)	Research Theme(s)
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Think about your CMST 210 or CMST 240 class and share a detailed example of faculty-student rapport that you have experienced or observed. (Please share details about this example of faculty-student rapport including what happened in the interaction, language used (if choice of language impacted rapport), and any specific aspects of this example of rapport that you think are particularly important.	1 & 2	FC, TBSE, CV
Reflecting on your CMST 210 or CMST 240 class, how do you feel faculty-student rapport impacts your experience as a student in this class? Does it have a positive or negative impact? Is faculty-student rapport something you value or is it not an important aspect of your student experience?	2	ML
Think about your CMST 210 or CMST 240 class and share what aspect of faculty-student rapport in this class is most important or significant to your experience as a student (if it matters at all). If it is helpful, you can share a story or example of an interaction with your faculty member that was particularly valuable.	2	TBSE, RC, AEB
Reflecting on your experience in your CMST class, what are some examples of things said or done by your faculty member that most significantly impact the creation of meaningful faculty-student rapport in that class? If meaningful rapport is not present in your classroom, what do you think is missing that would help to create it?	1 & 2	FC, TBSE, DIB, RC, CV, AEB
Think about your CMST 210 or CMST 240 class and share an example of a class interaction that demonstrated or helped to build rapport. Please describe the interaction in detail. Did this interaction involve just one student, multiple students, the entire class? What was the subject and purpose of this interaction? What was the result of the interaction?	1	FC, TBSE, ML, RC, CV, AEB
As you reflect on faculty-student rapport in your CMST class and in your overall experience at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, how would you characterize the importance rapport in your student journey? Share examples of things that matter and/or don't matter.	2	FC, TBSE, DIB, ML, RC, CV, AEB

Semi-Structured Interviews

Authors have stressed that a semi-structured interview format is an appropriate approach for addressing issues related to a study's research questions while also providing flexibility to respond to new ideas produced through study inquiry (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Based on these perspectives, semi-structured interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) were conducted during the second phase of data collection in an effort to clarify ideas and concepts shared in participant diary entries during phase 1 of the study. A semi-structured interview format (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) provided the opportunity to follow-up on diary reflections related to faculty-student rapport, allowed for exploration of factors students assessed to be impactful faculty behaviors, and also allowing opportunity for follow-up questions to valuable and intriguing respondent reflections (Busetto et al., 2020). Literature has asserted that, "interviewing is most consistent with people's ability to make meaning through language" (Seidman, 2019, p. 13). This perspective informed my choice to conduct semi-structured interviews in phase 2 of the research.

I conducted a 30 to 45-minute interview with study participants via Zoom, utilizing the software's ability to provide a detailed transcript of recorded meetings and interviews. After concluding the interviews, I saved transcripts to my OneDrive cloud-based storage which is password-protected and requires Duo two-factor authentication. Next, I reviewed the created transcripts and corrected any errors that might have occurred in the automated transcription process. After coding, interview analysis, and transcript

correction occurred, I destroyed Zoom recordings to protect the confidentiality of my study participants (Seidman, 2019).

The essence of in-depth interviewing is an interest in appreciating both the lived experience of others and the “meaning they make of that experience” (Seidman, 2019, p. 8). Seeking to understand the student experience in a university general education communication studies classroom, I created an interview protocol designed to enrich initial study findings gathered in phase 1 of the study. Patton (2015) outlined six types of interview questions, three of which were utilized in my study in various capacities. Reflecting on important themes noted in participant diary entries, I employed experience and behavior questions, opinion and values questions, and feeling questions. Experience and behavior questions are designed to assess things a person does or experiences - a typical day, for instance (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Opinion and values questions seek to determine a participant’s thoughts and feelings about a particular subject (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Feeling questions intend to assess a respondent’s feelings or emotions about a topic or experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I also utilized a “grand tour” open-ended question mentioned in Seidman (2019) while referencing Spradley’s 1979 work. A grand tour question can offer participants flexibility without presumption when reconstructing a personal experience (Seidman, 2019). A sampling of each type of the aforementioned questions was utilized in the participant interviews to supplement information shared through personal reflections in diary entries during phase 1. Because interview protocol in phase 2 of my study was constructed based on data gathered in

phase 1, specific interview questions were unable to be tested prior to initiation of the study.

Interview questions for phase 2 data collection were created to further explore themes identified through phase 1 diary prompt responses. Questions created probed phase 1 themes while continuing to return to the study’s research questions and rapport-related research. The table below details research questions and themes related to each developed interview question (See Table 5). To review my entire interview protocol, please see Appendix J.

Table 5

Interview Questions Based on Research Questions & Research Themes

Research Theme Abbreviations: CM= Communication & Messaging, BE= Behaviors & Engagement, DIB= Detrimental Instructor Behaviors, ML= Motivation & Learning, RC= Rapport & Caring, CV= Confirmation & Validation, AEB= Authenticity, Emotion Support & Belonging

Type of Interview Questions (Patton, 2015): EB= Experience & Behavior Question, OV= Opinion & Values Questions, FQ= Feeling Question, GT= Grand Tour Question

Interview Question	Research Question	Research Theme(s)	Type of Question (Patton, 2025)
Think back to the first few days and weeks of class. What are some things your professor did to begin to create rapport in the classroom?	1 & 2	CM, BE, CV, AEB	EB, OV
Follow Up: Were there any missed opportunities or things they could have done better?			
As your professor established a regular classroom environment, did they focus	1	CM, BE, RC, CV, AEB	EB, OV

Table 5 continued

on building rapport with the entire class,
with individual students, both?

Was the classroom environment relatively consistent, or were there days that rapport seemed stronger or weaker?	1	CM, BE, RC	EB, OV
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Follow Up: If there were inconsistent days, what do you think caused the shift in rapport?

How did rapport with your instructor impact your efforts in your communication studies class?	1 & 2	ML	OV, FQ
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Think about a class where there is little faculty-student rapport, how does it compare to a class with stronger rapport?	2	CM, BE, DIB, ML, RC, CV, AEB	OV, FQ
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Do you think there are elements of grading and how faculty provide feedback on assignments that impact rapport?	1	CM, DIB, ML, RC, CV	OV, FQ
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Follow Up: Can you share an example?

What would you say is most important to you regarding your relationship with your university instructors?	2	CM, BE, DIB, ML, RC, CV, AEB	OV, FQ
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Outside of your regular class meeting time, what instructor communication or behavior positively or negatively impacts rapport?	1 & 2	CM, BE, DIB, RC, CV, AEB	OV
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Does compassion or empathy from your faculty member impact your experience in their class? Follow Up: How can they best demonstrate compassion or empathy?	1 & 2	CM, BE, DIB, ML, RC, CV, AEB	EB, OV, FQ
What efforts can faculty make to help you feel valued and/or important?	1 & 2	CM, BE, RC, CV, AEB	OV
Is there anything else that we haven't talked about that you feel is important to share?	1 & 2	CM, BE, DIB, ML, RC, CV, AEB	GT

Interview Protocol Pilot

I piloted the developed interview protocol before entering the interview phase of the research study. Seidman (2019) recommended that researchers test interview protocols with “a small number of participants” to learn “whether their research structure is appropriate for the study they envision” (p. 43). A pilot effort can help a researcher evaluate potential strengths and weaknesses in question design and assess the approximate length of a completed participant interview (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Two peers were asked to assist in the interview protocol pilot. Pilot participants reviewed the study’s research questions and were asked to determine if questions posed during the interview accurately addressed study themes and inquiries. Peer feedback and suggestions from the protocol pilot were considered for any required revisions to the interview protocol and/or the number of questions posed to study participants prior to conducting interviews in phase 2 of the study.

Data Security

Participant diaries completed for the study were maintained in a Microsoft One Drive file that restricted access to only the study participant and the researcher through sign-in and password protection. This prohibited outside access to diary entries, protecting participant and data privacy and confidentiality. Diary entries were only reviewed and analyzed by the researcher, and data shared in research findings was deidentified. To protect confidentiality, I kept a codebook with actual participant names and demographic information along with assigned participant pseudonyms. Participant consent forms were also stored on a password protected computer and/or the UT One Drive cloud-based storage which is password-protected and requires Duo two-factor authentication.

During phase 2 of my study, I conducted interviews with study participants via Zoom, utilizing the software's ability to provide a detailed transcript of recorded meetings and interviews. After concluding the interviews, I saved transcripts to my password-protected OneDrive cloud-based storage which requires two-factor authentication. The Zoom recordings and interview transcripts were only listened to and reviewed by myself, as the researcher, and pseudonyms were used throughout interview transcripts, data analysis, and reporting. After coding, interview analysis, and transcript correction occurred, I destroyed Zoom recordings, maintaining only transcripts in a password-protected environment to protect the confidentiality of study participants (Seidman, 2019). All collected research data will be destroyed one year after completion of my degree program.

Data Analysis

Literature has highlighted the ongoing nature of data analysis in qualitative research and has conveyed that data collection and analysis can and should be a simultaneous process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Noting suggestions posed by Bogdan and Biklen in 2011, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) recommended that qualitative researchers, “plan data collection sessions according to what you find in previous observations” (p. 198). These assertions have informed my choice to allow data from participant diary entries to inform my interview protocol in the second phase of my study. Because data analysis can be the most challenging aspect of the qualitative research process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), explicitly defined analysis methods assisted in achieving rich and accurate research conclusions.

The diary entries submitted in phase 1 of my study were considered research-generated documents, created to uncover specifics about faculty-student rapport from the student perspective (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Authors have concurred that analysis of diary entries and/or documents does not vary greatly from the processes used for analyzing interview data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mishra & Gupta, 2024). Therefore, data analysis of diary entries mirrored the steps used in the data analysis of individual interview data collected in phase 2 of my study.

After all participant diary entries were submitted, I began to code diary entry data to “move toward consolidated meaning” (Saldaña, 2021, p. 13). A descriptive coding method was appropriate for the initial analysis of research findings as I sought to compare and evaluate the various perspectives of my student participants (Merriam &

Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2021). I utilized a conventional, inductive, descriptive approach to my coding that allowed “categories to flow from the data” as stated by Hsieh and Shannon (2005, p. 1279). This method presented the opportunity to ascertain both thoughts and experiences related to faculty-student rapport directly from my study participants (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Descriptive coding also allowed me to label important participant thoughts and reflections while summarizing data to ensure inclusion of relevant and recurring topics (Saldaña, 2021). To reduce bias and promote accuracy in coding, I continued to return to my research questions throughout the data analysis process. Additionally, I utilized *a priori* coding methods to account for identified rhetorical teaching behaviors discussed in the interviews. This encouraged proper illumination of rhetorical (academic-focused) teacher behaviors identified by students as significant in the establishment of instructor-student rapport.

I implemented the following structure for my data coding and analysis process as outlined in Saldaña (2021). First, I read through all data to gain an overview of the information shared by each study participant (Adu, 2019). Second, I went back through the data to identify and establish initial codes inductively and descriptively as a first-cycle coding process (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Saldaña, 2021). Third, I reviewed initial descriptive codes and employed a pattern coding process “as an initial analytic strategy” (Saldaña, 2021, p. 97) to determine appropriate categories for second cycle coding, reflecting on my research questions and the purpose of my study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). During this cycle, I also identified themes that appropriately categorized as one of the *a priori* codes that identified rhetorical teaching behaviors. Finally, I identified

overarching themes and concepts (Saldaña, 2021) appropriate for the final phase of data analysis through the lens of Rhetorical and Relational Goal Theory (Mottet et al., 2006). To review my Code Map for Phase 1 data analysis, please see Appendix K. For further specifics on Phase 1 code groupings and themes, please see Appendix M. As noted previously, I continued to revisit study research questions throughout the analysis process.

Semi-Structured Interview Analysis

I utilized the process for coding and analysis of participant diary entries outlined above to create codes, identify themes, and analyze the data collected from individual participant interviews in phase 2 of my study. As detailed in Saldaña (2021), I first read through all data to gain a summary perspective of the information shared by individual study participants (Adu, 2019). Next, I reviewed the data to identify and establish initial codes inductively and descriptively (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Saldaña, 2021). Third, I assessed initial descriptive codes and determined appropriate categories for second cycle coding (Saldaña, 2021). To minimize bias and promote accuracy in coding, I continued to return to my research questions throughout each step of data analysis. As noted above, I also identified appropriate themes as *a priori* codes that recognized rhetorical teaching behaviors during this cycle. Lastly, I identified overarching themes and concepts (Saldaña, 2021) appropriate for the final phase of data analysis through the lens of Rhetorical and Relational Goal Theory (Mottet et al., 2006). To review my Code Map for Phase 2 data analysis, please see Appendix L. For further specifics on Phase 2 code groupings and themes, please see Appendix N.

I utilized Rhetorical and Relational Goal Theory (Mottet et al., 2006) as a lens through which to assess student perceptions and preferences related to student-faculty rapport. Student insights and perspectives contemplated through this theoretical lens provided clarity of both demonstrated student needs and preferences in the college classroom as it related to faculty-student rapport. Utilizing *a priori* codes to recognize student reflections and data themes related to rhetorical (academic-focused) teaching behaviors allowed me to address any bias I might have as a faculty member who employs a heavily relationally focused teaching approach. Defining the perceptions and identified needs of today's students through Rhetorical and Relational Goal Theory (Mottet et al., 2006) helped to more clearly define the steps necessary to create a satisfying educational experience for the Generation Z students currently engaging on college and university campuses.

Ethical Safeguards

Due to the nature of my research, it was important to ensure that none of my own students participated in the study. Such a strong, personal connection would create challenges that might accentuate researcher bias and cloud judgements and decision making in the data collection and analysis phases of my study. Further, safety and comfort of the participant is a paramount ethical consideration in the execution of any research project as researchers work to uphold the standard to “do no harm” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.261). Asking my own students to participate in a study I was leading examining rapport in the classroom could quickly create discomfort for participants. Due to an extreme power imbalance, student respondents might worry about retaliation or

negative consequences in response to any negative opinions and/or perspectives they may have shared related to elements of instructor-student rapport (Seidman, 2019). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) also addressed the concern of power imbalance and potential threat to a study participant in their discussion of ethical challenges posed by a researcher's established relationship with study participants.

My research design utilized a nested sampling, asking student participants in phase 1 of the study to volunteer to participate in follow-up interviews in phase 2 of my study. The extensive time participants spent in the study required clearly communicated procedures offering opportunity for participants to withdraw participation or reevaluate their participation consent if they became overburdened with the research process (Poth et al., 2023). Creswell and Creswell (2018) cautioned that an essential ethical consideration for researchers must be to “avoid exploitation of participants” (p. 94). Poth et al. (2023) also alerted researchers to potential participant burdens and encouraged clear and reasoned expectations on behalf of study participants. Authors have also suggested that to avoid participant exploitation, “there needs to be some reciprocity back to the participants for their involvement in your study. This might be a small reward for participating...” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018 p. 94). To ensure reciprocity, I offered student participants a gift card to a popular local food vendor as a “thank you” for their time, energy, and commitment to the research study.

Finally, the confidentiality of research participants and participant instructors was prioritized throughout my study. My study design required careful protection of participant and instructor identities throughout both phases of the research. While

instructors did not directly participate in the study, due to the potentially sensitive nature of information that student participants shared about their instructors and classroom experiences, protecting identities and the confidentiality of students and their professors was of upmost importance. Creswell and Creswell (2018) emphasized the importance of respecting participant confidentiality as a valued ethical consideration. The confidentiality of participants and professors was accomplished by utilizing aliases or pseudonyms throughout data collection, analysis, and research reporting. I implemented processes in my data collection and coding processes to “protect the identity of the participant” (Seidman, 2019, p. 71), placing great emphasis on this paramount ethical consideration.

I would be negligent if I did not address the important role played by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) in the ethical considerations of my research study. Seidman (2019) explained that the “local IRB’s function is to protect the rights and welfare of participants in research conducted under the auspices of the institution” (p. 63). By submitting my proposed research study for review by the IRB, I was better able to “assess the potential for risk to participants” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 91) in my study. This process empowered me to carefully review and consider any possible risk or harm posed to my study participants while also providing an additional “check” of those potential risks by an outside entity. Seidman (2019) reminded researchers, “... rather than being an obstacle, IRB review, when done well, almost always leads researchers to a heightened awareness of important ethical issues embedded in their proposed research” (p. 65).

Methods of Verification

Trustworthiness

For qualitative researchers, trustworthiness is a key underpinning to establishing sound scholarly work (Shenton, 2004). Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated, “the basic issue in relation to trustworthiness is simple: How can an inquirer persuade his or her audience... that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of” (p. 290). Merriam & Tisdell (2016) discussed the concepts of “credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability” (p. 239) as components of study trustworthiness reaffirming assertions by Lincoln and Guba (1985). To provide confidence in the quality of research conducted and the findings produced, researchers can take several steps to construct a sound and trustworthy study.

Credibility

Questions of credibility address the validity and accuracy of data included in the qualitative study (Shenton, 2004). One method for promoting credible findings is utilizing a triangulation process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Shenton, 2004). Triangulation “involves corroborating evidence from different sources” (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 208) to increase credibility and consistency in study findings. After exploring faculty-student rapport through participant diary entries, I conducted individual interviews with students to directly assess identified faculty behaviors and ask clarifying questions related to observations of rapport reported in phase 1 of the study. Prior to conducting participant interviews, I also conducted an interview protocol pilot utilizing peer input to assess the strength and accuracy of the interview question design as it related to my study’s established research questions. This additional information

gathering and test of the interview instrument provided the opportunity to triangulate observations and study findings while maximizing input from various sources, including peers. Additionally, I conducted member checks with study participants to verify the accuracy of interview data (Busetto et al., 2020; Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Shenton, 2004).

Transferability

Transferability addresses “the extent to which the finding of one study can be applied to other situations” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 253). A challenge faced by qualitative researchers is that the typical sample size of a study is much smaller than that of a traditional quantitative study, calling into question the ability to apply qualitative findings to the larger population (Shenton, 2004). Providing a detailed description of study participants, processes, and observations can enable a reader to determine if study findings are transferable to other settings, environments, or individuals of specified groups (Creswell, 2013). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) referred to this method as “rich, thick description” (p. 256). I utilized rich, thick description as I reported each step in my study including data collection, analysis of findings, and research conclusions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Dependability

“Because human behavior is never static,” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 250), the dependability (or reliability) of qualitative research findings is often called into question. Perhaps most important in confirming study trustworthiness is convincing the audience that the findings are reasonable and consistent when reflecting on data collected

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To create confidence in the dependability of study findings, "...processes within the study should be reported in detail" (Shenton, 2004, p. 71).

Merriam & Tisdell (2016) highlighted the importance of an audit trail that specifies how data were collected, how codes and categories for the data were created, and how each investigative decision was made throughout the research. I employed an audit trail technique throughout my study, creating records of choices made throughout all aspects of the investigative process.

Confirmability

Confirmability speaks to "the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest" (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006, "Lincoln and Guba's Evaluation Criteria" section). It is important to take steps to ensure study findings are reflective of the study participants and not the thoughts and biases of the researcher (Shenton, 2004). I took two beneficial steps to establish confidence in the confirmability of my qualitative findings. First, I practiced reflexivity, acknowledging personal perspectives and opinions resulting from my participation in the study (Palaganas et al., 2017). Second, I utilized both the triangulation of data and a detailed audit trail to demonstrate thorough and accurate documentation of study findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Shenton, 2004).

Positionality

As a faculty member who teaches a general education communication studies at the UTK, I have direct knowledge of the university classroom and efforts made to establish rapport and community throughout the progression of a course. In my role, I

strive to convey warmth and care to my students, and endeavor to demonstrate compassion through my teaching. My teaching approach is informed and inspired by my extensive background in student affairs and student development. Recognizing that students change and grow significantly throughout their higher education career, I challenge myself to engage and care for each student as a whole person. This conveys through the high emphasis I place on relational teaching and pursuing relational goals when interacting with and encouraging students.

My teaching approach places heavy emphasis on the relational goals and needs of my students. Building a strong community is the cornerstone of my teaching philosophy as I work to support and encourage students who encounter speech anxiety by providing a safe and non-threatening space for skill growth. I work to create connections with and amongst my students during each class meeting. To address my bias toward relational teaching approaches, I incorporated both inductive and *a priori* coding in my data analysis process. This approach provided flexibility in evaluating important elements within the data while also helping me to look for specific, pre-identified themes related to rhetorical (or traditionally academic-focused) teaching efforts that I could have potentially overlooked due to personal bias.

While some scholars have questioned the accuracy and appropriateness of generational study, I find value in exploring the preferences and perceptions of specific generations. I believe it is important for higher education institutions to recognize that the students of today may have different needs and expectations than the students of yesterday or the university students of tomorrow. I concur with Jauregui et al.'s (2020)

perspective that researchers must be cautious in their depictions of generational cohorts, recognizing the various factors and influences that impact each, specific individual. I also believe that a robust and unbiased generational study can provide significant contributions to higher education's understanding of how best to engage, challenge, and support students.

Addressing Biases

My instructional emphasis on relational teaching efforts and behaviors could have created a potential bias in my research. My belief in the importance of consistently addressing student relational needs could potentially have blinded me to the identified rhetorical faculty behaviors that students identified as contributing to feelings of care and positive rapport in the classroom. To control for this bias during the data analysis phase of my study, I utilized both inductive and *a priori* coding methods. An inductive coding process allowed me to approach student diary and interview data with an open mind learning about student feelings, experiences, and observations throughout the coding process without preconceived expectations of study findings (Saldaña, 2021). Further, I utilized *a priori* codes to identify noted rhetorical teaching behaviors (Saldaña, 2021) to provide added visibility to the importance students place on teaching behaviors outside the relational realm. By identifying codes that addressed rhetorical teaching goals and behaviors, I gave power to the identified rhetorical components that contributed to positive instructor-student rapport.

I must also acknowledge my personal biases influenced by my well-established approach to teaching as a university faculty member of over twelve years. My tenure as

both a full and part-time university instructor has allowed me to experience a litany of classroom dynamics and individual student successes and concerns. These experiences have shaped my perspectives on what I feel are important elements of faculty-student rapport. I addressed potential biases by regularly reflecting on the study's research questions and utilizing careful analysis of participant perspectives. I also analyzed data from diary entries and interview responses blindly, without knowledge of instructor identity, to prevent any influence from preconceived notions I may have had of colleague teaching practices and approaches.

Worldview/Epistemological Perspective

In 2016, Merriam & Tisdell asserted that “postpositivism recognizes that knowledge is relative rather than absolute” (p. 9). My reverence for knowledge and belief in the power of science, experimentation, and the scientific process fosters a belief in some aspect of an ultimate reality. Additional aspects of my educational and life journeys have also informed my belief that perspectives can impact our concepts and interpretations of knowledge. These beliefs and viewpoints illuminate a recognition that one aspect of my onto-epistemology is consistent with the postpositive worldview.

Not in complete opposition to the postpositivist view of relative truth is my understanding that individual experiences shape perceptions of reality. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) asserted that “the experience a person has includes the way in which the experience is interpreted. There is no ‘objective’ experience that stands outside its interpretation” (pp. 9-10). Scholars have further argued, “...at any single moment in time, we cannot direct our gaze toward each and every happening. Instead, only those aspects

that we can apprehend and appreciate are those toward which we direct our understanding processes” (Peck & Mummery, 2018, p. 392). These noted tenets of the constructionist perspective also inform and influence my worldview.

While I am comfortable with aspects of both postpositivist and constructionist worldviews, I hold thoughtful esteem for pragmatism’s ability to consider multiple worldviews and varied assumptions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Shannon-Baker (2016) asserted that “pragmatism recommends a balance between subjectivity and objectivity through the inquiry” (p. 331). Further, Creswell and Creswell (2018) asserted, “pragmatists agree that research always occurs in social, historical, political, and other contexts” (p.11). I recognize that contextual circumstances and influences impact both an individual’s perspective of an occurrence or phenomena and their personal motivations in those spaces.

One’s belief about the “nature of knowledge” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 8) defines an investigator’s approach to research. I believe that while some aspects of reality are reasonably concrete, an individual’s reflections and perceptions are shaped by their own, unique experiences. Personal, social, and cumulative perspectives impact how one defines reality, perceives phenomenon, and assesses relationships. I believe that contextual circumstances combined with a student’s cumulative academic, classroom, and personal experiences will influence a student’s perspective on both the identification of rapport and the description of the instructor-student relationship. While many students can agree in their identification of specific instructor behaviors related to instructor-student rapport, the interpretations of those behaviors and the identified intentions of

faculty efforts will vary greatly from student to student based on their cumulative perspectives. I believe that an individual's perceptions are shaped by their personal, social, and summative life experiences and that personal experiences, memories, and perceptions are entwined to determine an individual's perspectives. This understanding of the entwined nature of individual influences informed my research endeavor, methodological choices, and data analysis activities. Shannon-Baker (2016) asserted that, "Pragmatism recommends a balance between subjectivity and objectivity through inquiry" (p. 331). This worldview informed my research choices and methodological design.

Conclusion

This study was comprised of two qualitative phases of research. In phase 1 of the study, student participants completed diary entries in response to prompts related to faculty-student rapport in their general education communication studies class at the UTK. In phase 2 of the research, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted, focused on content gathered through diary entries in phase 1. Methods of verification were prioritized throughout the study to maximize confidence in the quality of research conducted. Findings of the study are discussed in Chapter 4 while implications and future recommendations are explored in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

This study sought to understand the perceptions and preferences of Gen Z students related to the establishment of instructor-student rapport in the university classroom. The study was conducted in two phases. During phase 1, 19 undergraduate students enrolled in a general education communication studies class responded to diary prompts related to faculty-student rapport in their communication studies classroom. During phase 2 of the study, seven students who participated in phase 1 agreed to participate in an individual interview further exploring themes reflected in diary prompt responses. The results of participant responses in both study phases are discussed in this chapter. Two research questions guided this study:

1. How do Gen Z students describe their interactions related to instructor-student rapport?
2. What do Gen Z students characterize as most significant in the establishment of meaningful instructor-student rapport?

Findings from both phases were organized by overarching themes and supporting concepts. Identified themes of each phase are explored including a brief explanation of the design and implementation of each data collection point.

Phase 1 Data

Phase Design

During phase 1 of my study, data were collected through diary entry. Prompts were sent to student participants via a Microsoft form that was sent directly to the student's university email. Students were asked to complete each prompt reflecting on

their experiences with instructor-student rapport in their general education communication studies class. The definition of rapport, used for purposes of this study, was shared with each diary prompt, enabling participants to revisit the concept of rapport, as needed. Six diary prompts were created with a focus on answering the study's research questions. Students were asked to complete a diary prompt each time their class met over a two-week period. Students enrolled in Tuesday/Thursday classes completed four diary prompts, while students enrolled in Monday/Wednesday/Friday classes completed six diary prompts. As mentioned previously, nineteen total student participants agreed to participate in phase 1 of the research study. Eleven student participants completed four diary prompts while eight participants completed six diary prompts.

Design Reasoning

The concept of diary entries as a method of data collection was selected to provide study participants the opportunity to respond freely without additional influence from the researcher. By providing the ability to respond freely, study participants were able to interpret the prompt as they saw fit, sharing information they felt was relevant and important in response to the prompt. Alaszewski (2006) stressed this strength of diary-based research, emphasizing the value of participant responses shared in their own words with emphasis on what they feel is valuable and relevant. Utilizing diary entries to collect data during this phase of the study provided the opportunity for participants to determine what mattered most to them regarding instructor-student rapport in the university classroom.

Creation of Prompts

Diary prompts were created to address the study's research questions through student thoughts, memories, and personal reflections. Two prompts asked students to explore themes related to both their interactions related to faculty-student rapport and what was most significant to them in the establishment of rapport. One prompt focused specifically on interactions, while the remaining three prompts placed emphasis on what was most significant in the establishment of rapport. For a detailed breakdown of each diary prompt and the research question it was designed to address, please review Table 4.

Phase 1 Themes and Findings

An initial read-through of diary entries was first conducted to gain a basic understanding of participant reflections. Next, entries were reviewed using a descriptive coding method (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2021) to identify codes, determine categories, and later identify broader themes. The identified themes and secondary categories are detailed in the following section. Principal themes explored include rapport and faculty communication, rapport and rhetorical behaviors, and rapport and environment.

Rapport and Faculty Communication

As noted in Chapter 2's review of the literature, faculty communication plays a significant factor in the establishment of faculty-student rapport. Findings from student reflections in phase 1 echo the importance of communication in establishing relationships. Open respectful communication, positive messaging, and effort to engage students were referenced so frequently, all categories appeared in the top five of the code

frequency analysis. Student participants also emphasized the importance of feeling valued through demonstrated faculty compassion and faculty interest in their lives outside of the classroom (both top ten in the frequency analysis).

Open, Respectful Communication

Multiple student participants noted the power of open and respectful communication with their instructor as a factor that helped establish and strengthen rapport in their classroom environment. Students indicated they wanted to feel respected for their thoughts and opinions, seeking to be equal and valued contributors to classroom discussions. Sophia shared that an “important aspect of faculty-student rapport in this class is the professor engaging with us...” further explaining, “[my professor] seems genuinely interested in what we have to share...”. Lily expanded on the power of feeling respected: “I feel comfortable enough in class every day to be myself and participate without fear of being wrong.” Tara emphasized how her instructor’s use of humor helped them to feel more respected, explaining that,

little moments where our professor feels comfortable joking with us makes it feel like [our instructor] is just like one of us instead of a strict and serious professor who takes [themselves] too seriously and sees [themselves] as superior to us. She continued, it “makes me respect [my instructor] more since it seems like [my professor] respects us as well, as people, not just her inferior students.”

Relatedly, students emphasized the importance of being respected as an adult. Elizabeth explained, “One example of something my [communication studies] professor did that impacted the faculty-student rapport in my class was agreeing to treat us like

adults.” She later emphasized, “[My professor] has given us every opportunity to succeed while still treating us like equals, and it has greatly influenced the faculty-student rapport in this class.” Trina noted her instructor’s mutually respectful approach to class tardies, explaining that her instructor, “made a point to tell us that if we were ever late, we could just come talk to [them] after class about it.”

Students also noted the power of respectful communication when instructors provided feedback on questions related to class content, performance, assignments, and even during class discussions. Nate expressed how much he valued the thoughtful comments his instructor provided after seeking feedback on his speech presentation, explaining: “[My professor’s] language demonstrated a sense of caution and care...”. Sam shared, “[My professor] will tell me things I can do better, but [they do] it in a way that makes you feel supported.” Noel also placed significant value on respectful language sharing, “...when a question was answered, [my professor] always found a way to reword the answer into something a little more correct instead of saying the participant was outright wrong.” She clarified further, “...I appreciate it when teachers use your answer as a foundation and spin it to be correct, so you don't feel discouraged in front of the class. This leads to an environment that fosters honest and open conversations/ answers.”

Open, respectful faculty communication also helped to create an environment where students felt safe to ask questions, challenge ideas, and even make mistakes. Nina shared,

[My instructor helps] the students know we are all humans and make mistakes/ things happen. This is so valuable in a professor, so that you can ask them

questions and talk to them when needed, instead of being afraid to get help in class.

Trina clarified, “When professors are approachable and supportive, I definitely feel more comfortable participating and asking questions.” Ivy echoed these sentiments as she explained, “When students and professors are comfortable with each other, it creates a better learning environment, and students are less afraid to communicate when they need help in the class.” Eva agreed with the above sentiments, when she shared, “Overall, the atmosphere that [my professor] had created in my [communication studies] class was inviting and comfortable; a place where I could seek advice and guidance.”

Several student respondents noted the power of faculty self-disclosure and its contribution to the development of rapport, respect, and their learning experience. Ivy explained, “I think the students feel more comfortable and encouraged to talk when [our professor] shares stories about [their] life and strays from the normal lecture to a more personal discussion.” Eva also appreciated the value of learning from faculty’s personal experiences explaining, “My professor also shared [their] own experiences throughout this unit. Through [my instructor’s] anecdotes, I was able to see how this class prepared us for entering our professional career.” Lily also shared,

[our professor] told the entire class how [they] used to struggle with public speaking and told us a story of an experience [they] had [while] speaking. I think hearing how our own teacher used to struggle..., [helped] my classmates and I feel more relaxed and feel better about the topic. This reminded us that our teacher is also human...

These final student reflections emphasized the power, influence, and impact of open, respectful communication. Sam explained, “I think the most significant part of faculty-student rapport in this class is how easy and comfortable it is to address my professor with anything I need.” Talia acknowledged, “My professor is always open to talk about anything, which I really enjoy from a student perspective.” Finally, Nate shared a powerful insight, asserting, “I’ve had instructors with a range of personalities, but I’ve found that the professors who made the biggest impact were the ones who leveraged their unique traits to demonstrate individualized respect.”

Positive Communication

In addition to open, respectful communication, student respondents frequently mentioned the power of welcoming, validating, and encouraging messages. Students reflected that positive and welcoming messages from faculty helped to strengthen rapport and create trusting environments. Sadie shared, “[My professor] is always warm and welcoming, whether it's complementing our progress or telling a funny quip, these little conversations make me more excited to go to class because I feel like I know the professor.” Lily noted, “[my professor] is always someone that is friendly, outgoing, and always has a smile on [their] face which makes [them] very approachable and easy to ask questions.” Sophia also reflected, “Today in class, my instructor greeted everyone as we walked in. [They] offered a friendly smile to each student, and most returned it.” While this may seem a basic gesture, Nina emphasized the significance of what seems to some a very small effort... “The most significant way of [establishing] faculty-student rapport in my class is through my professor being personable and welcoming to us every day.” A

positive and welcoming disposition also helped students feel more comfortable asking for help. Trina shared that when approaching her teacher after class one day, “[they] welcomed me over with an approachable attitude.” Also stating that, “when professors are approachable and supportive I definitely feel more comfortable participating and asking questions.”

In addition to a welcoming and approachable demeanor, students appreciated faculty who genuinely want them to succeed. Nate emphasized, “my professor is genuinely invested in helping me grow in my ability to speak publicly” and reflected on how much he appreciated his professor’s contagious positivity and strong sense of awareness. Ford concurred sharing, “When I see that my professor actually wants me to succeed and learn the material and is passionate about it, it makes me more willing and excited to be in class and learn the material.” When reflecting on the rapport she had experienced, Eva expressed, “[my professor] welcomed our questions and wanted us to do well.” Recounting a day in her own communication studies class, Felicia shared, “This gesture really stood out to me because it showed that the professor genuinely wants us to improve and succeed, not just grade us and move on.” Both Hannah and Sophia talked about a beginning of class ritual on speech days where their professor(s) had them stand up and ‘shake out’ their nerves and encouraged the class to take a superman pose while assuring students they could be confident that they were going to ‘rock’ their speeches. Hannah reflected, “I think this helps show our class that [our professor] believes in us and our success.”

Beyond genuinely wanting students to succeed, study respondents emphasized the impact of faculty who shared praise and validation with students, even celebrating student successes. Tara had a particularly poignant message when she reflected on her instructor's thoughtful email praising her speech presentation,

In college I feel like it is really hard to make relationships with professors since we only meet a few times a week and they typically have hundreds of students so being reached out to, to give praise is very rare and meaningful.

Sam appreciated the fact that his instructor, "gives me praise for things I do well" and Trina noted that such praise can even take place in a casual classroom discussion. She clarified, "the teacher responded with validation explaining 'Those are some really good thoughts - great takeaways'." Perhaps most touching was Tatum's reflection that when she landed an important internship, her instructor "was excited" for her and showed that she cared. Tatum shared that her instructor's reaction, "made me feel accomplished" and acknowledged, "overall, it made me feel good and it made me feel seen and special."

Engages Class

Axelson and Flick (2010) define student engagement as "how involved or interested students appear to be in their learning and how connected they are to their classes, their institutions, and each other (p. 38)." The concept of engagement was commonly noted as an important component of faculty-student rapport throughout my findings. Ford explained that "meaningful conversations, group activities, and class engagement all help[ed] add to the faculty-student rapport in my [communication studies] class." Specifics noted by study respondents included the importance of faculty

encouraging engagement, how faculty efforts to connect with students facilitated engagement, the importance of faculty approachability, and how individual engagement could also encourage students to connect with their peers.

Noel noted, “my teacher will often engage us throughout class, and we are encouraged/directed to ask questions.” Erin similarly shared, “My professor built meaningful rapport by actively engaging with students and encouraging open dialogue during discussions.” Students noted that encouraging engagement was often foundationally based in an instructor making an effort to connect with students. Felicia asserted, “when professors take the time to connect with students, it creates a more supportive and engaging classroom environment.” Sadie and Erin both reflected on efforts their instructors made to connect with students. Sadie shared that her professor would start one day of class each week asking students to share “something good” (offering an opportunity to share good news in their lives) while Erin’s instructor would ask about “anything interesting” that may have happened since class last met, encouraging students to sharing interesting stories.

Faculty approachability was noted to be an important aspect of successful student engagement. Sam noted that his professor “makes it fun and engaging by being someone the students want to talk to.” Noel stressed the benefits of having casual conversations in class around various topics. She clarified that casual conversation helped students “to feel more confident talking in class”. Nate explained that a faculty member’s formal or informal approach to communication mattered little. He emphasized, “it’s more about whether they make themselves approachable and adaptable.”

Study participants noted that engaging individual students in class discussions could quickly lead to student-to-student connections and an improved sense of community engagement. Erin shared,

at the beginning of the semester in my [communication studies] class, my instructor would give us a question that we would then discuss with smaller groups before joining into a class-wide discussion. In doing so, students in the class were not only able to learn more about each other, but form relationships. Trina explained the impact of a specific class activity designed as an icebreaker and to encourage engagement when she shared, “the whole class participated, and it helped us laugh and get to know each other better.” Noel also noted how individual engagement and peer-to-peer engagement often go hand-in-hand. She recalled, “my instructor always [focused] on getting us engaged in class which allow[ed] us to feel more connected with [fellow] students as well.”

Feel Valued

Students broadly noted the impact of feeling valued by their instructor in the creation of meaningful faculty-student rapport. Not surprisingly, students wanted to feel cared for by instructors and known as “a person” beyond the classroom. Acts of care and compassion were noted in different ways by study participants, but foundational elements were consistent among responses. One of the most impactful acts, noted throughout these findings, was instructors learning student names.

Students repeatedly noted the importance of feeling valued as a person, beyond just a listing on the class roster. Tara expressed,

when my professor makes individual comments or remembers upcoming events I talked about, it makes me feel valued and appreciated as not only a student, but a person, and I am more willing to be attentive and participate in class and give [my instructor] my undivided attention.

Elizabeth stressed, “being able to feel like my teacher views me as more than just another student, feeling like they value me as a person and respect me as an adult, is so important to me.” Additionally, when Tara shared with her instructor about an interview she had coming up, her teacher later asked how it went. Tara expressed that this was quite meaningful as it showed that her professor “cared about me outside of just the classroom and being [their] student.”

Likewise, demonstrated care and compassion were emphasized throughout multiple diary entries as an essential aspect of students feeling valued. Elizabeth shared, as a student, it is so nice to feel like your teachers care about you as a person. Being at a large university can sometimes make you feel very small, but professors going out of the way to get to know you and taking a genuine interest in your personality is so refreshing and so amazing.

Hannah commented she felt that beyond just being their teacher, their course professor “actually cares about our wellbeing...” Finally, Felicia explained,

a powerful example of faculty-student rapport unfolded when a student experienced an anxiety attack while giving a speech. Instead of pushing the student to continue or moving on abruptly, the professor immediately stepped in with empathy and calm reassurance. They paused the presentation, spoke gently

to the student, and gave them the option to take a break or try again later without penalty. This moment of compassion not only helped ease the student's anxiety but also reinforced a supportive classroom environment where students felt seen, respected, and safe to grow.

Students also revealed how impactful informal communication (outside of traditional curricular topics) with faculty can be in the establishment of rapport and helping students to feel valued. Tara explained, "the most important part of rapport for me is the informal communication outside of lessons." When reflecting on her relationship with her communication studies professor, she later noted, "these private and personal conversations stick with me because no other professors have this relationship with me." Lily also detailed, "our teacher always makes conversation with us which I really appreciate." Informal conversations during class time were also impactful, as Ford explained, "when a professor takes a break from the material and makes it seem like they actually want to help, it creates a strong relationship."

Noted repeatedly throughout phase 1 findings was the important and powerful impact of an instructor learning a student's name. Tatum confirmed, "one of the best moments for me was simply when [my professor] remembered my name. Not all professors take the time to do that, and it really made me feel valued." She also shared, one of the biggest things that helped build meaningful rapport in my [communication studies] class was how my professor made an effort to get to know us individually. [My instructor] remembered our names early on, which sounds small, but it really made a difference in feeling seen.

Lily also confirmed, “I like when my professor knows my face and name, it makes it easier to reach out if I am ever in need of assistance.” Eva explained, “I feel that I have a pretty good relationship with my teacher, where [they] know my name, and I feel comfortable” asking questions or seeking advice. Steve also articulated the importance of, “... learning and using students’ names early on.” He emphasized, “it made interactions feel more personal and showed that the instructor cared about us individually, not just as a class.” Sophia noted that her professor, “built strong rapport by showing genuine interest in students” while Nate summed up many of the above sentiments in this powerful statement:

...simple acts such as when a professor remembers your name or takes additional time to check on your emotional/mental state, may seem like a small act of kindness, but it adds an element of care that motivates students to show up and be present in class.

Rapport and Rhetorical Behaviors

Reflecting on Mottet et al.’s (2006) Rhetorical and Relational Goal Theory, theorists have highlighted the unique needs both students and instructors bring to the university classroom, including both relational needs and rhetorical (or academic/teaching) needs. The second major theme in phase 1 findings is rhetorical in nature – providing helpful, specific feedback. Study participants repeatedly highlighted the importance of helpful and specific feedback in creating and maintaining rapport. Respondents also frequently reflected on two additional rhetorical behaviors, the value of instructor accessibility and an instructor’s degree of helpfulness.

Helpful, Specific Feedback

Specific and helpful feedback was noted as an important contributor to faculty-student rapport throughout numerous diary entries. Students often focused on the tone of the feedback, noting the importance of positive, encouraging messages. Overall, study participants welcomed feedback that is helpful and constructive, preferring personalized and specific comments/observations. Students also placed value on clear explanations and detailed, specific clarifications as requested.

Students noted throughout their responses that a faculty effort as basic as answering a question fully (and completely) could be an important contributing element to faculty-student rapport. Trina shared,

I asked my question and [my professor] fully answered it showing where to look on my own laptop. [They] asked if there was anything else and then told me to have a great day. [My professor's] constant positive attitude and helpful nature plays a big role in how I value this course.

Eva also explained in detail the significant impact of her instructor's help in clarifying both the parameters of an assignment, and the expectations for student execution of the work. She first disclosed, "as a student, in general the most helpful rapport is when a teacher helps clarify [an] assignment." She later shared a detailed example of the importance of comprehensive and specific feedback.

For our informative speech, I struggled with my thesis heavily. I stayed after class a few times just to make sure I was on the right path. I was also struggling with meeting all of the requirements for the speech and knew that I needed help. I

cannot remember the exchanges exactly, but I had my professor read over my work and share brief feedback. The short conversation helped me to feel more confident in my speech and allowed me to get a better grade.

In addition to explicit and clarifying feedback from faculty, students also emphasized the merit of personalized feedback that specifically addressed their own speech performance or recommended areas of improvement. Sam explained that he felt nervous about presenting so many speeches in his communication studies class. Because of this anxiousness, he “went out of his way” to talk to his professor “after class or through email’ so [his instructor] could provide personalized feedback. Felicia agreed with the importance of personalized instructor feedback sharing that her professor, “invited students to meet over Zoom to review feedback from our past speeches and discuss any concerns we had about our upcoming ones.” An individual meeting that provided personalized feedback and assistance for future assignments greatly contributed to Felicia’s sense of rapport with her instructor, and ultimately, satisfaction with her classroom experience.

The tone and nature of the feedback was also referenced frequently throughout phase 1 findings, as students reflected on how the tenor of a feedback message can impact the helpfulness of advice offered and the overall relationship with the instructor. There was a clear emphasis on the value of both constructive and positive feedback throughout diary responses. Erin appreciated Zoom sessions with her instructor that offered the opportunity to practice her speeches and receive constructive “comments about what I could improve upon and change.” She specifically noted the value of “useful

and constructive feedback...”. Felicia also specifically remarked that her instructor, “... ensured each student had the opportunity to present without distractions and always offered constructive feedback right after our speeches.” Sam reflected on both the constructive elements of feedback and the importance of positive messaging when his instructor offered suggestions. He emphasized, “the feedback [my professor] provides me... is very nice, and [my instructor] always explains why and how I can improve which helps me in numerous ways.”

Accessible and Helpful

For most student respondents, helpfulness and accessibility go hand in hand. In an era where communication is instantaneous and far-reaching, today’s students may question more traditional faculty expectations for boundaries and accessibility. Prior to the option of email, texting, and countless other communication options, students were often limited to connecting with faculty outside of class during designated office hours. Today’s students reflected often on the importance of accessibility and the value of a faculty member’s willingness to go, “above and beyond.”

Eva shared that, “the most helpful thing said by my professor was that [they] wanted to help us network, even going as far as suggesting to meet with us for coffee.” Eva also reflected, “it really changed the way I viewed our rapport as teacher-student, because [our professor] was not simply answering my questions, but going beyond to offer real-world advice.” These examples reflect helpfulness, accessibility, and a willingness to go beyond required class content. Erin confirmed the power of accessibility and helpfulness in strengthening rapport, “the most significant moment of

rapport in this class is the lengths the instructor goes through to make sure we are prepared for our speeches.” Lily also resonated on the importance of helpfulness. As she reflected on rapport in her classroom, she shared that she felt her classmates were aware that “they can go to my teacher for anything they need, and [our professor] will be there to help.”

Accessibility took on many forms in the experiences of study participants. One student’s instructor shared their phone number, “if we needed to contact [them] urgently about anything, and explained that [they] would always be there to help” (Elizabeth). Another respondent (Felicia) reflected, “in my [communication studies] class, one of the most significant aspects of faculty-student rapport has been the professor’s willingness to offer individual support outside of class.” For Sam, accessibility was also defined by responsiveness to emails, and a willingness to schedule a quick Zoom meeting to provide time for individualized, follow-up questions. He summarized the value of this access when he emphasized, “I would not have been nearly as successful in this class without [my professor’s] help.”

Rapport and Environment

The most frequently identified theme in phase 1 findings was that strong faculty-student rapport facilitated the creation of a safe environment for students. Respondents emphasized that a safe environment fostered honest conversations and created space for students to feel comfortable learning and making mistakes. Study participants also emphasized that safe environments helped them to feel connected not just to their faculty member, but to their peers. Students discussed the value of a safe environment and the

impact of rapport on their participation, learning, success, and confidence. Study participants also readily acknowledged challenges posed to faculty-student rapport.

Safe Environment

Ivy reflected that a comfort in vulnerability can be created for students through strong rapport and a safe and supportive environment for learning. A similar perspective was revealed by Tatum who shared this powerful observation:

one of the most important aspects of faculty-student rapport in my [communication studies] class has been feeling comfortable in the classroom. Public speaking can be nerve-wracking, but my professor has done a great job creating a space where students feel safe to learn, try, and even mess up sometimes.

Nate disclosed that shared experiences in his class reminded him that others were nervous too and made him feel “less alone.” Upon reflecting on her faculty-student rapport experiences, Sadie stressed that her professor’s classroom “always feels like a comfortable place, even when we have to do uncomfortable things.” This is an inspiring insight into the remarkable impact a safe environment can have on student learning and growth.

A safe environment also offered unique opportunities for building and encouraging a connected community. In one diary response, Ivy explained, “our class is very comfortable with one another and that is largely due to the environment our professor creates.” Trina also noted the sense of community she experienced sharing that her classroom felt “comfortable and connected.” Sadie reflected that, “even on days where I don’t feel good or am exhausted, I don’t feel judged” in my classroom – a

poignant example of a supportive community. Tara shared that her class developed a sense of community through inside jokes and laughter.”

Rapport is Important

As noted in my literature review, scholars have determined that faculty who are excited about teaching help students to be excited about learning (Seemiller et al., 2020). This connection between rapport and learning was discussed in multiple diary entries across phase 1 findings. Felicia concluded that the faculty-student rapport present in her communication studies class had “a strong and positive impact on [her] learning experience.” She further reflected, “having that sense of connection with faculty makes the class feel more collaborative and encourages deeper learning.” Hannah also felt that she learned better when having a relationship with her professor. Ford echoed these views, stating that rapport, “makes it easier for me to learn.” When pondering the impacts of strong instructor-student rapport on her experience, Eva observed, “I think there is a difference between teachers who teach versus teachers that want their students to learn.”

Respondents also reflected regularly on how strong rapport in the classroom impacted their classroom participation and motivation. Talia explained, “I think that having a healthy relationship with my professor allows for me to stay positive and motivated to stay determined to do [well] in the class.” Nina similarly commented that rapport, “has made me more comfortable with my professor and therefore makes me want to do better.” Hannah emphasized, “when I get to know my teachers more, I feel more inclined to work hard in the class and to show more respect to my teacher.” Trina also

revealed, “overall good rapport helps me feel more connected and motivated in my classes.”

Rapport also impacted students’ feelings about their confidence and success. Felicia affirmed that her instructor’s willingness to connect with students individually to provide feedback helped her feel “more confident, prepared, and valued as a learner.” Erin also emphasized that rapport demonstrated “throughout the semester ... left me feeling more prepared, and comfortable when speaking in a public setting.” Ivy stressed the importance of the relationship between rapport and student success explaining that she felt, “the professors at UT... do their best to build strong relationships with their students, which overall leads to a more successful semester for everyone.” Lily agreed with Ivy’s assertions explaining that strong rapport and a good relationship with her instructor impacted her “grades and overall college experience.”

Acknowledged Challenges to Rapport

While students readily recognized the value of rapport, they were also realistic about challenges that could make creating rapport in the classroom more difficult for instructors. Elizabeth thoughtfully reflected,

feeling like a professor respects me... and cares about my wellbeing inside and outside of class has made my experience in this class so amazing. I know that this relationship isn't always achievable, as some classes can have hundreds of students, but if I could have this experience in every smaller-scale class I take, it would improve my educational experience as a whole.

While considering the value of rapport in her communication studies class, Eva noted, “in some of my classes I am unfamiliar with my teacher because of big-sized classes or because the professor is hard to reach.” Noel felt that large classes presented a great challenge for the establishment of rapport when she suggested, “this would obviously not be as effective in a lecture class [as] we have to sacrifice rapport for instructional time.” Hannah concurred with these assertions as she believed it was easier to get to know her communication studies instructor because it was a smaller class, compared to the natural challenges posed by “a big lecture.”

Phase 2 Data

Phase Design

During phase 2 of my research study, data were collected through individual interviews with study participants. Email invitations to participate in interviews were sent to ten phase 1 study participants who voiced intriguing ideas about the value of faculty-student rapport and what mattered in the creation of strong instructor-student relationship. Seven participants agreed to participate in phase 2 of the study, and subsequent interviews were scheduled and conducted via Zoom. Interviews were conducted by the researcher and lasted approximately 30-45 minutes. Interview questions were designed to further probe intriguing themes and reflections represented in phase 1 diary entries with a continued focus on answering the study’s research questions. Eleven interview questions were created, and four items included structured follow-up inquiries. Because interviews were semi-structured, additional follow-up questions were posed as appropriate to clarify participant responses throughout various interviews.

Design Reasoning

Individual interviews were selected for phase 2 data collection to provide an opportunity for further exploration of themes that appeared in phase 1 data. In 2019, Seidman asserted the value of interviews as a method for learning about the individual experience and the weight and significance affiliated with those experiences. Engaging with participants from phase 1 through interviews in phase 2 encouraged further participant reflection on concepts shared in diary prompt responses. A semi-structured approach to interviews provided the opportunity for further inquiry regarding intriguing participant responses shared with the researcher (Busetto et al., 2020).

Creation of Interview Protocol

Interview questions were created to further probe intriguing themes that emerged from participant diary entries and to continue to investigate established research questions. Three questions were designed to specifically address research question 1, two were designed to address research question 2, and six questions probed participant perspectives related to both research questions. Ten interview questions explored participant opinions and values, five questions asked students to reflect on their feelings related to faculty-student rapport, four interview questions explored experience and behavior, and the final interview question was a grand tour question that asked participants to share anything they felt was important about faculty-student rapport that had not yet been addressed in the interview. For a detailed breakdown of each type of interview question and the research question it was designed to address, please review Table 5.

Phase 2 Themes and Findings

Similar to the phase 1 coding process, an initial read-through of each interview transcript was conducted to gain a general understanding of participant responses and common reflections. Transcripts were later analyzed by employing descriptive coding methods (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2021) to identify codes and categories that built to create broader themes. The identified themes and secondary categories are detailed in the following section. Major themes mirror those identified in phase 1 findings (rapport and faculty communication, rapport and rhetorical behaviors, and rapport and environment) with the addition of a fourth theme: barriers to rapport and subsequent impacts.

Rapport and Faculty Communication

As noted previously, literature has indicated that the choices faculty make when they communicate with students (individually and as part of a larger class) have a significant impact on the establishment of faculty-student rapport. Students in phase 2 of the study discussed the tone and spirit of faculty messages and observed how communication behaviors can facilitate growth in relationship or hinder faculty-student connections. Six of the top ten codes in the phase 2 frequency analysis were represented in the rapport and faculty communication theme. This demonstrated a consistency in the importance and influence of faculty communication choices. The categories of open and respectful communication, positive communication, and engagement were utilized to explore participant reflections. A final category that depicts students' sense of feeling "valued" is also detailed.

Open, Respectful Communication

Noted behaviors related to open and respectful communication from faculty were referenced by all seven interview participants in phase 2 of the study. Nina commented on the importance of open, respectful communication regarding her level of comfort in asking her professor “if I don’t understand.” She expressed that strong rapport helped her to feel more comfortable communicating when she was confused. Lily concurred when she shared, “I think [my professor] made it... very comfortable to just go up and... talk to [them] and ask questions where I feel like in some of my other classes... it’s not as a two-way street.” Sam also articulated feeling more comfortable when respectful and open communication patterns were established, indicating he felt safe asking “what I could do better... so that also helped a lot with... one-on-one [rapport].” When he contemplated rapport in his communication studies class, Nate thoughtfully reflected,

I think [my professor] sought to... support us a bit more and... make sure that [the] relationship was there so that [they] could communicate with us [regarding] concerns that we may have had approaching those more stressful periods of the semester.

The concept of respect was often infused in student’s comments about the power of open and respectful communication. Tara reflected, “... instead of..., ‘oh, [they’re] a professor, and we’re just students, [it felt like we were] ... on the same playing field, and [my professor] is willing to support us.” That feeling of respect during faculty-student interactions was mentioned in several of the phase 2 interviews. Students emphasized the importance of feeling respected as an adult and respected for contributions they could

make to classroom conversations and the overall environment. Elizabeth shared, "... it was nice to feel seen, and that's another part of feeling like an equal... feeling like an adult – is them acknowledging that your time is valuable as well." Nina had similar reflections about mutual respect in communication interactions when she explained, "I think it was just the way [my professor] talked... to us – [they] talked to us like we were just friends." Tatum thoughtfully stated, "every teacher wants to feel respected. I mean... you're kind of expected to give that respect. It is a teacher, and 100%, they deserve that respect, but I also deserve that respect." Nate emphasized that respect was also reflected in a professor's effort to be attentive, "one of the biggest things is an openness to engage... and during that engagement, just being present."

Study participants appreciated the opportunity to have informal conversations with faculty, that were not curriculum focused. These informal conversations were recognized as efforts to demonstrate care and respect on the part of the faculty member. Tara shared, "... if people were walking in early, [my professor] would just have conversations with the students as they walk[ed] in, ...and I don't think most professors do that." Sam valued some specific, perceived benefits of casual conversations with faculty. He explained,

we would talk about all types of things that weren't related to school, or related to the class... about [our] pets, or [we'd talk] about [our] hobbies, or where [we] want to travel. I think that just helps you build a better connection overall in school, and just as people, if you're able to open up and talk about other things.

Finally, Elizabeth connected her professor's efforts to engage casually with effort to care for students. She shared, "if you got there early, [our professor] would be standing there chatting with students. [They'd] take the first few minutes to make sure everybody was okay."

Care was identified by several students as a component of open and respectful communication, as students felt respected when they and fellow students were cared for by faculty, asserting that it greatly impacted their classroom experience. Tatum confirmed, "...it is very important to have a professor that actually cares...". Lily reflected that when reaching out to a professor who is understanding about her circumstance, she is reminded that they aren't just a professor, but "human." Tara had similar thoughts when she processed an incident in which her instructor demonstrated compassion. She asserted the importance of faculty looking beyond processes to remember that people are more important. She detailed a classroom occurrence this way:

...our professor let someone go before [the stressed student's] designated speech time. Normally, there's a predetermined order, but obviously [the student] was upset... so it was really nice that [our instructor] cared more [about the student] than following a specific set of instructions. [Our professor] was able to be like, 'no, I'm understanding of your situation, and I'm willing to bend the rules because of this extreme circumstance.'

Elizabeth had a similar reflection when she explained care in respectful faculty-student communication,

...it's so much of a weight off your chest when something is going on, to have a teacher that has empathy for your situation and will, if they can, help you work your way around the assignments and work your way around the stuff that you have to do.

Nate asserted that presence is another way that faculty can demonstrate care, detailing the importance of the professor, "being in the moment with the student." A final reflection was direct, but powerful, as Nina stated, "when they show that they care, it makes me want to care."

Students also explained that they felt more comfortable communicating with instructors when faculty shared personal stories and experiences. These self-disclosures positively impacted rapport and helped students to feel respected. Elizabeth shared that her professor,

would give us updates on their life and would ask everybody for updates on their lives... it was a regular intro to the class. [Our professor] would just sit for a couple of minutes and catch up with everybody and... it was nice to feel cared about.

Some students expressed a preference for instructors who shared personal details with the class early in the term:

I really enjoy when teachers... introduce themselves. Like, 'here's where I came from, I went to UT, or I went to Kentucky, and I'm a Kentucky fan', or whatever. 'I have a kid that goes here, or here are my pictures of my grandchildren'... I think it honestly puts a... personality to the face that you're going to be listening

to every day, and a lot of teachers don't do that, especially when it's a big auditorium.

Lily felt that faculty self-disclosure helped the class to feel more comfortable about their own anxiety when she explained that her professor

told us a story about how [they] had to do a Ted Talk for a project at school, and [they] were so nervous, and basically almost passed out because [they] were so anxious. And it just made it more like, '[my professor] understands what we're feeling'. It felt less like a teacher telling us what to do, and more like, 'hey, I understand'.

Positive Communication

All seven students interviewed during phase 2 of the study emphasized the importance of positive communication as a component of building faculty-student rapport. There was a significant emphasis on nice, kind messaging in various forms. When she referenced her professor's emails, Tara mentioned, "[my professor] always uses exclamation points, which is silly, but that really sticks out to me." Tara clarified that she views exclamation points in an email as an expression of enthusiasm. Nina also confirmed that energy, positive messaging, and care (or lack thereof) could be expressed through written communication when she said, "I think showing you care through an email is also important." She explained that a brief email response might make her feel that the professor was being short with her and was not very interested in helping. Lily expressed that her professor would openly thank them for coming to class in a kind way, for example, "you know, I really appreciate you guys coming in on this sunny Friday."

Lily also talked about how her professor's kind messaging impacted her experience. She conveyed that her instructor would often tell her to "have a great weekend" when leaving the classroom. She explained, "[they] didn't have to say that" but reflected that the kind communication made her feel good about herself and made her feel valued by her professor.

Another form of positive messaging that was highly valued by study participants was when faculty shared praise and validation for a job well done. Elizabeth was excited when she shared her professor, "told me that [they] had seen a really big improvement and that [they] liked [my speech]." Tatum emphasized that praise and validation meant more to her than just a grade, "like having somebody just say I did a good job means a lot more than just giving me a hundred percent." Sam also stressed how much praise from his faculty member meant to him sharing, "to let me know that [they] noticed [I] did better on this... seeing that instant praise, made [me] want to keep doing better on it." Tara explained how her instructor's praise and validation positively impacted rapport, "[faculty] normally only focus on the negatives about your assignments, but [our professor] would always point out the positives." Lily acknowledged that both the relationship she had with her professor and her instructor's regular praise of her work, "just made me want to keep doing better. Whereas I feel like if I don't get that academic validation, it just doesn't really matter to me as much."

A professor's energy in the classroom and for the subject they teach was also referenced as an important aspect of rapport related to positive messaging. Nina expressed that if a professor liked teaching and liked what they were doing, "it makes me

want to also like it.” Nate agreed that an instructor’s energy and passion seemed to be contagious when he shared,

I think knowing that... my professor is a bit more passionate about public speaking and actually wants to support the students and see us improve in our ability to publicly speak, it pushed me to strive for another standard in the class.

Nate also reflected,

I've come across some teachers that just want to kind of teach the class and don't really care about the information being presented. With teachers that want to build rapport a bit more, I see that [their] passion is transferable. So, when you teach with passion, it makes the students a bit more enthusiastic about learning about it, and... it makes you care more.

Lily agreed with Nate’s assessment when she stated, “energy is contagious.”

A fun, playful nature also contributed to rapport and the students’ overall experience. Sam shared an example of a fun way that his professor positively impacted the classroom. “For example, I had a professor in Econ this semester, and if you got an A on your first exam, [they’d] create a playlist, and you could play your songs throughout the class.” Tara also valued a fun, playful environment to create rapport. She explained,

instead of just saying, ‘here’ for attendance... [my professor] would... ask us fun questions. That made the class seem more playful and not so serious. It made it seem like she had a sense of humor and was willing to have fun with the class and with the students.

Tara also reflected that her instructor would make jokes that made the whole class laugh, positively impacting the atmosphere of classroom and encouraging a shared experience among classmates.

Engages Class

Just like student observations in phase 1 of the study, students interviewed in phase 2 emphasized how engagement is an important element of faculty communication behavior in the establishment of instructor-student rapport. It was noted throughout interviews that effective student engagement is an intentional act of the faculty member. Students also expressed a strong desire to play a valuable and contributing role in class discussions and content exploration. Another impactful way faculty engaged students was by their openness to student feedback throughout the term.

Study findings indicate that intentional engagement efforts were quickly identified by students in their classroom environments. Tara explained that she recognized, “right off the bat, [my professor] was super engaging and wanted to have normal conversations with us.” Sam indicated that his instructor engaged students through icebreakers that asked students to share some things about themselves, encouraging rapport with both the faculty member and classroom peers. Sam elaborated that his professor, “would do other little activities... that make you want to actually go to class and be present, not just sit there on your phone or play a game or something.”

Offering the opportunity for students to have a contributing role during class time was voiced to be an important and effective method for student engagement. Tatum shared some examples from a particularly engaging class she took at the university that

focused on current events. She explained that her faculty member would “open up the floor” during class and emphasized, “when you open the floor and open your own opinion to everybody, then you're able to see people for who they are and how they actually feel, rather than sitting in the back.” She clarified, “a lot of people did sit in the back and sit on their computers and phones the whole time in my public speaking class.” Tatum further detailed her experience with engagement this way:

there were multiple classes that we wouldn't have class, and we would just sit there and discuss. That was one of the most involved [experiences] I have [had] at UT so far. It wasn't even just because it was a current events class. It was because there was an open discussion about whatever we wanted to talk about, and we all felt involved as well.

A final noted and impactful approach to student engagement was a faculty member's receptiveness to student feedback. Tatum shared that her professor was, really good about asking for feedback. I think it was about halfway through the semester... we had to fill out a little note card of things that we liked, things we didn't like, and [things we thought should be added] into the class.

Lily explained that her professor would “own up” to mistakes and indicated that the “open, two-way street” her instructor created made [class] a lot better. Elizabeth remarked that her instructor was even open to feedback on their grading process. She explained, [my professor] was open to my feedback if I felt [they] had done anything wrong with [the] grading. Nina explained that her professor was so open to feedback, she gave students “a say” in the structure of the class schedule. She explained,

[our professor] made us make our [own] due dates. [They explained that we had] five assignments, [that] semester... and [said] let's figure out what our policies will be. So, [our instructor] customized the class to the specific group of people, and what worked best for them, which was really nice.

Feel Valued

Participants in phase 2 echoed the sentiments expressed in diary responses during phase 1 of the study: students wanted to be valued by faculty. Again, students emphasized the importance of their professor learning their name. Often, students connected a faculty member knowing their name with also feeling known personally by the professor. Respondents additionally reflected on “feeling seen” in their classroom and what that meant to them.

Findings continued to establish the power of learning a student’s name. Tatum shared this heartfelt answer when asked, “What efforts can faculty make to help you feel valued and important?”

Honestly, simple answer - learn your name. I understand that maybe, in big auditoriums and everything, that's really hard, and you're not gonna do that. But, in smaller classrooms especially, I've had teachers that don't remember my name, and it's a classroom of 20 people. ...I think that's really, really important. I think that's number one, to be honest... learning your name... it's as simple as that. Tatum further asserted, “if I'm gonna be [in] your class, I picked your class. I'm doing your assignments. I'm giving 100% of my time when I'm focusing in on that class, then

[the] least you can do is learn my name.” Tara also reflected on how a personal connection could impact her effort in a class. She explained,

knowing that [my professor] knows me by my name and knows me more personally, if I was slacking on an assignment or turned [it] in super late, I [feel] [my professor] would notice, and would know... whereas if it's a big lecture and ... I don't know the professor, I feel kind of anonymous, so it makes me more [inclined] to slack off, or just put it off.

Tara also considered the significance of an instructor knowing her name when she shared, “even just simply our names... learning our names and just keeping up with anything that we had even told [them]. [Our instructor] would remember, which means a lot...”

Beyond remembering names and personal details about their students’ lives, study participants emphasized the importance of “feeling seen” by faculty and what that meant to them. Tatum expressed the importance of “feeling seen” as an individual when she noted the importance of “feeling like, I'm not just another one of [their], a thousand students that [they] have...”. Tara also expressed, “if they remember something small, it makes you feel like they see you as a person.” Tara additionally emphasized that she would put “better effort into” a class if she “felt seen” by her instructor. For Elizabeth, it was important to feel like she was seen “as a person, and more than just somebody to fill that seat...”. Lily felt that professors had a responsibility to let students know they are valued early and often. She expressed the importance of faculty communicating value to students, like saying... ‘you're important’ [I care that you are here] no matter if you're in a lecture hall of 200 [students] or like in a classroom of 30 people. I feel like they

shouldn't be like, "I have to come here either way, so it doesn't really matter if you come or not," because that just makes me not want to come.

Rapport and Rhetorical Behaviors

The aspects of rapport impacted by rhetorical behaviors may be one of the most exciting findings of the study. Students' expressed needs and expectations in these areas are accessible to most, if not all, faculty on the university campus. Giving helpful, specific feedback on class assignments and providing help and access when students have questions is a basic expectation of the teaching profession. In these areas, students were merely asking for help from their instructor and reflected on how helpful and constructive feedback could strengthen the rapport they experienced.

Helpful, Specific Feedback

The most frequently identified factor that contributed to positive instructor-student rapport in phase 2 of the study was constructive and helpful feedback. While a "number" might tell students the grade earned on an assignment, study participants expressed a desire for constructive feedback that could help them improve their work from one assignment to the next. Lily shared that feedback provided by her instructor was extremely helpful when she expressed, "the things [my professor] was telling... me I could put to use... to make my speeches better or make my assignments stronger." Nina echoed Lily's sentiments regarding the importance of detailed, specific feedback. She voiced that she valued, "... good feedback that can tell me what I'm doing wrong but also tell me how to fix it. If there's a way to fix it, then I think that's what's important."

Elizabeth also emphasized the importance of knowing how to improve based on the feedback provided. She articulated,

when you just generally get points off with no explanation, that honestly just annoys [me] and [makes] me angry. But seeing [my professor] help me visualize what I did wrong and giving me very specific things that I could work to improve, was really helpful.

Several respondents commented on how constructive feedback often positively impacted their personal confidence and motivation. Tara addressed how rapport was enhanced by her instructor's feedback when she clarified,

with [my professor's feedback], it was also a little bit of an ego boost, because [my instructor] would point out positive things. Sometimes I'd leave a speech and feel like [it] went kind of badly, but I would go to [my professor's] feedback anyway because I [thought it was] going to make me feel better about myself and realize it was not as bad as I thought it was. That also motivated me to read [the] feedback and improve on what I was messing up before.

Elizabeth asserted that her professor's feedback "really helped me rebuild that confidence." Students also referenced how constructive feedback impacted their motivation. Sam explained, "I would ask [my professor] for so much feedback, I'd feel obligated to make sure I used the feedback [they] gave me, and it made my speeches a lot better." Lily talked about how her professor's helpful feedback "made me want to just keep going, because the stuff [they were sharing] was helping."

Helpful feedback was even referenced by respondents as a method of conveying care and strengthening the student-faculty relationship. Tatum stated clearly, “I think that feedback shows that you care. ... I think it shows that you care more than just putting a number [on an assignment].” She elaborated that feedback, “builds not only a connection between us, but also a connection that [helps me] feel like my professor cares.” Lily felt that strong and helpful feedback improved rapport with her instructor. “I think it honestly made my relationship better because I learned what [my professor] was looking for, and it helped me succeed.” Elizabeth agreed and insisted that while she thought her professor’s grading would have an influence on her relationship with her instructor, her relationship with her instructor instead “impacted how [she] viewed [her] grades.” Because her professor had demonstrated care and a constructive nature when sharing feedback, instead of viewing the grading process as critical or harsh, Elizabeth viewed it as “a way to improve.”

Accessible and Helpful

Students also expressed appreciation for faculty who demonstrated a helpful nature and were accessible to students throughout the term. Regular communication was noted by several respondents as a habit of a helpful and accessible faculty member. When asked about things that could positively or negatively impact rapport with her instructor, Tara reflected that one way a professor could positively impact rapport was through reminders and emails. Tara valued the helpful nature of reminders and regular communication from her instructors. Lily also appreciated reminders and explained that her communication studies and biology professors “reiterated through[out] the year” that

they were available to help during their upcoming office hours. While she understood that office hours are a requirement for all faculty, Lily explained that office hours are frequently only referenced by instructors “on the first day.” She clarified, “I feel like being reminded that they're actually here to answer questions and are willing to help, reminded me [to seek out that assistance].” For Lily, beyond the presence of office hours, the *reminder* that instructors were there to help contributed to instructor-student rapport and her positive classroom experience.

Clear and regular communication was observed to be an element of helpful communication from faculty members repeatedly throughout interviews. Tatum referenced that two of her faculty sent out announcements regarding “what our week is gonna look like.” She explained, “I've liked that over the years - [knowing] what's going to be going on for the week, because it is hard sometimes to keep track of it all.” Lily had a similar experience describing how two of her professors would send weekly reminders about upcoming due dates and what they would be learning in class that week. She suggested that it helped her keep on track and remember to do her work. Sam also noted the importance of regular reminders sharing that it was helpful that his professor “would lay out everything that's going on the next week.” He reflected that he liked that the class, “always had a little background knowledge of what we'd be doing.” Elizabeth appreciated that her professor “would send us announcements on Canvas giving us updates on things.” She emphasized, “if anything changed in the class schedule, we all knew immediately.”

A helpful nature was also conveyed by instructor availability for study participants. Elizabeth quantified the importance of faculty availability in her remarks:

I think, just generally being available for students [is important]. Because college is hard. There are a lot of times that we're not gonna know things and we can't find answers anywhere, and if a professor is totally unavailable, won't give accurate feedback, won't try to help you do your best, then it's hard to do your best when you feel that your instructor doesn't want you to... It is availability [that's critical]... if a teacher isn't available, then they're not gonna be able to [establish strong] faculty-student rapport.

Sam also emphasized that faculty being accessible “is one of the biggest things because you need to be able to get a hold of them” when you have a question or need guidance on an element of a class assignment. Lily felt that faculty availability enhanced the rapport she experienced with her instructor sharing, “I feel like [by] taking advantage of the time set aside for [students] to come ask questions, [you could] have a better relationship [with the professor].”

Rapport and Environment

Safe classroom environments contribute to student engagement, dialogue, inquiry, and student learning. Student participants in phase 2 of the study expressed feeling more comfortable asking questions and participating in class when rapport helped to create a comfortable and safe space. Students also indicated that faculty effort to enhance instructor-student rapport often created strong rapport between classmates as a welcome

and beneficial byproduct. Respondents reported that consistent rapport contributed to a consistently safe environment.

Safe Environment

During interviews, students noted that while strong rapport helped to create a safe environment, the compassion and understanding of the instructor was often the foundation of that safe space. Tara expressed that because she knew her instructor cared, she felt safe asking for clarification on assignments and even grades she received. She stressed, “I [knew my professor] wouldn’t care if I asked her for clarification.” Lily emphasized the importance of instructor understanding in creating a safe, comfortable environment for students. She explained, “I feel a big thing for me is just saying, ‘I understand.’ I feel like understanding is [so important].” Nate talked about the importance of empathy in creating a safe space for learning and growth. He explained that he was struggling with nervousness and “when I expressed that to my teacher... [they] empathized with me, and just... put [themselves] in my shoes and gave me some tips on how to calm myself down a bit.” The empathy expressed helped Nate to feel more comfortable.

Consistency in rapport also contributed to students’ sense of stability and safety in their classroom environments. Tatum affirmed that she felt safe in her classroom due to the consistency of the environment. She observed, “[my professor] was very consistent. It was nice to know what you’re going into, especially with a class like that.” When explaining a ritual his professor had the class perform before speeches, Nate maintained

that it made him, “feel better about going into the presentation, just seeing that we all share the same feelings.”

Students also described how group rapport developed as an extension of the safe environment created. Nate spoke about how class activities contributed to group rapport and a safe space for students when he explained that the class became “fairly well acquainted with one another... [as frequent activities] ... kind of just pushed us to come together...”. Sam reflected that compared to other classes he had taken, his communication studies class “was probably one of the... classes where I had [the most] connections with my classmates...”. He also shared that his professor required everyone to “find a partner” for the semester asking students to swap contact information, “so that already allowed us to have one person in the class who was like, “with us”, I guess you could say.” Finally, Tara revealed the power of humor in creating safe community spaces when she articulated that she enjoyed when her instructor would make jokes and the whole class would laugh together.

Rapport is Important

The impact of rapport on student participation and motivation was a recurring message expressed by students during phase 2 study interviews. This observation was noted so consistently, it appeared in the top ten of the code frequency analysis. Students also emphasized the influence of rapport on their learning and overall classroom experience. Sam voiced that a connection with a professor and the presence of positive faculty-student rapport would help students, “feel more inclined to go to class, show up, and just be a part of it.” Nina emphasized “when [faculty] show that they care, it makes

me want to care. ...I feel like it gives me motivation to try harder and show them what I'm capable of." Lily confirmed,

the [professors] that I've had a relationship with, where it's comfortable..., have made [class] better, and made me want to pay attention more. [If it's] a teacher I like, I want to do better. I want to pay attention more. I want to make sure I'm in class every day. Having that relationship makes me want to succeed.

Tara discussed how familiarity helped students feel more connected and motivated in class. Explaining how faculty should make note of the personal interests of their students, she remarked, "if professors care about their students [feeling connected] and... [students] putting more effort into their class because of [the connection]" it is worth the investment of the instructor.

Study participants also felt that rapport positively impacts their overall learning experience. Lily asserted that "[rapport] made the classroom atmosphere... better and more comfortable, and [positively impacted] my overall performance [in the class]." When comparing classes with less rapport to his communication studies class, Nate explained, "I think that's one big difference... the level of interaction with the students that [the professor] tries to garner during teaching. That, from my experience, has had a pretty profound impact on my learning experience." He also reflected that his professor's support of students and expressed desire to see them improve, "pushed me to kind of strive for another standard in the class and kind of see... what I was capable of when it came to public speaking." When reflecting on rapport in the classroom, Elizabeth shared,

“I feel like that relationship is so important in so many ways. It can help students have confidence... The presence of faculty-student rapport... is really impactful to a class.”

Rapport was also important to students because it made the overall class experience more enjoyable. Lily said, “when the teacher has more enthusiasm, and you can tell that they really enjoy what they're teaching and want that relationship with their students, [it] makes me want to actually listen.” When reflecting on how other class experiences compared to the rapport Tara encountered with her communication studies professor, she noted, “all of my [other] classes [have] way less rapport. This was my first experience having a professor so engaged with [their] students. I think my experiences in the other classes [were] way less rewarding...”. Finally, when Nina was asked what was most important about the relationship she had with her university instructors, she replied simply, “feeling comfortable.”

Barriers to Rapport and Subsequent Impacts

Participants also acknowledged variables that posed challenges to the establishment of positive rapport. Class size was the most commonly noted obstacle to the development of strong rapport during phase 2, but multiple students were quick to point out that they had also experienced positive rapport in larger classes, if on a less frequent basis. There were also many examples of negative rapport behaviors shared throughout interviews as students reflected on how their experiences in a positive rapport classroom contrasted with other, less connected classroom experiences.

Acknowledged Challenges

As they did in phase 1, study participants readily acknowledged that class size posed a significant challenge to the establishment of strong faculty-student rapport. Nina maintained, "...smaller classes tend to have a better rapport... just because there's less students, and [the professor] can get to know students better." She noted that big lecture classes made it difficult for the professor to get to know each student on an individual basis. When considering her various classroom experiences, Tatum seemed to accept the challenges with rapport in large classes without much contempt. She shared, "I can think of a couple that had less, [rapport] and they were just bigger classes." Upon further reflection she explained that she took a history class in an auditorium-style classroom. She indicated that she typically arrived early and sat on the second row but clarified "So, I know that [my professor] knew who I was and everything, but there was never a connection." Another student spoke of the value of "checking up on a student" but then acknowledged, "Which is a lot easier to do when you have 25 students, like in public speaking class, compared to my 200-person chemistry class (Elizabeth)."

While acknowledging that class size was a significant challenge in establishing strong faculty-student rapport, study participants also recognized the impact of faculty efforts on the process of establishing a connection. Tatum repeatedly asserted the importance of instructors learning student names throughout her interview. Her reflections on large classrooms varied slightly from others. She stressed, "...I've had teachers that will remember my name, and it's a classroom of 70." This observation illustrated Tatum's acknowledgement that while class size could be an obstacle in

establishing rapport, challenges could be overcome with sufficient faculty effort on behalf of the student experience. Nina also recognized the impact of faculty effort on her classroom experiences and reflected on an inconsistency in faculty effort in her communication studies class:

I think definitely the first four weeks were all really consistent, and then it ...

[was almost nonexistent]. ...It's kind of like [our professor] just didn't really care at the end of the semester, and I [thought] 'I feel the same way'.

Nina's experience illustrated the influence of faculty attitude and effort on the student's overall classroom experience.

Experiences with Negative Rapport

While helpful and constructive instructor feedback topped the list of positive faculty behaviors in phase 2 of the study, poor and unclear feedback was regularly mentioned as a factor that sullied the student experience and impeded the establishment of positive rapport. When contrasting a positive and a negative experience with faculty-student rapport, Tara revealed, "for other classes, I won't even bother reading [feedback], because I know it's not specific enough. It's not helpful." Elizabeth shared her frustration with losing points on an assignment with little to no explanation. She contended, "I didn't ever feel like there was anything I could fix. I didn't feel like there was a way to improve. I was just trying to make [my professor] happy, but I never understood what I was doing wrong." When discussing her frustrations with another class experience, Lily emphasized,

I feel like not having that strong feedback, and not having the relationship where I felt comfortable enough to go up to [my professor] and ask... that was one of the classes I did the poorest in, because I feel like I didn't have the feedback [and my professor] didn't really teach the material in a way that catered to the students' understanding. So, I feel... that definitely impacted my grade and my overall understanding [of class content].

Students also expressed an overall disappointment when they experienced a lack of connection with faculty. Tara complained, "I don't think any of my other professors would even recognize me or know my name." She explained that several professors wouldn't know her well enough to look amongst other students and recognize that she was in class without calling her name from the roll to verify it. When remembering a past class, Elizabeth also recalled, "[my professor] didn't really make an effort to get to know any of us." Tatum reflected on a class with little to no faculty-student rapport and stated, simply, "It's my history professor. I don't think I spoke to [them] once, so..."

An unwelcoming disposition also negatively impacted students' experiences and hampered connections between students and faculty. Nate described his experience this way, "with the teachers that didn't really establish that rapport and kind of just talked 'at' us... [they weren't] very approachable, and it felt kind of nerve wracking to ask for help." When she discussed the challenge of seeking feedback about a grade in a class with little rapport, Tara explained, "sometimes I feel afraid to ask the professor 'why that is' because... they seem scary to me, like they're unapproachable." Elizabeth detailed an

overall lack of respect from some instructors when she shared she had a class in which her professor treated students, “like we’re in kindergarten or something.”

Several students noted how negative rapport impacted their motivation in the classroom and sometimes their interest in attending class at all. Tatum stated, “it's really easy to not pay attention [in class] when you don't have that connection.” Lily emphasized, “If you're listening to someone that looks bored, everyone listening is going to be bored, too.” She further elaborated, “I didn't like going to that class because I [felt] like... not having that relationship impacted [my experience] in a very negative way.” Nate stressed that a lack of connection with his instructor made him, “not want to be in the class, anyway, because the professor, just seems a bit... stuck up and they don't really seem to care about the student.” Lily also shared that her professor’s messages at the beginning of the term became lasting and far-reaching for her. She explained that her professor,

started off the year by [saying] ‘if you don't come to class, that's your problem.’

Basically, [saying] I don't really care if you're here or not... I have to be here anyway. And [I thought], ‘if you don't care that I'm here, why am I gonna come?’

Across the Data - Themes and Findings

Looking across the data, a code frequency analysis indicated that the top ten codes in each phase of data collection shared six codes in common. The frequent appearance of these codes in both sets of data depicted their importance to study participants in the establishment of instructor-student rapport. Five of the six codes fell under the theme of rapport and faculty communication, while the sixth code was categorized in the rapport

and rhetorical behavior theme. An exploration of each of these six categories follows with an example of how they were depicted by participants in both diary and interview responses.

Rapport and Faculty Communication

Open, Respectful Communication

The importance of open and respectful communication was echoed by participants throughout both phases of the study. Conveying respect through positive communication was a repeated theme throughout student responses and was voiced to be an important factor in establishing strong rapport. In her diary entry, Lily reflected, “I feel like my teacher respects my thoughts, personality and opinions and accepts me for who I am.” Elizabeth emphasized in her phase 2 interview, “if the professor respects the students, the students are [going to] respect the professor.”

Positive Communication

The tone of faculty communication was also noted throughout phase 1 and phase 2 findings as a factor that impacted rapport. Students shared they felt more connected to faculty who expressed positive and encouraging messages throughout the term. While reflecting on rapport in her phase 1 diary entry, Sadie remarked, “[Our professor] is encouraging and fun.” In her individual interview, Lily shared that her professor seemed to always have a positive outlook that she appreciated, “I feel like my teacher always came in with a smile on [their] face.”

Engages Class

Another theme denoting the importance of faculty communication and rapport was perceived faculty effort to engage students. In his diary entry, Nate discussed how rapport and engagement with an instructor could impact engagement with material. “Developing a sense of connection with my instructors over the last two years has made it significantly easier to engage with the material presented in my courses.” Tatum further emphasized how faculty effort to engage positively impacted rapport when she stressed in her phase 2 interview that she valued “feeling more a part of something” rather than being an observing, non-participant.

Feel Valued

In addition to positive messaging and efforts to engage students as respected contributors in the classroom environment, participants noted throughout the study the importance of feeling valued by faculty. Students who felt valued by instructors depicted closer rapport with faculty and categorized rapport as both positive and rewarding. Two specific value-based themes that appeared in the top ten codes during both phases of the study were instructors who asked students questions about their lives and instructors who demonstrated compassion in their interactions with students.

Asks Questions About Our Lives. Participants noted feelings of value when faculty asked questions about their lives seeking to know students beyond the classroom. During phase 1, Ivy emphasized in her diary response, “...when [my professor] asks us to share our own individual experiences [they] always make us feel validated and important, which definitely helps build rapport.” Tara also stressed in her interview the importance

of this type of faculty interaction in the creation of rapport. When she reflected on the efforts made by her instructor, she shared that her professor, “really remembers [those] personal interactions.” She also noted that she appreciated that her professor would later reference personal interactions in future conversations.

Demonstrated Compassion. Expressions of care and compassion also helped students to feel valued by their instructors. In his diary entry, Steve emphasized the power of instructor language when conveying care for students. He explained, “[my professor] used words that made me feel okay about a poor situation. This includes ‘100 percent okay’ [and] ‘don’t worry.’” Elizabeth also shared in her interview the importance of demonstrated compassion. She emphasized, “I really do feel like a teacher having at least some empathy or some compassion for their students, really... it makes a class different.”

Rapport and Rhetorical Behaviors

Helpful, Detailed Feedback

The final overlapping code in the top ten frequency analysis of both study phases was helpful, detailed feedback. Participants throughout the study emphasized that constructive and specific feedback helped students to feel their professor was invested in their growth and wanted them to succeed. These feelings of faculty investment and belief in students’ potential, contributed to positive faculty-student rapport for many study participants. During phase 1, Sam affirmed in his diary entry the importance of constructive feedback in the establishment of positive rapport. He shared, “[my instructor] always gives me good advice and will give me good feedback on aspects of

my speeches I could do better.” Lily shared in her phase 2 interview that she appreciated the detailed nature of the feedback her professor provided when she conveyed, “the feedback was very specific - I knew exactly how to fix it and it showed [in future assignments].”

Conclusion

This chapter explored research findings from two phases of data collection including the diary entries of nineteen study participants during phase 1 data collection and follow-up interviews with seven student participants during phase 2 of the research. Findings for phase 1 were organized into three significant themes including rapport and faculty communication, rapport and rhetorical behaviors, and rapport and environment. Phase 2 findings were also identified by these three overarching themes with the addition of a fourth theme, barriers to rapport and subsequent impacts. A cross-analysis of both phases of data indicated the significance of six categories of findings including open, respectful communication, positive communication, student engagement, interest in student lives, demonstrated compassion, and helpful, detailed faculty feedback. Chapter 5 includes a discussion of findings, implications of the research, recommendations for future inquiry, and author reflections to conclude the study.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Chapter 5 provides a discussion of findings, implications of the research, recommendations for future practice and study, and investigative conclusions. Through discussion, I will first provide an overview of the findings of this two-phase, basic qualitative study exploring student perceptions of the establishment of faculty-student rapport and what is most significant in the establishment of meaningful rapport. Next, I will discuss implications for the field of higher education, higher education practitioners, and for associated scholarly literature. The final section of the chapter will include recommendations for practitioners and future study, noted limitations of the research, and concluding thoughts from the researcher.

Summary of Findings and Theoretical Frame

Faculty communication, rhetorical choices and behaviors, and the established classroom environment were all factors identified by students as having a significant impact on the creation and development of meaningful rapport with university instructors. Faculty efforts to engage in positive, open, and respectful communication while demonstrating compassion and a personal interest in students were significant factors within the theme of faculty communication. Students also identified accessible and helpful faculty as instructors who established strong and positive rapport through efforts in the realm of more traditional teaching or rhetorical behaviors. A safe environment was interestingly recognized as both a component in the creation of rapport, and a product of meaningful faculty-student rapport. A safe environment encouraged

student participation and motivation throughout the class experience. Finally, students identified instructor passion and enthusiasm as important elements of strong relationship with faculty and overall rapport. The next section explores how both research questions were answered by student study participants.

RQ1: How do Gen Z students describe their interactions related to instructor-student rapport?

The study's first research question sought to understand faculty traits and behaviors that helped establish rapport for Gen Z students. Participants reflected on several aspects of faculty communication that impacted the establishment of rapport including open and respectful communication, positive communication, engagement, and feeling valued by faculty through demonstrated compassion and displays of interest in student lives. Participants also reflected on how the environment created by faculty contributed to rapport.

Rapport and Communication

Each of the following themes were categorized as meeting the relational needs of students as identified by Mottet et al.'s (2006) Rhetorical and Relational Goal Theory. As explained by the theory, students bring both academic and relational needs to the classroom environment, while faculty pursue both rhetorical and relational goals through their teaching efforts. By working to communicate in a respectful manner that encouraged student feelings of value and belonging, faculty efforts in pursuit of relational goals were acknowledged as important contributions to the establishment of positive rapport.

Open, Respectful Communication

Authors have asserted that Generation Z students seek to be treated as equals with valued opinions (Flanigan et al., 2023; Leftwich et al., 2022). This theme was reflected throughout both phases of my research findings as students emphasized the importance of open and respectful communication in the establishment of rapport. Students further emphasized the importance of mutual respect, and genuine faculty interest in student reflections and contributions. Seemiller and Grace (2015) echoed these concepts when they emphasized that today's students preferred a more facilitative and less authoritative approach to instruction. A more facilitative style helped students in this study to feel respected and safe to ask questions without fear of being wrong. Several students noted feeling comfortable seeking help when instructors were respectful in both their communication and facilitation of class. Participants who experienced safe, open communication confirmed strong rapport with faculty which paralleled Webb and Barrett's (2014) findings that rapport was strengthened when students felt a level of respect from instructors.

Positive Communication

Positive and encouraging messages contributed to feelings of rapport for students in both phases of the research. Student participants appreciated praise and validation for their efforts in the classroom and personal growth throughout the term. These findings were consistent with several studies that noted students of Gen Z valued faculty encouragement (Carr et al., 2021; Generous et al., 2023; Sayers et al, 2021). Scholars also revealed that Gen Z students felt faculty who set high (but attainable) expectations for

student learning, cared about students and were invested in student growth (Khalid, 2013; Kirby & Thomas, 2022). This was confirmed by study participants who specified that faculty praise encouraged them to strive for continued improvement.

Engagement

The impactful nature of student classroom engagement has been widely discussed and accepted among educational scholars and practitioners. Gen Z students in this study also identified engagement as an influential factor in the establishment of faculty-student rapport. These findings were mirrored in student preferences in a 2015 study in which participants expressed appreciation for an academic environment that offered engagement, support, and hands-on learning (Seemiller & Grace, 2015). Multiple studies have also confirmed that fun activities, engagement, and energy in the classroom conveyed professor care for students of Gen Z (Miller & Mills, 2019; Sayers et al., 2021).

Feel Valued

Students throughout both phases of the study emphasized the importance of feeling valued by faculty. Demonstrations of compassion and taking a personal interest in the lives of individuals helped to meet the relational needs of students (Mottet et al., 2006) and contributed to faculty-student rapport. Faculty efforts to advance relational goals (Mottet et al., 2006) by communicating in a caring and respectful manner helped develop trust and care in faculty-student interactions and strengthened rapport.

Demonstrates Compassion. Authors have confirmed that demonstrations of compassion contributed to positive faculty-student rapport for Generation Z (Kendall & Schussler, 2013). Researchers have emphasized that Gen Z students desired personal

connections with faculty, and valued demonstrations of respect and compassion from their professors (Kendall & Schussler, 2013; Webb & Barrett, 2014). This was corroborated by study participants who noted the value of demonstrations of compassion when students experienced anxiety or were under duress. Participants agreed that demonstrated faculty compassion notably changed their classroom experience. Researchers Webb and Barrett (2014) echoed these observations when they indicated that care, compassion, and respect were principal elements in the establishment of rapport.

Shows Interest in Student Lives. Scholars have asserted the importance of faculty who treated students as unique individuals and refrained from viewing a class as a group of students in a collective sense (Webb & Barrett, 2014). These findings were confirmed repeatedly in diary responses and student interviews throughout the study. Literature has also widely confirmed the importance of connection and relationship with instructors for students of Generation Z (Christman & McCall, 2021; Han & Rideout, 2022; Webb & Barrett, 2014). Participants in this study shared those perspectives. Faulkner et al. (2021) further highlighted student feelings of inclusion when faculty recognized the individual, and personal circumstances of students. These findings were echoed by several study participants who noted the importance of faculty efforts to learn their name or recall personal conversations in later class meetings.

Rapport and Environment

Creates safe environment

Study participants further observed that a safe environment created strong and positive faculty-student rapport. These assertions were consistent with the research, as

authors previously determined that a safe and positive classroom climate helped students feel more comfortable participating in class discussions and posing questions when they were confused with a concept (Han & Rideout, 2022). Several students in the study noted feeling comfortable sharing vulnerabilities when a safe environment had been established. Others noted the significant impact that feelings of comfort and safety had on the establishment of rapport with the instructor.

RQ2: What do Gen Z students characterize as most significant in the establishment of meaningful instructor-student rapport?

The second research question sought to understand what, for Gen Z students, was most important in the establishment of strong, positive, and meaningful rapport with their college instructor. Participants again placed great emphasis on faculty communication that promoted strong relationships including open and respectful communication, positive communication, respectful engagement, and feeling valued by faculty through demonstrated compassion and displays of interest in student lives. Students also stressed the importance of instructor passion as a contribution to strong rapport during multiple phase 2 interviews. The importance of faculty helpfulness and accessibility, two important rhetorical instructor behaviors, were also noted repeatedly. Finally, respondents reflected on a safe environment as both a factor that contributed to strong positive rapport and a product of those efforts on behalf of faculty. Participants emphasized that a safe environment contributed to motivation and increased their classroom participation.

Rapport and Communication

When asked to identify what was most important in the creation of strong and positive faculty-student rapport, many study participants placed emphasis on faculty communication that met student relational needs. Students identified many of the communication behaviors that helped establish or define rapport as most important to contributing to strong and meaningful rapport. In addition to several themes that are reflected in findings for both research questions, a noted contributor to strong rapport throughout phase 2 responses was instructor passion and enthusiasm.

Open, Respectful Communication

Researchers have confirmed that respect from faculty helped Gen Z students to feel cared for in their learning environment (Guzzardo et al., 2021; Khalid, 2013; Miller & Mills, 2019). Researchers also emphasized that students on today's campuses wanted to be listened to by faculty, and to feel that their opinion mattered in class discussions (Geier, 2021; Guzzardo et al., 2021; Khalid, 2013). Similarly, emphasis was placed on the value of open and respectful communication as a critical component of strong and meaningful rapport by multiple study participants. Students emphasized an appreciation for faculty that established respect in both personal and classroom interactions. Authors have also confirmed that Gen Z students seek a sense of control in their learning environments (Flanigan et al., 2023) and have noted that respectful communication provided a sense of autonomy which positively impacted faculty-student rapport in an important way (Flanigan et al.).

Positive Communication

Scholars also affirmed that positive motivational messages enhanced rapport for Gen Z students (Generous et al., 2023; Kaufmann et al., 2021). Further, students who believed their instructor promoted a “growth mind set” reported better classroom experiences in a 2022 study (Kroeper et al.). Study findings reinforced these concepts. Participants reflected on how faculty praise and encouragement motivated their work to improve and contributed to their sense of accomplishment. Scholars have confirmed that faculty who conveyed their desire for students to succeed were acknowledged as caring and supportive by students of Gen Z (Guzzardo et al., 2021; Khalid, 2013; Kirby & Thomas, 2022; Miller & Mills, 2019; Schussler et al., 2021).

Respectful Engagement

Findings of the study emphasized the importance of active and respectful engagement in the establishment of strong rapport in the classroom. Beyond being engaged in classroom discussions, students also valued having an impact on the direction of the actual class meeting. Several students noted that their faculty “opened the floor” for student topic suggestions and other contributions which furthered feelings of respectful engagement. These efforts on behalf of faculty greatly enhanced rapport as students felt respected as important contributors to the learning process.

Researchers have confirmed that students of Generation Z appreciated faculty who encouraged active engagement in learning (Cheema & Zhang, 2021). Scholars have further noted that the relationship between student and professor is both mutual and impactful in the classroom environment (Anderson & Carta-Falsa, 2002). Research has

also suggested that the identities of students were validated when faculty were respectful and treated students as capable learners (Faulkner et al., 2021). Additionally, scholars have confirmed that professor efforts to solicit feedback and “attend to” student perspectives were identified as demonstrations of faculty care by Generation Z (Khalid, 2103; Miller & Mills, 2019). These assertions were mirrored by multiple respondents in the study.

Passion and Enthusiasm

Several students mentioned the importance of instructor passion and enthusiasm when asked to reflect on something important related to instructor-student rapport, or what mattered most to them regarding their relationship with university instructors. Participants indicated faculty enthusiasm conveyed care and encouraged student interest in class content and conversations. Several students also explained that passion could be contagious and could be conveyed both in the classroom and through written communication. Seemiller and Grace (2015) observed similar themes when their study established a Gen Z preference for passionate and knowledgeable instructors. Other researchers also noted the contribution of enthusiasm to feelings of care and rapport for today’s higher education students (Guzzardo et al., 2021; Miller & Mills, 2019).

Feel Valued

Not surprisingly, students continued to emphasize the importance of feeling valued by faculty when they reflected on what mattered most in the establishment of strong and meaningful rapport. Student relational needs (Mottet et al., 2006) were met when faculty called students by name, demonstrated compassion, and displayed interest in students’ lives outside of the classroom setting. Students who felt a personal

connection with faculty identified stronger rapport and a favorable experience in their communication studies class.

Demonstrated Compassion and Taking a Personal Interest. Positive messaging that established student worth and value was noted to be a powerful method of conveying care in a 2013 study (Khalid). Students also expressed feeling valued when they experienced a connection or meaningful conversation with their faculty member in Christman and McCall's research (2021). Researchers additionally confirmed that students placed high value on conversations outside of class and noted the importance of individual relationship and acknowledgement (Guzzardo et al, 2021). Findings of this study reinforced these themes as participants reflected on the importance of faculty efforts to communicate informally with students to learn more about their personalities and interests.

Care and compassion were also an important part of strong and positive rapport for study participants. Respondents experienced comfort when an instructor displayed empathy for their personal situation. Researchers have confirmed that expressions of care and concern for students translated into meaningful acknowledgement for Gen Z students (Christman & McCall, 2021). Relatedly, scholars have established that students of Generation Z were more likely to reach out to a faculty member they perceived as "warm" and caring (Guzzardo et al., 2021; Sayers et al., 2021).

Rapport and Rhetorical Behaviors

Beyond faculty communication and behaviors that worked to meet students' relational goals, there were some noted faculty choices that helped to establish

meaningful rapport by attending to students' academic or rhetorical needs (Mottet et al., 2006). Encouraging and specific feedback on a graded assignment was considered to be an expression of care and support by study participants. Respondents also expressed that care could be conveyed through a professor's helpful attitude and clear explanations related to upcoming assignments. Faculty approachability and accessibility were also frequently mentioned as important influences in the establishment of strong and meaningful rapport.

Accessibility

Beyond merely holding office hours, some students reflected on the importance of regular reminders that faculty were available to help at designated times. Participants felt that by continuing to reiterate their availability to help, faculty demonstrated an openness to answer questions and work with students through moments of confusion or difficulty. Several studies corroborated the importance of this rhetorical component of rapport noting that faculty who were available and accessible were assessed as caring by students (Carr et al., 2021; Guzzardo et al., 2021; Kirby & Thomas, 2022; Miller & Mills, 2019). Research also confirmed that Gen Z students felt closer to faculty who were both approachable and helpful (Carr et al., 2021; Guzzardo et al., 2021; Miller & Mills, 2019; Sayers et al., 2021). Several study participants emphasized the importance of being able to contact their instructor quickly and directly with questions and concerns. Literature has echoed this sentiment, asserting that faculty who were accessible, approachable and easy to talk to helped students feel cared for in multiple studies (Miller & Mills, 2019; Sayers et al., 2021).

Rapport and Environment

Safe Environment

A safe environment was an important contributing factor to the establishment of rapport for students throughout the study but was also a noted outcome of strong and meaningful rapport in responses that addressed the study's second research question. Participants explained that a safe classroom environment facilitated community and feelings of comfort among classmates. Several students also reflected that these connections helped them to feel less alone in their discomfort or anxiousness. These observations were mirrored in a 2022 study in which respondents reflected on the importance of group belonging in their college classroom (Burk & Pearson).

Rapport Impacts Participation and Motivation

Participants further noted the significant impact of strong rapport on their class participation and continued motivation throughout the term. This finding was also depicted in a 2019 study in which faculty caring emerged as a significant theme and was determined to be directly related to student motivation to learn (Miller & Mills). Study respondents noted that a sense of connection with a professor created a class environment that felt more collaborative. Others explained that a strong and healthy relationship with an instructor encouraged their personal motivation and efforts to succeed in the class. Relatedly, findings from a 2020 study indicated that a strong connection with a professor made connecting with class content easier for students (Seemiller et al.).

These findings reflect factors that Gen Z students identify as valuable to the establishment of faculty-student rapport and what is most meaningful to them in the

creation of positive and impactful rapport. The direction and practices of higher education continue to shift with advances in knowledge, leadership, learning, and technology. What is impactful for today's student, may not be for tomorrow's. The question of what matters most to college and university students should continue to be posed by scholars on a habitual and persistent basis.

Implications for the Field

Higher education institutions embrace broad missions to educate students, strengthen communities, propel the workforce, inspire personal growth, and foster solutions to community and societal challenges through research. While the mission of the work does not change, students and generations do. Evolving student beliefs, attitudes, needs and expectations will require modifications to the higher education landscape (Chicca & Shellenbarger, 2018). Student appeals to feel valued and respected by faculty in the classroom are compelling supported by the findings of this study.

Perspectives that put sole onus on the student for learning and college success are outdated and unhelpful in a societal climate that regularly challenges the work of the academy. While it has become common for institutions to create entire divisions devoted to student success, success work without the engagement of faculty is imprecise and ill informed. Researchers have contended that in order to connect and engage with the students of today, a new approach is required (Giray, 2022) that could challenge higher education's existing norms and approaches in uncomfortable ways (Mohr & Mohr, 2017). Today's students aspire to communicate openly in safe classroom spaces with faculty who demonstrate care and compassion through respectful dialogue and thoughtful

engagement. Findings from this study confirmed that feelings of value, mattering, and belonging are essential for the engagement and success of students of Generation Z.

Implications for Practitioners

Findings from this study provided thoughtful considerations for how faculty approach the classroom and work to create a safe and engaging environment for students of Generation Z. Throughout both phases of the research, participants voiced the importance of positive faculty communication that provided encouragement and support throughout the term. Students expressed that they valued praise and validation when they performed well academically and made important and valuable contributions to class discussions. Participants also emphasized the importance of being regarded as a vital contributor to classroom conversations and debates.

The significance of respect from faculty in both classroom engagement and the creation of classroom culture has strong implications for the establishment of meaningful rapport in the college classroom. Students expressed a desire for autonomy in decision making and safety in making mistakes as they questioned and learned. They sought to be an integral part of constructing the classroom environment and even the structure of the day's agenda when appropriate for class content and direction. Conversely, findings in phase two of the study regularly highlighted faculty choices that can impede or prohibit the establishment of rapport. These conclusions are of equal importance to practitioners' aggregate understanding of what is most impactful in the facilitation of positive faculty-student rapport.

Recommendations for Practitioners

Scholars concur that college faculty are not typically “trained to teach” at the university level (Baker, 2024; Hativa, 1997; Oleson & Hora, 2014) but are instead primarily hired based on expertise in academic discipline. Studies have asserted that the expectations established for faculty instruction are often learned through the socialization process of their academic field and professional organizations, meaning approaches to the classroom can be more consistent among faculty in the same discipline than among colleagues at the same institution (Oleson & Hora, 2014). Because few faculty receive formal training in teaching methodology prior to stepping into the college classroom (Baker, 2024), it is not surprising that efforts in the areas of meeting student academic and relational needs are inconsistent and often inadequate.

The institution and administration are responsible for setting the standard for teaching in the college or university classroom. The practice of taking a “hands off” approach to this fundamental aspect of the student experience is risky at its best and negligent at its worst. Respectful assessment of a faculty’s teaching background and experience should be conducted upon hire at the institution. Faculty with ample teaching experience should be provided a set of institutional teaching expectations. Faculty with limited teaching experience should participate in a teaching methodology training. This will ensure a basic understanding of influential teaching practices and the teaching expectations and standards set forth by the university in line with its institutional mission. This assertion is congruent with a recent research study which found that 96% of faculty surveyed “felt there was a need to be trained to teach at the college level” (Baker, 2024,

p. 118). Additionally, study results indicated that training in teaching methodology can positively influence both student satisfaction and faculty confidence (Baker, 2024).

While academic departments, schools and/or colleges should be an important part of establishing teaching ideals, expectations for this vital function of the institution should be reinforced and supported at an institutional level. This broader perspective is imperative as the student experience is central to the mission of the institution. Authors have confirmed that knowledge of teaching is typically derived from a faculty member's previous experiences as an instructor, a student, a researcher, or in another non-academic role (Oleson & Hora, 2014). While many of these experiences were noted as valuable learning opportunities, researchers also disclosed that the data did not

uniformly reveal a willingness of faculty to continuously learn and revise their teaching behaviors based upon evidence of ineffectiveness. For some, years of experience in the classroom [had] resulted in a recipe for instruction that [was] satisfactory and [did] not require any adjustment. (Oleson & Hora, 2014, p. 41)

This observation reinforces the need for institutional action in the establishment of teaching expectations and appropriate teacher training programs for university faculty. Findings from this study confirmed that students on today's campuses bring novel expectations, needs, and preferences to the university classroom, and authors have agreed that the fresh perspectives and understandings of today's students should encourage higher education faculty to grow to meet the needs of this generation (Lopez & Abadiano, 2023).

Implications for the Literature

This study contributes to a greater understanding of what factors students of Generation Z identify as essential to the establishment of strong and positive instructor-student rapport. It highlights both the relational and rhetorical efforts that can contribute to meaningful and impactful rapport for students on today's college campuses through the lens of Rhetorical and Relational Goal Theory. The importance of feeling safe in the learning environment highlighted students' needs for positive, welcoming, and encouraging communication to address relational needs. Findings also emphasized the importance of constructive feedback on academic assignments paired with faculty who were both helpful and accessible to address the rhetorical and academic needs of students. Importantly, findings of the study also indicated a student understanding of the challenges faced by faculty in the creation of rapport but also depicted an expectation that faculty work to overcome those challenges.

Much of the existing higher education and instructional communication literature that explores the creation and importance of instructor-student rapport is dominated by quantitative research. The heavily favored survey approach to the study of rapport provides the benefit of large-scale data collection but does not account for unique and personal student perspectives. The qualitative methodology of this study will contribute rich, detailed descriptions of student observations, perspectives, and preferences related to faculty-student rapport in the university classroom. Scholars have also asserted a gap in research findings related to an understanding of how higher education students define and understand faculty care (Miller & Mills, 2019) and steps instructors can take to

establish and strengthen meaningful rapport (Miller & Mills). Diary prompts and interview questions posed in this study sought to investigate both of these understudied areas. While literature has largely and repeatedly acknowledged the impact of positive faculty-student rapport in the university classroom, this study provides specific details of factors that contributed to rapport and what students of Gen Z felt was most significant in its establishment.

Recommendations for Future Studies

This study explored the creation and growth of faculty-student rapport in a smaller class setting at a large, public, Research I institution. While a smaller class size provided more opportunity for student-faculty connection and individual engagement, it limited the scope of the research to settings more conducive to the establishment of strong and meaningful rapport. Throughout the research, participants shared examples of rapport that occurred in larger classroom environments and emphasized that ardent faculty effort to connect with students could help overcome the barriers created by larger class size. An examination of strong instructor-student rapport created in larger class environments could provide powerful and extremely beneficial data for administrators and practitioners hoping to create stronger student impact and connection.

Additionally, this study concentrated on faculty efforts and expectations in university classrooms at a large, Research I institution. Exploring the establishment and growth of rapport in classrooms found on more traditionally teaching-focused campuses could provide new and compelling perspectives on faculty strategies. Such a study could also provide unique insights related to university “teaching and learning” priorities.

Similarly, research focused on colleges and universities with smaller total enrollments could offer varied assessments of the challenges and opportunities presented in the establishment of significant and meaningful rapport between students and faculty.

Considering the many factors impacting the dynamics of instructor-student rapport, it is also surprising that studies have not placed a great deal of emphasis on personal student challenges or barriers that might impede the development of rapport. For example, students who are challenged with social or communication anxiety may encounter unique barriers in working to establish relationships with their instructors. Similarly, students who are first-generation college enrollees may not have been socialized to seek out assistance from faculty or to actively participate in college classroom discussions, which could impede the establishment of strong and meaningful faculty-student rapport. Distinct student attributes and circumstances are important considerations that should be weighed more heavily by future researchers.

Limitations

Several study limitations were identified with potential impact on research findings. First, due to the nature and design of a qualitative study, a smaller sample size was utilized for research insights. While a smaller sample provides the opportunity for rich, detailed descriptions and shared perspectives, a larger sample may have provided additional findings or more varied viewpoints related to faculty-student rapport. Another challenge was the lack of gender diversity in the study. Female participants outnumbered male study respondents 15-4 in phase 1 of the research (males representing a mere 26% of respondent perspectives), and 5-2 in interviews conducted during phase 2 of the study.

While a more balanced representation of genders would be preferred, both male and female participants expressed the importance of strong rapport and its contribution to their student experience.

Similarly, the study had limited representation from upper-class students. Of the nineteen students participating in the study, only three identified as juniors and seniors, with the remaining students classified as freshmen and sophomores. This could potentially impact the reflections and perspectives of study participants, as students who have encountered fewer classes due to the early tenure of their university studies have experienced fewer classroom environments, therefore limiting cumulative encounters with faculty rapport. Another limitation was the possibility that more successful and ambitious students volunteered to participate in the study. Because study recruitment was voluntary, it is possible that less engaged or less motivated students may not have been interested in providing their perspectives. If study respondents were indeed more traditionally intrinsically motivated and engaged overall, the findings of the impactful nature of faculty-student rapport may be positively skewed.

Concluding Thoughts

Gen Z students bring elevated standards, unique expectations, and powerful perspectives to the university classroom. Findings indicated a strong desire for connection with faculty who are positive, encouraging, compassionate, and caring. Students of Generation Z have high standards for engagement and seek to be active contributors to their classroom culture and environment. Faculty who are respectful of students and value their contributions often motivate students to try harder, engage more

fully, and develop higher levels of competence and confidence. While faculty bring a diversity of perspectives, experiences, and personalities to the classroom, all faculty can provide a basic level of respect, assistance, and accessibility to establish a foundation for the growth of positive and meaningful rapport. Strong, positive rapport in the classroom encourages open communication, helps students feel valued and respected, and builds a safe environment for students to learn, question, engage, and grow.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Email to Faculty Members Asked to Assist in Student Participant Recruitment

Good afternoon! As most of you know, I am currently working to complete my PhD in Higher Education Administration. I have reached the point in my studies where it is time to conduct research and I'm reaching out for your help. I have included some details below to make my study and request easier to review.

What is my study? I am working to understand the preferences of Gen Z students as it relates to faculty-student rapport and faculty care in the university classroom. Through my research I hope to determine how Gen Z students describe their interactions related to instructor-student rapport and what they characterize as most significant in the establishment of meaningful instructor-student rapport.

How will I conduct my study? I will conduct a two-phase basic qualitative study. In phase 1 of the study, I will ask students to complete diary entries exploring their perceptions and preferences related to how they experience faculty-student rapport in their general education communication studies class over a two-week period. In phase 2 of my study I will ask about half of the student participants from phase 1 to participate in individual interviews that will clarify and expand on information shared in the initial diary entries.

How will I maintain data security and confidentiality? All content collected through diary entries in phase 1 will be accessible to only the study participant and the researcher. Interviews conducted in phase 2 of the study will only be attended by the researcher and the student study participant. The confidentiality of participants and professors will be accomplished by utilizing aliases or pseudonyms throughout data analysis, and research reporting. Only I will have access to the secured codebook that will contain assigned pseudonyms. All data gathered in both phases of the study will be stored on the UT One Drive that is password protected and requires Duo two-factor authorization.

What do I need from you? Ideally, I would like to identify 3-4 of your students in section ____ of your CMST210/CMST240 class to participate in the study that meets on _____ from _____. Please share the attached flyer with your students in section ____ and/or use the attached Canvas announcement to share information about the study with your students. (Paper copies of the flyers will be in your mailbox by 8:15 AM on Mon., April 7.) Please ask any student interested in participating in the study to contact me directly before the end of the day on Friday, April 11th.

Is there compensation for the student? I will provide a \$25 gift card to any study participant who completes the required diary entries during phase 1 of the study. Students can choose to receive a gift card from any of the following: Chick-fil-A, Starbucks, Chipotle, or Zaxby's. If students are enrolled in a M/W/F class, they will be asked to complete six diary entries (one each day of their class meeting for two weeks). Students enrolled in a T/R class will be asked to complete four diary entries (again, one each day of their class meeting for two weeks). I will also provide an additional \$25 gift card to any student who is asked to participate, agrees to do so, and completes the individual interview in phase 2 of the study.

Thank you so much for considering my request. I know it is a busy time of the year, and I appreciate your valuable time! If you are willing to assist me, please send me a quick email or text message. My cell is: 850-445-6591. Because I would like to collect my data before the term ends, I'd love for students to respond if they are interested within the next five days if at all possible. If you are unable to assist at this time, I totally understand!

Thank you again,
Cathy Cuevas

APPENDIX B

Canvas Announcement

Research Study: What Matters Most? Gen Z Preferences for Faculty-Student Rapport

A doctoral student is looking for volunteers to participate in a research study. This study seeks to learn more about the experiences of Gen Z students in the university classroom.

If you participate, what is required? You will be asked to respond to a diary prompt each day your communication studies class meets for two weeks. Questions will be related to how you experience faculty-student rapport in your general education communication studies class.

Will my responses remain confidential? Yes! All information collected during this study will be utilized by the researcher only and will remain confidential. Aliases or pseudonyms will be used when reporting information in any format.

If I participate in this study, will I be compensated? Yes! A \$25 gift card will be provided to any study participant who completes all required diary entries during phase 1 of the study. Students can choose to receive a gift card from any of the following: Chick-fil-A, Starbucks, Chipotle, or Zaxby's. Some students will have the option to participate in phase 2 of the study with the potential to receive a second \$25 gift card.

If you'd like to know more or are interested in participating, please contact Cathy Cuevas at ccuevas@utk.edu or (850) 445-6591 by Friday, April 11th.

APPENDIX C

Script for Faculty Sharing Study Recruitment Flyer

I have information on a research study being conducted by a doctoral student in the Higher Education Administration program here at UT. The study is exploring faculty-student rapport and care in the university classroom for today's students. Participants in the study will be compensated for their efforts with a \$25 gift card. Is anyone interested in learning more about the study? I have informational flyers to share that explain the study and who to contact for more details. The deadline to express your interest in participating is this Friday, April 11th.

APPENDIX D

Initial Email to Potential Study Participants

Hi, _____.

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research study, *What Matters Most? Gen Z Preferences for Faculty-Student Rapport*. If you choose to participate, you will be asked to reflect on the rapport you have with your Communication Studies instructor by completing diary entries about your experience in class. You will receive a prompt for each day your class meets over a two-week period. Depending on how many times your class meets during the week, you will be asked to reply to either 4 or 6 prompts over the two-week period. As a thank you for your willingness to participate, students who complete all required diary entries will receive a \$25 gift card from your choice of one of the following: Chick-fil-A, Starbucks, Chipotle, or Zaxby's.

Some students will be invited to participate in a second phase of the study and will have the option to accept or deny this request. I will talk more about this aspect of the study in the participant meeting.

To make scheduling easier, I will hold several brief participant meetings via Zoom to explain the study in the coming week (only one meeting is required) . Please complete this Doodle survey to indicate when you might be available for the meeting (there are lots of options, but you can just select those that work for you). The meeting should last approximately 15 minutes. You will also receive an Initial Study Questionnaire via Microsoft Form to confirm your eligibility for the study.

Please use this link to indicate your availability: [Doodle calendar link here](#)

Thank you, and feel free to contact me with any questions.

Cathy Cuevas
ccuevas@utk.edu
(850) 445-6591

APPENDIX E

Initial Study Questionnaire

1. What is your year of birth?
2. Are you 18 years of age or older?
 - Yes
 - No
3. How often does your CMST 210 or CMST 240 communication studies class meet?
 - Twice a week
 - Three times a week
4. What is your Student Classification at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville? (Year at UT: freshman, sophomore, junior, senior)
 - Freshman
 - Sophomore
 - Junior
 - Senior
5. What is your current academic major at UTK?

APPENDIX F

Email Invite for Phase 2 Participation

Subject: Invitation to Phase 2 of the Research Study

Hi, _____.

Thank you again for participating in Phase 1 of my research study by completing journal prompts based on your experiences with faculty-student rapport in your communication studies class.

You may recall that I indicated I would invite some participants in phase 1 of my study to participate in follow-up interviews in which I hope to clarify some of the ideas and observations shared in the completed journal entries. I was writing to see if you would be willing to participate in this second phase of my study.

I anticipate the interview lasting 30-40 minutes during which I will ask you 10 or so questions to further discuss faculty-student rapport. The interview will be conducted via Zoom at a time that is convenient to you, and all students that participate in an interview will be compensated with an additional \$25 gift card as a thank you for your time and efforts.

Please let me know if you would be willing to participate in a Zoom interview. I have a target number of interviews I hope to conduct, so if your schedule does not allow, please let me know, and I can offer that spot to another participant.

If you are willing to participate in an interview, please send me your preferred method of contact. If it is easier to communicate via text, I am happy to do that as well. I am in the process of being re-approved by the university IRB office for phase 2 of my study, so I'm not sure of the days I will be able to conduct interviews. As soon as I get word that I am cleared, I will contact you about potential interview times.

Thank you!

Cathy Cuevas
(850) 445-6591

APPENDIX G

Meeting with Student Study Participants (via Zoom)

Introduction: Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research study. I'm Cathy Cuevas, and I am a PhD student in the Higher Education Administration Program here at the University of Tennessee, and this study is an important part of my journey to earning my PhD and becoming Dr. Cuevas! My study will examine the perceptions and preferences of Generation Z students as it relates to faculty-student rapport in the university classroom. More specifically, I will be asking you to reflect on the rapport you have with your Communication Studies instructor this semester. During phase 1 of the study, I will ask you to complete a diary entry in response to a prompt I will provide you. You will receive a prompt for each day your class meets over a two-week period. Those of you enrolled in a Tuesday/Thursday class will receive a total of four diary prompts. Those of you enrolled in a Monday/Wednesday/Friday class will receive a total of six diary prompts over the two-week period.

Confidentiality: Before I go into more specifics about the study, I would like to reassure you of the confidentiality of any information you share with me. First, all completed diary entries will be maintained in a Microsoft One Drive file that restricts access to only you and myself as the researcher. The information you share with me will be sign-in and password protected. Also, you will be assigned a pseudonym so that your name will not be attached to any information I report out to others. Only I will have access to the codebook containing assigned pseudonyms. I am required to collect signed participant consent forms, and those forms will also be stored on a password protected computer and/or the UT One Drive storage which is password protected and requires Duo two-factor authorization.

Time for Initial Questions: I'm going to go into the details of the study and what you will be asked to do next, but does anyone have any questions at this time?

Explanation of Phase 1 and Expectations for Diary Entries: For Phase 1 of my study, I will ask each of you to respond to a diary prompt each day your Communication Studies class meets for two weeks. Each prompt will ask you to reflect on some aspect of the rapport you have with your Communication Studies instructor. You will receive a new diary prompt for each day that your class meets for two weeks. The diary will come in a Microsoft form that should be very easy to use/complete. I would like you to include as much information as possible when replying to the diary prompt. Please write several paragraphs as you reflect on the question posed by the prompt. Please know that your thoughts and reflections are important to my research study and I want you to feel that you can be completely candid and honest with what you share about rapport in your classroom.

Compensation: I am grateful for your willingness to participate in my study. As a thank you for your willingness to complete diary entries for two weeks of class meetings, I will provide you a \$25 gift card to your choice to one of the following establishments: Chick-fil-A, Starbucks, Chipotle, or Zaxby's.

Explanation of Phase 2 - Interviews: After the diary collection phase of my study is completed, I will invite some, but not all of you, to participate in follow-up interviews in which I hope to clarify some of the ideas and observations shared in the completed diary entries. This will be phase 2 of my study. Interviews will be conducted via Zoom and should not last longer than 45-minutes. If you are asked to participate in an interview and are willing to do so, you will again be compensated with a \$25 gift card as a thank you for your time and efforts. I will save transcripts and video recordings of student interviews in a password-protected environment to protect study participant confidentiality. Recordings and interview transcripts will only be listened to and reviewed by me.

Time for Additional Questions: Now that I have explained most of the details of the study, does anyone have any additional questions? I'm happy to clarify anything that might be confusing or complicated.

Participant Consent Form: If you are still willing to participate in my study, I will need you to review, sign, and return a Participant Consent Form. This will confirm that you are comfortable with the diary entry and interview process and overall research project. I will send the consent form to you at the conclusion of our meeting and ask that you return them as soon as possible. This step will officially enroll you in the study and allow me to begin sending you the information needed to participate in phase 1 of the study.

Conclusion: That is all the information I had planned to cover in today's meeting. Thank you so much for attending today and making time in your busy schedule to learn about my research. I will stay after for a few minutes in case anyone has any additional questions. You can also contact me via email with any questions you may have after our meeting concludes. I will drop my email in the chat as a reminder in case you need that. Thank you!

APPENDIX H

Participant Consent Form

Consent for Research Participation

Research Study Title: What Matters Most? Gen Z Preferences for Faculty-Student Rapport

Researcher(s): Cathy J. Cuevas, University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Dr. Pamela Angelle, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Why am I being asked to be in this research study?

We are asking you to be in this research study because you are an undergraduate student at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, enrolled in a general education communication studies course and were born between 1995 and 2010.

What is this research study about?

The purpose of the research study is to explore your experiences in a general education communication studies class at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville as they relate to the classroom experience and faculty/student rapport.

How long will I be in the research study?

If you agree to be in the study, you will complete diary entries on class days for a period of two-weeks. A portion of study participants will also be asked to participate in individual student interviews during phase 2 of the study that will last for 45 minutes.

What will happen if I say “Yes, I want to be in this research study”?

If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to participate in the diary entry portion of the study. You will also have the opportunity to accept or deny a request to participate in a 45-minute interview as a follow-up to the information you shared in your diary entries. Diary entries will be maintained via a Microsoft One Drive doc. Subsequent interviews will be conducted via Zoom and scheduled at a time that is convenient for you. This interview will be recorded for research purposes.

What happens if I say “No, I do not want to be in this research study”?

Being in this study is up to you. You can say no now or leave the study later. Either way, your decision won’t affect your grade, your relationship with your instructor, or your standing with the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

What happens if I say “Yes” but change my mind later?

Even if you decide to be in the study now, you can change your mind and stop at any time. If you decide to stop before the study is completed, please email me as the student researcher at ccuevas@utk.edu. I will delete your diary entries and/or our recorded interview and safely discard any notes or transcripts from both phases of the study.

Are there any possible risks to me?

It is possible that someone could find out you were in this study or see your study information, but we believe this risk is small because of the procedures we use to protect your information. These procedures are described later in this form.

Are there any benefits to being in this research study?

We do not expect you to benefit from being in this study. Your participation may help us to learn more about student experiences and preferences related to faculty/student communication and interactions.

Who can see or use the information collected for this research study?

The information you share will only be used for my research study. The diary entries will only be reviewed by me. Zoom recording and interview transcripts will only be listened to and reviewed by myself, and I will use a pseudonym, or alternate name, for you through the transcript. We will protect the confidentiality of your information by limiting access to the diaries to just you and the researcher, and storing consent forms and interview transcripts on the UT One Drive which is password protected.

What will happen to my information after this study is over?

We will keep your information to use for future research. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be kept secure and stored separately from your research data collected as part of the study. We will not share your research data with other researchers.

Will I be paid for being in this research study?

You will be provided a \$25 gift card to one of the following restaurants of your choice: Chick-fil-A, Starbucks, Chipotle, or Zaxby's for participating in each phase of the study. (Students who participate in phase 1 will receive one gift card, students who participate in phase 2 will receive two total gift cards).

Who can answer my questions about this research study?

If you have questions or concerns about this study, or have experienced a research related problem or injury, contact the researchers, Cathy J. Cuevas at ccuevas@utk.edu or Dr. Pamela Angelle at pangelle@utk.edu.

For questions or concerns about your rights or to speak with someone other than the research team about the study, please contact:

Institutional Review Board

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Phone: 865-974-7697

Email: utkirb@utk.edu

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

I have read this form, and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the chance to ask questions, and my questions have been answered. If I have more questions, I have been told who to contact. By signing this document, I confirm that I am age 18 or over and am agreeing to be in this study. I confirm that I am/will be physically present in the United States at each data collection point. I will receive a copy of this document after I sign it.

Name of Adult Participant

Signature of Adult Participant

Date

APPENDIX I

Diary Prompts

For the purposes of this study, rapport will be defined as, “a friendly, harmonious relationship, *especially*: a relationship characterized by agreement, mutual understanding, or empathy that makes communication possible or easy” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). ***Please refer back to this definition of rapport as needed when reflecting on each of your diary prompts throughout the study.***

1. Think about your CMST 210 or CMST 240 class and share a detailed example of faculty-student rapport that you have experienced or observed. (Please share details about this example of faculty-student rapport including what happened in the interaction, language used (if choice of language impacted rapport), and any specific aspects of this example of rapport that you think are particularly important.
2. Reflecting on your CMST 210 or CMST 240 class, how do you feel faculty-student rapport impacts your experience as a student in this class? Does it have a positive or negative impact? Is faculty-student rapport something you value or is it not an important aspect of your student experience?
3. Think about your CMST 210 or CMST 240 class and share what aspect of faculty-student rapport in this class is most important or significant to your experience as a student (if it matters at all). If it is helpful, you can share a story or example of an interaction with your faculty member that was particularly valuable.
4. Reflecting on your experience in your CMST class, what are some examples of things said or done by your faculty member that most significantly impact the creation of meaningful faculty-student rapport in that class? If meaningful rapport

is not present in your classroom, what do you think is missing that would help to create it?

5. Think about your CMST 210 or CMST 240 class and share an example of a class interaction that demonstrated or helped to build rapport. Please describe the interaction in detail. Did this interaction involve just one student, multiple students, the entire class? What was the subject and purpose of this interaction? What was the result of the interaction?
6. As you reflect on faculty-student rapport in your CMST class and in your overall experience at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, how would you characterize the importance rapport in your student journey? Share examples of things that matter and/or don't matter.

APPENDIX J

Interview Questions

1. Think back to the first few days and weeks of class. What are some things your professor did to begin to create rapport in the classroom?
Follow Up: Were there any missed opportunities or things they could have done better?
2. As your professor established a regular classroom environment, did they focus on building rapport with the entire class, with individual students, both?
3. Was the classroom environment relatively consistent, or were there days that rapport seemed stronger or weaker? **Follow Up:** If there were inconsistent days, what do you think caused the shift in rapport?
4. How did rapport with your instructor impact your efforts in your communication studies class?
5. Think about a class where there is little faculty-student rapport, how does it compare to a class with stronger rapport?
6. Do you think there are elements of grading and how faculty provide feedback on assignments that impact rapport? **Follow Up:** Can you share an example?
7. What would you say is most important to you regarding your relationship with your university instructors?
8. Outside of your regular class meeting time, what instructor communication or behavior positively or negatively impacts rapport?
9. Does compassion or empathy from your faculty member impact your experience in their class? **Follow Up:** How can they best demonstrate compassion or empathy?
10. What efforts can faculty make to help you feel valued and/or important?
11. Is there anything else that we haven't talked about that you feel is important to share?

APPENDIX K

PHASE 1 CODE MAP

Final Iteration: Themes

Rapport and Faculty
Communication

Rapport and Rhetorical
Behaviors

Rapport and Environment

Second Iteration: Pattern Variable

Accessible and Helpful
Acknowledged Challenges
Engaged Class/Students

Helpful, Specific Feedback
Made Me Feel Valued
Open, Respectful
Communication

Positive Messaging
Rapport is Important
Safe Environment

First Iteration: Initial Codes

Accessible, available to help
Asked about our lives
Attentive, good listener
Believed in us
Cared about well-being
Clear communication from
faculty
Created safe environment
Demonstrated compassion
Engaged class
Goes beyond curriculum
Helpful, specific feedback
Informal conversations
Knew my name

Like a friend, one of us
Made me feel seen, heard
Made me feel valued
Open communication
Open to feedback
Passion, joy, enthusiasm
Positive messaging
Praise, validation
Professionalism
Professor is pivotal to
experience
Protects FACE
Rapport easier in small class
Rapport has a positive impact

Rapport impacts confidence
Rapport impacts success
Rapport impacts particip.
Rapport impacts respect for
faculty
Rapport is important for
learning
Rapport makes class
enjoyable
Respected us
Shared personal
stories, experiences
Stressed commonalities

APPENDIX L

PHASE 2 CODE MAP

Final Iteration: Themes

Rapport and Faculty Communication	Rapport and Rhetorical Behaviors	Rapport and Environment	Barriers to Rapport and Subsequent Impacts
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Second Iteration: Pattern Variable

Accessible and Helpful Acknowledged Challenges Engaged Class, Students Helpful, Specific Feedback	Impacts of Negative Rapport Made Me Feel Valued Respectful Communication	Positive Messaging Rapport is Important Safe Environment
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First Iteration: Initial Codes

Accessible, available to help Asked about our lives Attentive, good listener Believed in us Cared about well-being Chose my professor carefully Clear communication from Faculty Consistent rapport Created safe environment Demonstrated compassion Engaged class Fun, sense of humor Good first impression Goes beyond curriculum Helpful, specific feedback Inconsistent rapport Informal conversations Knew my name	Like a friend, one of us Made class interesting Made me feel seen, heard Made me feel valued Mutual respect from class Noted negative behaviors Open communication Open to feedback Passion, joy, enthusiasm Positive messaging Praise, validation Professionalism Professor is pivotal to experience Prompt communication Protects FACE Rapport easier in small class	Rapport has a positive impact Rapport impacts class enjoyment Rapport impacts confidence Rapport impacts my success Rapport impacts participation Rapport impacts respect for faculty Rapport is important for learning Rapport makes class enjoyable Respected us Shared personal stories, experiences Shared understanding Stressed commonalities Value a good professor We “had a say” in class
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APPENDIX M

PHASE 1 CODE SPECIFICS MAP

Groupings by Theme

Rapport and Faculty Communication

Engaged Class/Students
Made Me Feel Valued
Challenges
Open, Respectful Comm.
Positive Messaging

Rapport and Rhetorical Behaviors

Accessible and Helpful
Helpful, Specific Feedback

Rapp. & Environ.

Rapport is Important
Safe Environment
Acknowledged

Initial Code Groupings

Access. and Helpful

Clear comm. from faculty
Access./avail. outside of class
Went above and beyond

Acknowled. Challenges

Professor is make or break
Smaller class = easier rapport

Engages Class/Students

Works to engage
Open to student feedback

Helpful, Specific Feedback

Helpful, specific feedback

Makes Me Feel Valued

Knows my name
Made me feel seen/heard
Makes me feel valued/import.
Asks questions about our lives
Cared about stud. well-being

Open, Resp. Comm.

Informal conversations
Open communication
Stressed commonalities
Like a friend/one of us
Respects us like adults
Demonstrates compassion
Shared personal stories/ex.
Attentive/good listener

Positive Messaging

Positive messaging
Provided praise/validation
Believes in us
Passionate, joyful

Rapport is Import.

Rapp. = easier to learn
Rapport impacts partic.
Rapp. = positive impact
More rapp. = more resp.
Rapp. = can be success.
Rapp.= class enjoyable
Rapp. = feel confident

Safe Environ.

Helps save FACE
Creates safe environ.
Remained profession.

APPENDIX N

PHASE 2 CODE SPECIFICS MAP

Groupings by Theme

Rapp. and Faculty Communication

Engaged Class/Stud.
Made Me Feel Valued
Open, Respect. Comm
Positive Messaging

Rapport and Rhet. Behav.

Access. and Help.
Help., Spec. Feed.

Rapport and Environment

Rapport is Imp.
Safe Environment

Rapp. Barriers/ Subseq. Impacts

Acknowl. Challeng
Impac of Neg. Rapp.

Initial Code Groupings

Access. and Helpful

Clear faculty communication
Accessible, available to help
Went above and beyond
Prompt communication
We had a say

Makes Me Feel Valued

Knows my name
Made me feel seen/heard
Makes me feel valued/import.
Asks questions about our lives
Cared about stud. well-being

Rapport is Imp.

Rapp. = easier learn
Rapp. = posit. impact
Rapp. = participation
More rapp.=more resp
Rapp. = more success
Rapp. = class enjoyab
Rapp. = feel confident
1st exper. w/strg rapp

Acknowled. Challenges

Professor is make or break
Smaller class = easier rapport
Inconsistent rapport

Open, Respect. Comm.

Informal conversations
Open communication
Stressed commonalities
Like a friend/one of us
Respects us like adults
Demonstrates compassion
Shared personal stories/ex.
Attentive/good listener

Safe Environm.

Helps save FACE
Creates safe environ
Remained profession
Shrd unders./grp rapp.
Consistent rapport
Mutual class respect

Engages Class/Students

Works to engage
Open to student feedback
Made class interesting

Helpful, Specif. Feedback

Helpful, specific feedback

Positive Messaging

Positive messaging
Provided praise/validation
Believes in us
Passionate, joyful
Fun, sense of humor, playful
Good first impression

Impact of Neg. Rapp.

Less rapp. = less enjoy./engage
Noted negative rapp. behaviors

VITA

Catherine J. Cuevas (Cathy) spent most of her life in the state of Florida, relocating to Knoxville, TN in 2010. She serves as a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Her teaching philosophy is informed by an extensive background in student affairs and student development. Cathy earned degrees in Interpersonal Communication (B.S) and Higher Education (M.S.) from Florida State University. She is now also very excited to have earned a Ph.D. in Higher Education Administration at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Cathy served in various capacities as a student development practitioner for sixteen years of her career and recently completed her thirteenth year as a university faculty member. Cathy regularly presents to faculty, staff, and student groups on the power of effective communication and presentation skills and has also presented her doctoral research on faculty-student rapport at an international student affairs conference. Cathy has a passion for supporting the growth and development of university students and championing the opportunity and transformation a college degree can provide. Cathy and her husband, Frank, have two adult children who have earned college degrees and are making an impressive mark in their fields and communities!