



Building professor-student rapport: A model, survey findings, and implications for practicing professors

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Abstract This article is about bolstering professor-student rapport (PSR) in business education. Specifically, we integrate relevant published works to advance a model of PSR that includes literature-supported concepts and some examples from Tim, a master rapport builder. We surveyed students in a southeastern university to gain qualitative inputs that we use to refine our conceptual model ($n = 75$) and present those findings to help explain why PSR impacts outcomes, the primary elements that explain when PSR will impact the outcomes, and the main learning and retention outcomes that PSR may influence. Last, we translate these ideas for the practicing professors in the classroom and summarize our suggestions to advance valuable educational outcomes.

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*Nobody cares how much you know until they
know how much you care.*

— Teddy Roosevelt

1. Why professor-student rapport matters

Though emerging trends demonstrate significant challenges and opportunities for higher education, professor-student rapport remains a foundation upon which practicing professors and students can build. Concerning the uncertain future of higher education, we do not fully understand how several trends—artificial intelligence (AI), COVID-19, and economic pressures—will change the learning process. However, what we do not know must not

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rob us of what we do know: building relationships is critical to the learning, development, and growth of students—as Tim Baldwin knew and practiced.

After the launch of ChatGPT, faculty likely do not fully understand how AI will alter the future of higher education, including the ethical concerns, its use for students, or its use for instructors. Will it generate more equitable, fair treatment and level the playing field for the most disadvantaged students, or will it amplify the inequities such that only the most academically prepared or wealthiest benefit? Further, postpandemic students may enter higher education needing remediation, which leaves college instructors less equipped to help students who are not necessarily prepared for college-level work. Moreover, many institutions are experiencing flat to negative enrollment numbers, and there are no simple solutions. Such trends driving the uncertainty of higher education are disconcerting. As such, we contend that getting back to the basics concerning the relationship instructors have with students is a primary way in which practicing professors can deal with this uncertainty. Certainly, Tim knew and appreciated the value of a relational approach.

Rapport is defined generally as the sense of a harmonious, personal connection between two or more people that is characterized by trust, open communication, and mutual respect (e.g., Catt et al., 2007). The rapport between students and their college instructors—and its importance for bolstering valued instructional outcomes—has significant face validity, as evidenced by the plethora of tips, resources, essays, and mantras available across websites (e.g., Granitz et al., 2009; Lincoln, 2008; Weimer, 2010). Professor-student (P-S) rapport (Wilson & Ryan, 2013) has been related to a host of learning, retention, and related higher education outcomes.

We contribute to the literature by articulating a conceptual model of PSR that includes literature-supported concepts. In the study, we gathered anonymous online survey data from college students to refine our model so researchers and practicing professors have a more comprehensive understanding of how and when PSR affects learning and retention outcomes in education. This article is organized as follows. First, we propose a conceptual model based on previous literature and our exploratory survey findings. Then, we briefly describe the results of that online survey. Last, we provide a table and discussion of practical implications based on the proposed conceptual model.

2. Proposed conceptual model

Figure 1 represents our proposed model including key outcomes we posit are linked to PSR as well as other concepts that explain why PSR affects outcomes and when PSR will influence outcomes. This model is a culmination of our literature review and present student survey results. Each component of our proposed model is discussed in turn.

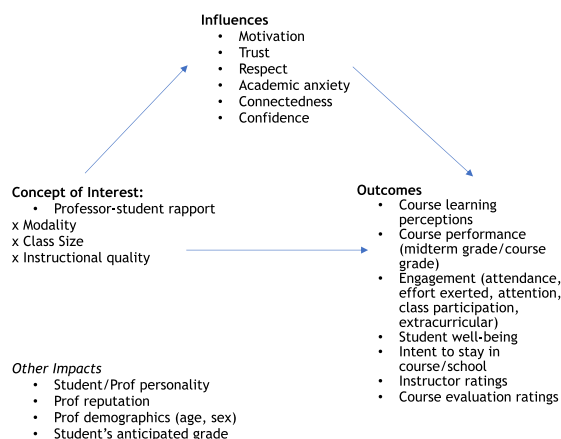
2.1. Why professor-student rapport matters, continued

Certain outcomes have been reported in the published literature as correlated with PSR. Students who feel that rapport-building behaviors are present in their environment have more overall success and achievement in college. For example, research has demonstrated empirically that the rapport developed within the classroom between a student and a professor greatly contributes to the amount learned by a student (Dickinson & Kreitmaier, 2021), with other researchers stating that the perceived amount learned was positively affected by professor-student rapport (Demir et al., 2019). The quality of PSR is also positively linked to student satisfaction with the learning experience. Students are in addition more likely to attend classes with higher levels of instructional rapport. Lastly, higher professor-student rapport can enhance students' sense of connectedness and engagement, and notably, student engagement has been linked to student retention rates (Strikwerda, 2019).

2.2. Why rapport influences outcomes

The proposed model also suggests reasons why PSR influences instructional outcomes. For example,

Figure 1. A proposed model of PSR outcomes



PSR can enhance student confidence and belief in their abilities to succeed in the course. That is (Demir et al., 2019, p. 28):

It could be that professors conveying confidence in their student's ability to do well in the course and supporting their choices while listening to them and validating their ideas and perceptions creates an environment in which students believe that they can do better in the course.

Simply put, confidence begets confidence. Tim's optimism in every aspect of life showed that he believed deeply in his students' abilities.

Connectedness, particularly bolstered by the professor's communication efforts, is another variable that helps explain why professor-student rapport affects student outcomes. When teachers use supportive verbal and nonverbal communication, students report higher engagement and lower boredom, anxiety, and frustration (Skinner et al., 2008). Supportive communication, which includes positive/inviting facial expressions (e.g., smiles, head nods, direct eye contact to facilitate interaction), empathetic concern, and humility, creates an opportunity for authentic connection, tearing down the status differentials (Burke-Smalley, 2018). Tim had inviting facial expressions (e.g., an infectious smile) and broke down status differentials by using magic as "The Great Timbini" to engage students and illustrate concepts.

Granitz et al. (2009) also assert that rapport produces higher student motivation, comfort, and trust, and instructional candor facilitates an honest exchange that is ultimately important for building trust. Compared to rapport—which is largely affective in origin—trust has also a cognitive element based on others' reliability or truth-telling (Burke-Smalley, 2018; Johnson & Grayson, 2005). Many doctoral students, including the first author of this article, can attest to their trust in Tim while serving on their dissertation committees. Enhanced respect can also be a byproduct of PSR that acts as an intervening variable in the proposed model.

2.3. When rapport influences outcomes

The proposed model also suggests when PSR will strongly or weakly influence instructional outcomes. For example, we suggest that class size and class modality are important constraints of rapport. For asynchronous online classes specifically, rapport-building practices (e.g., introductory videos,

weekly video updates, weekly emails, personalized feedback) resulted in students reporting a stronger sense of rapport, earning higher grades, and showing lower attrition rates. Participants perceived all five categories of instructor behaviors (Webb & Barrett, 2014) as consequential for rapport in online classes. Three of those behavior categories (connecting, common grounding, and information sharing) were relied upon by these instructors for the initiation of rapport, and the other two (attentiveness and courteousness) were relied upon only for the maintenance of rapport (Flanigan et al., 2022). Class size also affects rapport. Students in smaller classes generally have stronger interpersonal relationships with their instructors (Flanigan et al., 2021). Larger classes generate less PSR, in comparison.

2.4. Other influences

In our literature review, we found additional factors that could be controlled in future empirical work due to their influences on PSR and instructional outcomes. One variable that affects rapport is a professor's reputation, which has been referred to as *baked-in rapport* (Flanigan et al., 2021). Prior work suggests that many students have already developed a perception of their instructors before the first day of class—whether that perception is good or bad. Specifically, their participants noted that instructor reputations among the student body can influence student perceptions before entering the classroom (Flanigan et al., 2021). A baked-in reputation can make it easier to initiate rapport, but a poor reputation can make it more difficult, and thus impact instructional outcomes (Flanigan et al., 2021).

The sex of the student and of the instructor can also determine how students perceive the instructor's *immediacy behaviors* (i.e., instructor behaviors that reduce social distance; Lammers & Byrd, 2019). For example, one study's results showed male instructors scored higher than female instructors on rapport (Schrivier & Kulynych, 2021). In another study, the gender of the instructor affected patterns of expected rapport (i.e., students higher in femininity provided higher expected rapport ratings to a feminine instructor but also provided relatively higher expected rapport ratings to a masculine instructor), indicating the need for more research (Lammers & Byrd, 2019). Age and personality may also influence rapport and course perceptions, as intimated by our survey results, so we include those elements in our model. For example, open and extroverted students tend to be more satisfied with learning

experiences (Rios et al., 2018). Next, we briefly summarize the results of our exploratory survey research that helped to refine our proposed conceptual model.

3. Results: Online student survey

We surveyed undergraduate students ($n = 75$) in an online and anonymous format at a southeastern regional university to gain qualitative input and help refine our conceptual model. The survey results, including the Likert scale questions and a summary of text responses to open-ended questions, are available upon request from the first author. By integrating key takeaways from our quantitative results with our literature review findings, we refined the model over the course of the project. Our goal was to refine the key elements that help explain why PSR impacts outcomes, the primary pieces that explain when PSR will impact the outcomes, and the main learning and retention outcomes PSR predicts.

We found that a significant majority of students agree that the following outcomes are likely improved with PSR: attendance, effort, learning, grades, course evaluations, intentions to return, and professor ratings. Most students agree that the following elements help explain why PSR influences outcomes: increased motivation to learn, trust, communication, and respect, along with reduced apprehension or anxiety. As for when PSR influences outcomes, a majority believe class size and course modality affect the strength of the rapport-outcome relationship. Interestingly, other concepts were not perceived by students in our sample as having an impact on this relationship (and hence could be tested in future research) including the professor's or student's sex, ethnicity, national origin, or disability status. Notably, results were mixed for a professor's age impacting PSR, which suggests that age may need to be controlled in future empirical works.

For our first open-ended question, students identified even more specific measures of engagement as potential outcomes of PSR, including classroom engagement and effort, extracurricular or professional involvement, attention during class, and better mental health. For the second question, students reiterated that the level of professor-student connection (interaction, concern) and commitment were as important. For the last open-ended question, students identified elements of personality that could affect the PSR including openness, sociability, and

neuroticism along with students' anticipated course grades.

Thus, based on the open-ended question survey results, we added instructional quality (e.g., connection, interaction, concern) to our model. In addition, we added personality and the student's anticipated grade to the model, as well as multiple measures of student engagement as outcomes in our model (e.g., attendance, effort exerted, attention, class participation, extracurricular). Repeated references to such concepts in the open-ended student responses appeared to warrant their inclusion in our proposed conceptual model of professor-student rapport yet maintained model parsimony.

4. Translating these ideas for the classroom

In this section, we discuss insights that could be useful for practicing professors who are looking for incremental yet significant ways to help students' outcomes and/or reframe how they view their roles, responsibilities, and/or constraints. We summarize these useful strategies in Table 1. As instructors review these implications, our hope is it facilitates the development of a personalized teaching signature (Fisher, 2023).

Because professor-student rapport is our area of focus and is critical to student learning outcomes, we outline the five main categories of rapport-building behaviors in Table 2.

1. Uncommonly attentive behaviors
2. Connecting behaviors
3. Information building behaviors
4. Courteous behaviors
5. Common grounding behaviors

All these represent core behaviors that work to initiate PSR and bolster course and learning outcomes (Burke-Smalley, 2018).

Modality should be a primary consideration when developing and delivering courses. Instructor planning, communication, and active monitoring of students' online interaction can help establish a positive climate and rapport (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2020). Teaching online and building relationships is inherently more difficult, but instructors can engage in mechanisms that further humanize themselves through immediacy (e.g., using humor and emoticons

Table 1. Practical implications for practicing professors

Relevant concepts	Example: Strategies and ideas
Rapport initiation & maintenance	• Engaging in attentive behaviors (e.g., calling students by name). • Engaging in connecting behaviors (e.g., informal conversations). • Engaging in information-sharing behaviors (e.g., weekly email reminders). • Engaging in courteous behaviors (e.g., open to student questions). • Engaging in common grounding behaviors (e.g., asking about personal goals).
Course modality	• Humanizing the instructor through immediacy (e.g., humor, use of emoticons). • Demonstrating relational dynamics such as instructor self-disclosure, as appropriate. • Making assignments with exceedingly clear expectations.
Class size	• Using AI to automate elements of the workload. • Partnering with educational technology companies that have potential solutions. • Partnering with other departments on campus to streamline onerous processes.
Instructional quality	• Encouraging students' self-directed learning and agency in their studies. • Engaging in professional development opportunities. • Collaborating with colleagues. • Engaging in curriculum mapping at a department and/or college level.
Student/Professor personality	• Modifying personality dimensions, such as openness, sociability, and emotional stability.
Professor reputation	• Demonstrating subject matter expertise. • Being fair and consistent.
Motivation	• Allowing self-selected topics for projects. • Making course content relevant and applicable.
Trust	• Assuming positive intent. • Showing empathy and understanding.
Respect	• Adopting a motivational interviewing perspective. • Being empathetic toward student constraints.
Academic anxiety/Confidence	• Providing ample formative assessments. • Pursuing some form of alternative grading philosophy. • Scaffolding assignments into smaller parts. • Fostering a growth mindset. • Creating a supportive classroom culture.
Connectedness	• Seeking out reverse mentors.

in responses to students; [Vareberg et al., 2022](#)). In addition, instructors may utilize certain educational platforms that help facilitate these types of interaction in online classes to allow more immediacy and connection (e.g., Yellowdig, Hypothesis). Self-disclosure also becomes more important—not less—in online environments ([Song et al., 2016](#)), as it can affect students' emotional responses toward the instructor and form higher satisfaction with the relationship and subsequent knowledge gain. Instructors can learn to reframe their relationship roles as givers rather than takers or matchers ([Grant, 2014](#)) to self-disclose more effectively. Further, clear expectations regarding assignments are imperative to an online environment, where all communication is computer mediated.

Though class size is typically a constraint for instructors, there are ways in which practicing professors can reimagine those constraints—allowing them the time and ability to interact more freely with students. One potential way to do more with less is to rely on AI for job elements that can be automated. Some contend that there are three elements of the learner-instructor interaction that could be automated in some way: communication (e.g., AI teaching assistants), support for instructors (e.g., AI group project organizer), and presence (e.g., virtual avatars; [Seo et al., 2021](#)). For example, if AI were acting as a group project organizer, it could (1) write meeting minutes using speech recognition, (2) suggest action plans from group discussions, and (3) give feedback based on

Table 2. Types of rapport-building behaviors

Types of rapport-building behaviors	Definition	Examples
Uncommonly attentive behaviors	Showing genuine personal interest for students	Calling students by name
Connecting behaviors	Being personable toward students	Conducting informal conversations with students
Information building behaviors	Showing a commitment to communicating course policies	Weekly email reminders
Courteous behaviors	Showing respect and empathy	Being open to student questions
Common grounding behaviors	Finding similarities with students	Asking students about personal goals

assignment details. As such, instructors may want to partner with educational technology companies.

Further, teachers may use AI to create projects, rubrics, or grade non-content-related rubric criteria (e.g., spelling, grammar; Neely, 2023a). As an example, if an instructor is concerned that most students are not spending enough time on the content and relying too heavily on their phones, they might consider the trend of microlearning apps (e.g., EdApp, Cerego, Gnowbe) which contain bite-sized, easy-to-digest lessons that can be completed on their mobile devices. If technology is not of a particular instructor's interest, they might partner with on-campus departments to help students develop skills they intend to teach (e.g., a writing center can assist with written communication, a student success center can help with resumes, and marketing could give feedback on creative projects).

Improving instructional quality is important as it relies primarily on utilizing assessment data to alter students' instruction. However, there are other ways in which professors might add value. Changing student perceptions of this attribute could be as important as changing the attribute itself. In other words, students need encouragement to seek out their own learning and to demonstrate agency in their coursework. This could mean providing several options for conducting a particular project by which they can demonstrate content mastery. Or it could have students provide insights at the outset concerning what they think they need to learn to be successful. In addition, there are always opportunities to find someone else who has solved your problem (Heath & Heath, 2013) and can help solve underlying issues regarding instructional quality (e.g., rethinking how we assess student work; EL Education, 2018). However, a more holistic way to improve instructional quality is to have faculty at a departmental or college level work with colleagues

to map program goals and the curriculum and prepare students to "move outside university circumstances and outside the recitation of knowledge" (Wang, 2015, p. 1557).

As stated, student and instructor personalities may impact important student outcomes, but students and instructors do not have to view traits as fates due to the concept of neuroplasticity. Some research, for example, supports the notion that cognitive, inductive-based training can increase an individual's openness to experience (Jackson et al., 2012). For sociability or extraversion, when participants were instructed to act more talkative, assertive, and spontaneous, they realized higher levels of positive affect and well-being (Margolis & Lyubomirsky, 2020). Previous research also provides suggestions to mitigate neuroticism such as mindfulness (Drake et al., 2017) and therapeutic interventions (Roberts et al., 2017). Some practical examples of personality change exist in the "Personality" episode of *The Mind, Explained* (e.g., one can be more open to experiences by taking pictures of beautiful things every day; Harjani, 2021).

Demonstrating subject expertise and adhering to norms of fairness are also important implications that can positively affect a professor's reputation. Students perceiving the instructor as knowledgeable, insightful, and fair can have enduring impacts on student outcomes. There may also be technological advancements that help with students' perceptions of fairness, for example:

- Instructors might change their minds about accepting a specific answer in the middle of grading, and there are certain educational platforms that can adjust rubrics so every student with similar answers will receive the grade adjustment (e.g., Gradescope).

- Technology can help calibrate multiple graders for the same course for deliverables such as assessment of learning outcomes in accreditation activities.

Regarding motivation, providing an element of student autonomy regarding the nature of the projects, the type of the projects (e.g., group vs. individual), and the modality of the project (e.g., presentation, video, paper, website) could increase student motivation (Skinner et al., 2008). For example, when students get to pick the topic, the medium, and the nature of the work, they may become more naturally invested in the project. In addition, relevance to their personal and professional lives is also of great merit in motivating them to engage. Tim tirelessly focused on maintaining relevance for his students.

To build trust, one strategy is to assume positive intent (Heath & Heath, 2013), as it can mitigate anger and defensiveness and even increase the desire to listen to the other party. For example, when a student misses a deadline, instructors can start by giving the benefit of the doubt to the student without assuming malintent. Showing sympathy and empathy can also be encouraging when trying to build trust. Thus, when students are experiencing personal challenges, instructors can actively provide them with campus resources for support.

As far as fostering respect, instructors could seek opportunities to use a motivational interviewing perspective in which they acknowledge the autonomy of the student and try to build their competence and relatedness (e.g., self-determination theory; Deci & Ryan, 2012). This type of approach encourages instructors to:

- Ask open-ended questions;
- Affirm students' strengths in terms of how they have dealt with past adversities;
- Reflectively listen by repeating, rephrasing, paraphrasing, and reflecting on feelings; and
- Summarize their thoughts by ending with ways that emphasize change statements (e.g., problem recognition; Rollnick et al., 2016).

Using more formative assessments in the classroom can also serve as a tool to decrease student anxiety and increase confidence. Alternative grading strategies may be a good fit because they can potentially reduce student—as well as

instructor—anxiety surrounding grades. These strategies can run the gamut, such as:

- An *ungrading philosophy* in which students receive quality feedback without grades—or, sometimes, very few grades—until the end of the term with the use of self-reflection/self-grading. See Stommel (2021) for an ungrading introduction and overview.
- *Contract grading* in which expectations differ based on what grade a student wants in the class (e.g., requirements for an A; Ashe et al., 2020).
- *Specifications grading* in which there is an emphasis on pass/fail grading (Hall, 2018).
- *Scaffolding assignments* into smaller components with multiple deliverables can ease anxiety as students receive feedback throughout the process. In other words, fostering a growth mindset and emphasizing that students can effectively change (e.g., praising effort) may be helpful in creating the necessary cognitive resources for reducing students' anxiety.

Aside from what has already been stated in terms of increasing connectedness (e.g., calling students by name, having informal conversations), there is another tangible way in which instructors can find connections to students: engaging in a reverse mentoring relationship. Through reverse mentoring, an instructor seeks out a student mentor to teach them about a specific youth subculture (e.g., TikTok dances; Neely, 2023b). This reduces the power distance between instructors and students, demonstrates that we have something to learn from each other, and allows students to see that instructors are trying to connect with them. Experimenting with reverse mentoring, or other strategies above, can be attempted on a small scale and then expanded based on their impact on PSR.

5. Closing remarks

As Tim Baldwin would appreciate, professor-student (P-S) rapport has gained attention in the higher education literature. In this study, we integrated relevant published works to advance a model of PSR that includes literature-supported concepts. In tandem, we surveyed students online to gain qualitative inputs that we used to refine

our initial conceptual model. Our portfolio of work is designed to help future researchers study this topic empirically and help instructors employ various ideas, strategies, and policies for bolstering PSR.

PSR is important because it can significantly impact student outcomes (e.g., attendance, effort, learning, grades). In addition, it influences key outcomes by getting students excited to learn, as well as building their trust in, communication with, and respect for their instructors. Lastly, PSR can even reduce their apprehension or anxiety. As we have discussed, there are tangible, small, and nonetheless significant ways in which instructors can bolster PSR, such as:

- Encouraging students to believe in themselves—their abilities, their motivation, and their opportunities.
- Reframing our role as a guide or a resource that exists to help students. For example, instructors can actively communicate, express a genuine interest, and help them deal with obstacles.
- Being intentional about building rapport even amid constraints (e.g., class size, modality).

Our practical suggestions can also be personalized as follows:

- Determine what you want and/or are willing to change regarding interactions with students. For example, examine your personal teaching philosophy and stage of life to determine if/when any of these suggestions are right for you.
- If you want to reframe the P-S dynamic, start with yourself. For example, naturally gravitating toward a positive intent is grounded in various psychological approaches and is a habit professors can develop.
- Actively seek out resources that can assist you in demonstrating care and concern. For example, utilize available campus resources and experiment with educational technology platforms to help achieve key instructional goals.

In summary, throughout this article, we have provided relevant exploratory research, specific examples using a variety of sources, and practical recommendations to bolster PSR. While these suggestions are not intended to be all-encompassing, they are a useful place to start and—perhaps more importantly—showcase the

need for professors to create successful, enduring student relationships.

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