

Building Rapport and Creating a Sense of Community: Are Relationships Important in the Online Classroom?

Kimberlee Ratliff, *American Public University System, USA*

ABSTRACT

Enrollments in online higher education programs and courses have increased and more instructors are now teaching online. Researchers have identified the best practices for creating a learning environment that meets the needs of post-secondary students enrolled in online courses. This paper examines the factors associated with the instructor–student relationships and student–student relationships that promote student satisfaction, motivation, and learning in online contexts. Researchers have identified several instructor characteristics that aid in building relationships and help facilitate learning. Practical strategies for building rapport and creating a sense of community illustrate how these concepts apply to online classrooms.

Keywords: online education, rapport building, sense of community, student motivation, instructor–student relationship, student–student relationship

Crear una buena relación y un sentido de comunidad: ¿Son importantes las relaciones en el aula en línea?

RESUMEN

Las inscripciones en programas y cursos de educación superior en línea han aumentado y más instructores ahora están enseñando en línea. Los investigadores han identificado las mejores prácticas para crear un entorno de aprendizaje que satisfaga las necesidades de los estudiantes de educación superior inscritos en cursos en línea. Este documento examina los factores asociados con las relaciones instructor-alumno y las relaciones alumno-alumno que promueven la satisfacción, la motivación y el aprendizaje de los alumnos en contextos en línea. Los investigadores han identificado varias características del instructor que ayudan a construir relacio-

nes y ayudan a facilitar el aprendizaje. Las estrategias prácticas para crear una buena relación y crear un sentido de comunidad ilustran cómo estos conceptos se aplican a las aulas en línea.

Palabras clave: educación en línea, desarrollo de relaciones, sentido de comunidad, motivación del estudiante, relación instructor-estudiante, relación estudiante-estudiante

建立融洽关系和营造社区意识：网络课堂中人际关系重要吗？

摘要

在线高等教育项目和课程的注册人数有所增加，现在有更多的教师在网上教学。研究人员为创造能够满足在线课程注册的高等教育学生需求的学习环境确定了最佳实践方案。本文探讨了网络环境下师生关系和同学关系促进学生满意度和学习动机的相关因素。研究人员已经确定了几种有助于建立人际关系和促进学习的教师特征。建立融洽关系和社区意识的实践战略说明了这些概念是如何应用于网络教室的。

关键词：网络教育，融洽关系建设，社区意识，学生动机，师生关系，同学关系

Access to a college education has been more readily available with the development of online educational courses and programs. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2016), 14% ($n=2,824,334$) of students enrolled in post-secondary institutions in the United States are exclusively taking distance education courses and 28.5% ($n=5,750,417$) are participating in some distance education course(s). There are

typically two types of online courses: those that (a) have no face-to-face interaction with the instructor and classmates; or (b) operate in a hybrid format with both online and face-to-face interaction. For the purpose of this discussion, the online classroom is defined as one in which interactions with the instructor and classmates exclusively occur virtually, or online.

Some of the most notable benefits of online education are the convenience

and flexibility it provides, particularly for students who are in areas without physical access to a university or need a flexible schedule to accommodate work and family obligations. As online education has gained popularity and provided increased access, researchers have explored the quality of online education and which specific factors play a role in achievement, motivation, and persistence in this unique environment. Similar to face-to-face courses, instructors who help create a sense of community and establish rapport with students can positively affect student motivation, persistence, and achievement (Joyner, Fuller, Holzweiss, Henderson, & Young, 2014; Malott, Hall, Sheely-Moore, Krell, & Cardaciotto, 2014; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Online instructors play a critical role in creating an effective learning environment through social interaction, teaching presence, fostering a sense of community by encouraging student connections, and demonstrating various characteristics associated with rapport-building, such as warmth, caring, support, enthusiasm, and creativity. The most effective online instructors place an emphasis on relationship building efforts and do not ignore the human interaction and social factors in the learning process (Allen, Whitt, & Wheelless, 2006; Lowman, 1996; Meyers, 2000; Sitzman & Leners, 2006; Wilson, 2006).

Awareness of Student Needs

Before considering instructor influence in online classrooms, it is important to consider needs

of students who are enrolled in online courses. Instructors who understand and meet students' individual needs help to increase student satisfaction, motivation, and persistence. When instructors are not attuned to students' needs, it may lead to frustration and dissatisfaction, which may also result in withdrawing from the course.

Technology Challenges

A mismatch between instructor expectations and failure to recognize student needs can lead to assumptions and misunderstandings. For example, instructors may assume that students taking online courses are well-versed in technology and how to use the Learning Management System (LMS). Mupinga, Nora, and Yaw (2006) found that 93% of students participating in their study needed technical assistance, which included navigating the LMS. Not recognizing this trend may lead to students having ongoing difficulties and possibly withdrawing from the course. Instructors should serve as both the content expert in the subject area and needed resource in helping learners navigate the virtual classroom. Thus, embracing both roles is essential in the online classroom. Students taking online courses may also experience anxiety associated with technology and this can have a negative influence on their performance and satisfaction (Sun, Tsai, Finger, Chen, & Yeh, 2008). Being aware of these particular needs is important to provide the level of support necessary. This may be particularly true of those students who will be taking an online course for the first time.

Individual Circumstances

Another factor that online instructors may need to consider is that students have circumstances that led them to take courses at a distance. Students may be limited to this mode of education for various reasons. For example, they may live in a rural area and lack proximity to a post-secondary institution. Or, they may be military members who endure frequent deployments and relocations. Students may be working fulltime jobs and online courses are more accommodating for their work schedule. Learners may have family obligations, such as taking care of young children or aging parents. In some cases, students may have their own health issues that prevent attendance in a brick and mortar classroom.

Keeping these possible scenarios in mind, students persevering through various personal challenges are better attended to when instructors allow for some flexibility without compromising the quality of the learning experience. Asynchronous online learning environments inherently provide flexibility as attendance is not limited to a specific meeting day or time. Instructors can provide expanded flexibility by accepting assignments past the due date without late penalties. Being knowledgeable about organizational offerings (e.g., writing centers, library resources, mental health support systems, etc.) equips instructors to more efficiently direct students to receive appropriate assistance. Getting to know each student's story and his or her particular needs assists in providing the necessary sup-

port, while better situating the student for academic success.

Need for Belonging

In addition to considering students' individual stories and technology skills, Milheim (2012) discussed the need for acceptance and belonging within the online classroom community. Beyond building a positive instructor–student relationship, students also need a sense of community and connection with classmates. This learning community helps prevent a sense of isolation among students (Komarraju, Musulkin, & Bhattacharya, 2010; Perera-Diltz & Monaghan, 2014), which can be a common problem in distance education. Specific instructor behaviors and characteristics have the potential to create a learning community fostering both meaningful instructor–student and student–student relationships, which have been associated with better learning outcomes, increased motivation, and persistence in the course or program.

Building Rapport

Rapport building helps establish a positive instructor–student relationship. Instructors teaching completely online typically operate in an asynchronous manner and may have limited opportunities to interact at the same time with their students. Although advances in technology have provided several options for online synchronous interaction, it is not always possible when navigating different time zones and student preferences. It is also important to note that some students

who choose online education may not be interested in meeting face to face or in real time, whereas others might welcome the opportunity. Despite not having face-to-face interaction, rapport can still be developed in online settings. Having an understanding of student circumstances and needs, gaining insight into their interests and personalities, and maintaining regular communication can help an instructor develop rapport even when interaction is limited to the online classroom.

Ways to Build Rapport

Murphy and Rodriguez-Manzanares (2012) identified several ways to build rapport in online educational environments. Recognizing the person/individual involves gathering some personal information, which is often the goal of an introduction posting in the course's discussion area, or forum, where instructors and students share more about themselves and help establish some connections during the first week of the course. One strategy I use to help build rapport involves pointing out commonalities, strengths, and goals among students' introduction forum postings. This biographical information is also helpful when providing tailored feedback specific to each student. Timely, quality feedback is mentioned throughout the body of literature as an important factor in building the instructor-student relationship (Herbert, 2006; Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2012). In addition to providing constructive criticism, providing praise, encouragement, and support help to build a positive connection with stu-

dents. Sharing resources, such as institutional-provided tutoring, assistance from librarians on call, or referrals for emotional support are additional ways to build rapport by meeting individual student needs.

Availability, accessibility, and responsiveness include timely responses to emails, substantive feedback, and having times available for individual conferencing. In addition to being available, instructors need to be approachable or students may not take advantage of office hours or individual conferencing opportunities. Even though the nature of online courses is asynchronous, there are occasions when non text-based interactions are important to structure. Hearing or seeing one another may promote clarity and deeper connectedness. I have found verbal communication, especially, to be an effective method for building instructor-student rapport.

Messages that convey a friendly, positive, and respectful tone aid in building a positive working relationship (Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2012). For example, I have used digital storytelling, verbal narration in PowerPoint presentations, and recorded webinars across courses. Screencasting is another popular tool instructors use to connect with students in online classrooms. This tool allows for recording verbal assignment feedback, reviewing expectations outlined in the syllabus, delving deeper into a concept students are struggling to learn, demonstrating a *how to* on using specific functions in the classroom, conferencing with individual students, and helping build com-

munity (Luongo, 2015). When communicating with students, it is often not the words said, but *how* they are conveyed that makes a difference. Communicating empathy and understanding when a student is experiencing personal, professional, or academic difficulties improves the instructor–student relationship. Lastly, non-academic conversation/interactions such as showing caring and concern or engaging in social conversations can foster rapport (Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2012).

Instructor Characteristics

Rapport building and developing a positive working relationship with students are essential components of building a classroom climate conducive to learning (Malott et al., 2014) and students want to have relationships with instructors who know them (Exter, Korkmaz, Harlin, & Bichelmeyer, 2009). Building rapport has been associated with specific instructor characteristics that increase student motivation and academic achievement. Students report increased motivation when instructors are caring (Meyers, 2000; Sitzman & Leners, 2006; Wilson, 2006), supportive, enthusiastic, humorous, creative (Lowman, 1996), interactive (Capra, 2011), responsive, respectful, and warm (Allen et al., 2006). Additionally, Rugutt and Chemosit (2005) found instructor–student interactions, such as providing emotional support, encouragement, respect, and guidance on professional goals, are associated with academic achievement. All of these characteristics contribute to a positive instructor–student relation-

ship and help set the stage for successful learning. Demonstrating these instructor characteristics in online classrooms can be a challenge, but not impossible. Instructors may display these traits in creative ways even without interacting with students face to face.

Caring. Caring is one of the predominant characteristics associated with building rapport. Behaviors associated with caring include (a) effective and timely communication, (b) supportive guidance (Allen et al., 2006; Meyers, 2009), (c) personal connection and empathy, (d) availability, and (e) instructor commitment to learning (Sitzman & Leners, 2006). Holzweiss, Joyner, Fuller, Henderson, and Young (2014) found that graduate students specifically expect prompt responses to emails and assignment feedback, so there may be slight differences in expectations based on educational level. Herbert (2006) found responsiveness to be the most important characteristic of caring instructors. Instructors, who provide clear, concise directions, respond promptly to email and discussions within 48–72 hours, and are available for phone conferences, communicate that they care about meeting student needs (Sitzman, 2010). When communication and responsiveness are lacking, students perceive the instructor as disengaged and proceed to disengage from the course (Armstrong, 2011). On the other hand, students who perceived high level of interaction and communication with instructors felt they learned more (Swan, 2006; Trolan, Jach, Hanson, & Pascarella, 2016) and reported increased confidence and motivation (Komarraju

et al., 2010). Regular interaction and timely responses communicate the instructor cares and remains invested in students' learning experiences. Engaging with students through accurate, timely, and effective communication appears to be a necessary component of building rapport and setting the stage for academic success.

Genuine concern. In addition to responsiveness, Wilson (2006) found that communicating genuine concern as the most significant predictor of motivation, academic achievement, and satisfaction in the course. Demonstrating caring and genuine concern could be intentionally reaching out to students when they lack engagement in forum discussions or miss an assignment due date. Sending an encouraging personal message and asking if assistance is needed communicates that the instructor cares about the student's engagement in the course and that his or her participation is valued. For example, an instructor might write, *I noticed your initial post in the forum discussion is missing this week and wanted to check in and see if everything is okay. If you are having any difficulty with the topic or need assistance of any type, please let me know. I look forward to seeing your response to the question this week.* Following this approach for the past 7 years, I have noticed responses from students have been overwhelmingly positive. Often, students will reveal an obstacle they are facing, which gives more insight to the barrier preventing them from participating in the course discussion area.

When students submit assignments late, flexibility may be needed.

Adhering to inflexible expectations, such as not grading any late work regardless of circumstance, negatively affects the instructor–student relationship, fosters disengagement, and decreases motivation. Students reported respecting instructors who were flexible and understanding, particularly related to assignment deadlines when students were overwhelmed by navigating multiple roles and responsibilities (Mupinga et al., 2006).

Supportive guidance. Supportive guidance is another way to demonstrate caring and is defined by the ability to relate to students' challenges in online classrooms; helping to troubleshoot those challenges; offering support directly to students; providing specific assignment feedback; and giving encouragement to increase student self-efficacy (Allen et al., 2006; Meyers, 2009). Being relatable also helps students to see the instructor as approachable and understanding. So this may open the lines of communication when students are having difficulties in courses, including obstacles that distract them from participating fully.

Student motivation improves when instructors are viewed as approachable (Komarraju et al., 2010). Sending an introduction message before a course begins and sharing brief, specific expectations can communicate that an instructor is approachable, relatable, available, and enthusiastic. Instructors may use self-disclosure in their course welcome messages the first week of class by sharing both professional and personal interests. They may also relate to student difficulties, such

as by communicating, *I know APA style may be challenging and to be honest, I keep my copy of the style guide on my desk to double check my own work at times.* Sharing this type of information with students communicates the instructor relates to the student experience and is attempting to foster a genuine connection. Another benefit of being relatable and approachable includes prompting connections with students beyond the classroom setting. It may lead to opportunities to work with students on additional projects, such as collaborating on research, presenting at a professional conference, or participating in a related university student organization.

There are several ways instructors might grant supportive guidance and encouragement through feedback. One technique is sharing two strengths for every listed area of improvement. Focusing only on areas of improvement without pointing out student strengths may give the impression that an instructor is only focused on pointing out the negatives, which may damage the instructor–student relationship. When students receive information about their strengths along with constructive criticism, this fosters a positive relationship and increases student confidence.

Similar to face-to-face communication, the tone in which an instructor communicates is important in online settings. Setting a positive tone communicates support and encouragement. For example, an instructor may provide the following feedback: *Good analysis of the case study and following the consultation model provided in this week's*

lesson. I noticed you provided some references from popular news sources and although the information was relevant and timely, your paper's credibility is improved when you use peer-reviewed journal articles and sources grounded in research. If you are having difficulty finding peer-reviewed sources, here are some links and contacts in the library that can be helpful. Feel free to contact me if you have any questions or need additional assistance. Online instructors who use video feedback have the ability to communicate through tone of voice and body language. There is an opportunity to review the video and adjust any unintended body language or negative tone prior to sharing it with one or more students. Imparting constructive criticism is an art and pairing that criticism with acknowledged student strengths may communicate the instructor is approachable and supportive.

Availability. Instructors also show that they care by offering one on one conferences to review feedback, grades, or progress in the course. Conferences allow for sharing additional resources and supporting students having difficulty navigating the classroom or course content. For students performing well, conferences may be used to suggest collaborating on publishing, presenting, or other related activities. Giving students the option to meet in the online chat room, meet on a conference call, or exchange emails communicates respect for the students and their preferred modes of communication.

Building Sense of Community

In addition to instructors building rapport with individual students, some of the same instructor characteristics are helpful when fostering a sense of community in online classrooms. According to Joyner et al. (2014), effective learning environments are those in which students feel valued and a sense of belonging. Online courses may be perceived as impersonal and static; however, instructors who build connections with students and develop a sense of community contribute to their retention and academic success (Pascarella & Terezini, 2005). Similarly, students' interactions with the instructor and other students have been associated with increased sense of community and a supportive learning environment, where students are engaged in their own learning and in helping others (Young & Bruce, 2011). Rovai (2002a) identified spirit, trust, interaction, and learning as the characteristics necessary for creating a sense of community. Spirit is defined as belonging, cohesion, and developing a group identity and friendships. Learning refers to student perceptions and interactions within the classroom and to what extent interactions support shared educational goals and expectations (Rovai, 2002b). Building upon research by Rovai and Lucking (2000), Wilson, Ludwig-Hardman, Thornam, and Dunlap (2004) identified the following characteristics associated with creating a sense of community: (a) shared goals; (b) a safe/supportive environment (e.g., comfortable with sharing thoughts and ideas); (c) group identity

(e.g., sense of belonging); (d) collaboration (e.g., student–student interaction); (e) respectful inclusion (e.g., differences respected); (f) progressive discourse (e.g., questions and discussions facilitate learning); and (g) mutual appropriation (e.g., reliance on each other to learn). Shu-Fang and Aust (2008) found sense of community and interactions with peers were significant predictors of satisfaction in the course and perceived learning. Lack of a collaborative, supportive environment (Murphy & Cifuentes, 2006; Rovai, 2002) and limited interactions with instructors and other students (Johnson, Aragon, & Shaik, 2000; Rovai & Downey, 2010) were identified as some of the reasons for being dissatisfied with distance education programs. In order to develop a sense of belonging and identify shared goals, instructors may begin a course by modeling an introduction that includes self-disclosure about interests, hobbies, and current/future goals (Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2012; Oliphant & Branch-Mueller, 2016). When the instructor and students share such details, common interests and experiences surface and they have the opportunity to relate to one another. Discovering commonalities with others can aid in developing sense of classroom community.

Ways to Build Community Connections

One of the most important elements of building a sense of community involves fostering connections among students and instructors. Before delving into course content, relationship building is

worth time and effort. Instructors and students make their first impressions in the first forum discussion area, which is typically reserved for introductions and sharing biographical information. Creating introduction postings that are engaging and fun helps classmates connect and more readily relate to each another. As they connect in this way, students feel safer to express their thoughts and ideas (Wilson et al., 2004). The more students are familiar with each other and feel comfortable in the classroom, the better the learning environment.

For example, I created a cultural collage introduction forum for a graduate level school counseling diversity course I teach. I share my own collage introduction using photos and words (see Figure 1) that tells my cultural story along with a written summary that highlights various aspects of my identity. This provides a model for students who then in turn completed their own cultural collage introduction to share with the class. Such activities serve multiple purposes as they: (a) foster personal connections; (b) model K-12 school approaches; (c) connect to and highlight course objectives; and (d) offer an immediate concrete connection to course content. Sharing cultural backgrounds leads to clearer understandings about perspectives and more honest conversations in the forums throughout the course. I often receive personal feedback from former students who share that the cultural collage forum helped them feel as if they knew me personally and ultimately more connected to their classmates as compared to other courses.

Murphy and Rodriguez-Manzanares (2012) recommend finding ways to express personality and this can be done through creative forum prompts. For example, creating a digital photo story with personal photographs and voice narration helps convey a personality more than through a written introduction. Students can post within forums in a similar manner and possibly share more about their personalities. I often give students options that attend to various comfort levels. Understanding that some students will be more comfortable with technology than others, instructors should provide various options for creative formats that allow for expression of personality. Options such as sharing a collage, presentation, digital story, or other creative format the students are familiar with may increase their confidence in completing the task.

Interactions in Forums

According to Tello (2007), student persistence is influenced by frequency of interaction with instructors. As interactions between the instructor and students increased, so did student-to-student interactions. This indicates that instructors' increased engagement with students and subsequent potential to increase students' interactions may lead to building group identity and mutual appreciation. Creating a space conducive for those connections and interactions may result in decreasing attrition rates.

Since interactions take place regularly in typical forum discussions,



Figure 1. Cultural collage example

higher frequency of responses may encourage more dialogue among students (Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2012). Encouraging the use of critical thinking questions in reply postings establishes an expectation for students to pose questions to classmates, and should serve to propel dialogue forward, resulting in more responses and interactions. Instructors should capitalize on recognized points of disagreement and promote further discussion that considers differing points of view.

One strategy I use is what I refer to as *linking*. This process is similar to weaving, which highlights important points from students, weaves them together in a summary, and encourages further discussion by inviting students to respond to a question or challenge (Salmon, 2011). When I notice two stu-

dents with very different perspectives, I reach out to both students in the forum to encourage further dialogue and debate. For example, I create a forum discussion posting with the students' names in the title (e.g., *Question for Fred and Jane*) to alert them to read that specific post. I synthesize aspects of their postings, summarize, and include one or more questions to foster connecting and learning from their unique perspectives. By *linking* the students, they have the opportunity to expand their understanding from one another's point of view.

Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning is another way students may build connections with one another and various tools are available to provide such opportuni-

ties online. However, it is interesting to note that when too much of the course grade is based on collaborative group work, students perceive they learned less in the course (Swan, 2006). So, in structuring a course, it is suggested that instructors balance graded group and individual assessments. On the other hand, Oliphant and Branch-Mueller (2016) found that group assignments and forum discussions helped develop and maintain a sense of community. Some LMSs include chat features within forums that give students a place to discuss projects, ask questions, work together on assignments, share smaller works with the entire class, and connect about professional topics. For example, my students prepare for a professional licensure exam during their counseling program. In each course, they have the option to participate in a discussion forum thread about their preparation for the exam. This encourages working together and making connections based on a common goal as they share fears, insights, and resources to increase the probability of success. Further, it develops deeper awareness of professional field expectations and skills needed to function within professional learning communities (PLCs).

Acknowledging Student Strengths

Recognizing and acknowledging student strengths, such as perseverance (Crosling, Heagney, & Thomas, 2009), and providing activities that encourage students and instructors to make social connections benefit the online classroom climate. Instructors set the stage

for student engagement, which has been identified as a significant factor in retention and persistence (Boston et al., 2010; Kezar & Kinzie, 2006). Creating lessons, assignments and forums relevant to students' experiences and aligned to learning outcomes may influence student engagement and encourage more meaningful participation. Considering the diverse experiences students bring to classrooms, recognizing and leveraging their strengths through collaborative activities is crucial. Activities may include completing peer review exercises, creating a presentation or forum response, or using problem-based learning to solve a scenario.

I designed a *progressive case study* to capitalize on students' strengths and situate a collaborative problem-based learning scenario. I developed this idea based on the progressive dinner experience where each participant provides a part of a five course meal. In this case, everyone provides one part of the case study prior to working together in order to help identify better solutions. A *progressive case study* forum involves assigning students to individually develop different elements of a case study and then equipped with the broader range of others' elements, have them address the concerns, issues, and solutions collectively as a team.

For example, in a counselor education *progressive case study*, Student 1 gathers demographics, Student 2 contributes historical and cultural data, Student 3 adds relevant assessment information, and Student 4 describes the problems. Once group members complete their assigned sections, they work

cooperatively to choose interventions and apply a decision-making model. Each student has a specifically assigned role leading to the project culmination of problem-solving case solutions collaboratively. Students' strengths may be considered in assigning specific individual tasks. Students skilled at providing detailed information might develop the historical backgrounds of the case. Students experienced with assessments in their professional positions might be assigned accordingly. Instructors who provide such structured course activities provide opportunities for students to use their strengths and collaborate as a team to solve challenging scenarios similar to what they will experience in the field.

Further, collaborative learning fosters community. Creating a sense of community in online classrooms has been associated with positive outcomes, such as increased student satisfaction, motivation, and achievement (Joyner et al., 2014; Malott et al., 2014; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Since these outcomes are desired within online classrooms, it is recommended that instructors encourage student-student relationships to develop a sense of community and facilitate a safe, supportive space for student learning. Although the primary means of communication in online courses is dependent upon technology and not occurring face to face, instructors can creatively facilitate respectful, encouraging, and engaging environments for students.

Future Recommendations

The characteristics necessary for building rapport and sense of community in online classroom have been identified primarily based on student perception data. Other studies have found associations between these characteristics and motivation, persistence, and achievement (Joyner et al., 2014; Malott et al., 2014; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). What has not been explored in depth is which specific methods have the most significant impact on student outcomes and sense of belonging. With the myriad of available technologies, future research studies should explore which strategies, approaches, and tools have a greater impact on student learning outcomes to guide best practices for creating effective online learning environments. With so many options, instructors may be overwhelmed with trial and error. The strategies presented in this paper have received positive responses from students based on my personal experiences. The next recommended step is to build on this anecdotal evidence and conduct empirical research studies that examine the effectiveness of the approaches and strategies. For example, if desired instructor characteristics, such as caring, are expressed more effectively through screencasting in comparison to written responses, then this might inform how an instructor provides feedback to students. Conducting research studies that focus on how a strategy was implemented and can be replicated helps to increase the generalizability of findings.

Another recommendation is studying whether students' learning styles or personality characteristics may influence the perception of effective strategies and approaches in online classrooms. It may be helpful to explore how these factors influence students' sense of community, relationships with the instructor, and learning outcomes. Although online courses are typically designed to meet the needs of a large group, data about individual students help with adapting environments to both individual and collective student needs.

Future research exploring instructor–student rapport building and effective developing of a sense of community may need to include factors beyond the traditional LMS. Some universities provide opportunities outside of the classroom to foster relationships with faculty members and peers through social media, student organizations, mentoring, advising, or other means. Research on effective tools and strategies within online classrooms may apply to a broader context of rapport building and sense of community among the university community as a whole. Instead of viewing online classrooms as isolated spaces, it would be

beneficial to consider a more comprehensive perspective of students' experiences and whether successful in-course strategies can be used more widely.

Conclusion

As higher education leaders, faculties, and staff seek ways to support students and their persistence, priority should be given to designing learning environments that attend to building rapport, connectedness, and sense of community. Then students who may otherwise feel isolated when taking courses online might persist and be successful. Specifically, instructors who demonstrate caring, respect, understanding, enthusiasm, approachability, creativity, and other traits conducive to developing relationships with and among students create online courses that promote motivation and achievement. Spending time on the relationship aspect of online learning is a worthwhile investment and an important responsibility. As online course and program offerings increase, research on optimal online learning environments to support student motivation, achievement, and persistence is needed to guide best practices.

References

Allen, M., Witt, P. L., & Wheelless, L. R. (2006). The role of teacher immediacy as a motivational factor in student learning: Using meta-analysis to test a causal model. *Communication Education, 55*, 21-31.

Armstrong, D. A. (2011). Students' perceptions of online learning and instructional tools: A qualitative study of undergraduate students use of online tools. *The Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology*, 10(3), 222-226. Retrieved from <http://www.tojet.net/articles/v10i3/10325.pdf>

Boston, W., Diaz, S. R., Gibson, A. M., Ice, P., Richardson, J., & Swan, K. (2010). An exploration of the relationship between indicators of the Community of Inquiry Framework and retention in online programs. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 14(1), 3-19.

Capra, T. (2011). Online education: Promise and problems. *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 7(2), 288-293.

Crosling, G., Heagney, M., & Thomas, L. (2009). Improving student retention in higher education: Improving teaching and learning. *Australian Universities' Review*, 51(2), 9-18.

Exter, M. E., Korkmaz, N., Harlin, N. M., & Bichelmeyer, B. A. (2009). Sense of community within a fully online program: Perspectives of graduate students. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 10(2), 177-194.

Herbert, M. (2006). Staying the course: A study in online student satisfaction and retention. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, 9(4). Retrieved from <https://www.westga.edu/%7Edistance/ojdla/spring61/miller61.htm>

Holzweiss, P. C., Joyner, S. A., Fuller, M., Henderson, S., & Young, R. (2014). Online graduate students' perceptions of best learning experiences. *Distance Education*, 35(3), 311-323.

Johnson, S. D., Aragon, S. R., & Shaik, N. (2000). Comparative analysis of learner satisfaction and learning outcomes in online face-to-face learning environments. *Journal of Interactive Learning Research*, 11(1), 29-49. Retrieved from <https://www.learntechlib.org/p/8371/>

Joyner, S. A., Fuller, M. B., Holzweiss, P. C., Henderson, S., & Young, R. (2014). The importance of student-instructor connections in graduate level online courses. *Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 10(3), 436-445.

Kezar, A., & Kenzie, J. (2006). Examining the ways institutions create student engagement: The role of mission. *Journal of College Student Development*, 47(2), 149-173.

Komaraju, M., Musulkin, S., & Bhattacharya, G. (2010). Role of student-faculty interactions in developing college students' academic self-concept, motivation,

and achievement. *Journal of College Student Development*, 51(3), 332-342.

Luongo, N. (2015) Missing the chalkboard: Using screencasting in the online classroom. *Computers in the Schools*, 32(2), 144-151.

Malott, K. M., Hall, K. H., Sheely-Moore, A., Krell, M. M., & Cardaciotto, L. (2014). Evidence-based teaching in higher education: Application to counselor education. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 53, 294-305.

Meyers, S. (2009). Do your students care whether you care about them? *College Teaching*, 57, 205-210.

Milheim, K. L. (2012). Toward a better experience: Examining student needs in the online classroom through Maslow's hierarchy of needs model. *Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 8(2). Retrieved from http://jolt.merlot.org/vol8no2/milheim_0612.htm

Mupinga, D. M., Nora, R. T., & Yaw, D. C. (2006). The learning styles, expectations, and needs of online students. *College Teaching*, 54(1), 185-189.

Murphy, K. L., & Cifuentes, L. (2006). Using web tools, collaborating, and learning online. *Distance Education*, 22(2). Retrieved from <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0158791010220207>

Murphy, E., & Rodriguez-Manzanares, M. A. (2012). Rapport in distance education. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 13(1). Retrieved from <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/1057/2076>

Oliphant, T., & Branch-Mueller, J. (2016). Developing a sense of community and the online student experience. *Education for Information*, 32(4), 307-321.

Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (2005). *How college affects students: A third decade of research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Perera-Diltz, D. M., & Monaghan, C. H. (2014). A dialogue on strategies for effective online counselor education instruction. Retrieved from https://www.counseling.org/docs/default-source/vistas/article_54.pdf?sfvrsn=2677d2c_10

Rovai, A. P. (2002a). Building sense of community at a distance. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 3(1). Retrieved from <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/79/152>

Rovai, A. P. (2002b). Development of an instrument to measure classroom community. *Higher Education*, 5(1), 197-211.

Rovai, A. P., & Downey, J. R. (2010). Why some distance education programs fail while others succeed in a global environment. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 13(3), 141-147.

Rugutt, J. K., & Chemosit, C. C. (2005). A study of factors that influence college academic achievement: A structural equation modeling approach. *Journal of Educational Research and Policy*, 5(1), 66-90.

Salmon, G. (2011). *E-moderating: The key to online teaching and learning* (3rd ed.). NY: Routledge.

Shu-Fang, N., & Aust, R. (2008). Examining teacher verbal immediacy and sense of classroom community in online classes. *International Journal on ELearning*, 7(3), 477-498.

Sitzman, K. (2010). Student-preferred caring behaviors for online nursing education. *Nursing Education Perspectives*, 31(3), 171-178.

Sitzman, K., & Leners, D. W. (2006). Student perceptions of CARING in online baccalaureate education. *Nursing Education Perspectives*, 27(5), 254-259.

Sun, P. C., Tsai, R. J., Finger, G., Chen, Y. Y., & Yeh, D. (2008). What drives a successful E-learning? An empirical investigation of the critical factors influencing learner satisfaction. *Computers & Education*, 50(4), 1183-1202.

Swan, K. (2001). Virtual interaction: Design factors affecting student satisfaction and perceived learning in asynchronous online courses. *Journal of Distance Education*, 22(2), 306-331.

Tello, S. F. (2007). An analysis of student persistence in online education. *International Journal of Information and Communication Technology Education*, 3(3), 47-62.

Trolan, T. L., Jach, E. A., Hanson, J. M., & Pascarella, E. T. (2016). Influencing academic motivation: The effects of student-faculty interaction. *Journal of College Student Development*, 57(7), 810-826.

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2016). *Digest of Education Statistics, 2015* (NCES 2016-014). Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=80>

Wilson, J. H. (2006). Predicting student attitudes and grades from perceptions of instructors' attitudes. *Teaching of Psychology*, 33(2), 91-95.

Wilson, B. G., Ludwig-Hardman, S., Thornam, C. L., & Dunlap, J. C. (2004). Bounded community: Designing and facilitating learning communities in formal courses. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 5(3). Retrieved from <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/204/286>

Young, S., & Bruce, M. A. (2011). Classroom community and student engagement in online courses. *Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 7(2). Retrieved from http://jolt.merlot.org/vol7no2/young_0611.htm

Dr. Kimberlee Ratliff is a Professor and Program Director of School Counseling at American Public University System. She earned a B.S. in Psychology at Fayetteville State University, M.Ed. in School Counseling at Campbell University, and Ed.D. in Counseling Psychology at Argosy University/Sarasota. She is a (WA) Licensed Mental Health Counselor (LMHC), National Certified Counselor (NCC), National Certified School Counselor (NCSC), and holds school counseling certification in Washington. Her research interests include multiracial identity development, military children and families, suicide prevention, quality online instruction, and child and adolescent mental health/wellness.