

The Ripple Effect of Belonging: How Faculty Warmth and Self-Disclosure Shape Students' Engagement in the Classroom



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Introduction

A great deal of attention has been devoted in recent years to college student belonging, which has been shown to predict not only greater well-being, but also improved academic performance. Faculty and mentors play a critical role in shaping students' sense of belonging, and small interpersonal behaviors, such as conveying identity-safety cues or inclusive values in a syllabus, have been shown to foster this sense of connection (Allen et al., 2024). As key dimensions of social cognition, students' initial impressions of faculty warmth and competence can significantly shape their classroom experiences (Abele et al., 2016; Fiske et al., 2019; Sunds et al., 2023).

Despite this, some faculty worry that demonstrating warmth or engaging in self-disclosure may be interpreted as a lack of professionalism, risking disrespect or a loss of classroom control. This perception may contribute to the growing levels of faculty burnout in recent years, as instructors feel they must choose between being respected and being relational. In reality, warmth does not require leniency, and professionalism does not preclude approachability. We were interested in how faculty can communicate warmth and care for students while still maintaining clear boundaries.

In addition to warmth, self-disclosure, such as sharing personal anecdotes or acknowledging shared challenges, may humanize the instructor and enhance perceptions of likability and connection. Prior work has found that instructor self-disclosure can increase student engagement and rapport (e.g., Goldstein & Benassi, 1994), but questions remain about how it influences perceptions of authority and belonging. **In the present between-subjects study, we investigated how ostensibly faculty-written emails, identical in policy but varied in warmth and self-disclosure, shape students' perceptions of their professor and the classroom environment.**

Methods

Participants: $N = 206$ full-time undergraduates at the University of Richmond

Condition 1: Low Warmth, Low Self-Disclosure ($n = 68$)

Condition 2: High Warmth, Low Self-Disclosure ($n = 69$)

Condition 3: High Warmth, High Self-Disclosure ($n = 69$)

"I acknowledge that this course load may seem heavy at times. But late assignments will be penalized by 10% each day. Extensions may be granted in rare cases. It is your responsibility to stay on top of your coursework."

"Late assignments will be penalized by 10% each day. At the same time, I acknowledge that this course load may seem heavy at times. If you need an extension, please do not hesitate to discuss the situation with me. I want to help you succeed."

"Late assignments will be penalized by 10% each day. At the same time, I've been in your shoes before and I know (from experience) how easy it is to struggle with a heavy course load. If you need an extension, please do not hesitate to discuss the situation with me. I want to help you succeed."

Measures

Perceived Warmth: 6 semantic differential items ($\alpha = .91$); e.g., *very cold* to *very warm*

Perceived Competence: 6 semantic differential items ($\alpha = .82$); e.g., *not at all competent* to *very competent*

Sense of Belonging: 10 items ($\alpha = .95$); e.g., "In this class, I would feel a connection with the classroom community"

Trust in Faculty: 2 items ($r = .74$); e.g., "Even when I did poorly, I would trust Professor M to have faith in my potential"

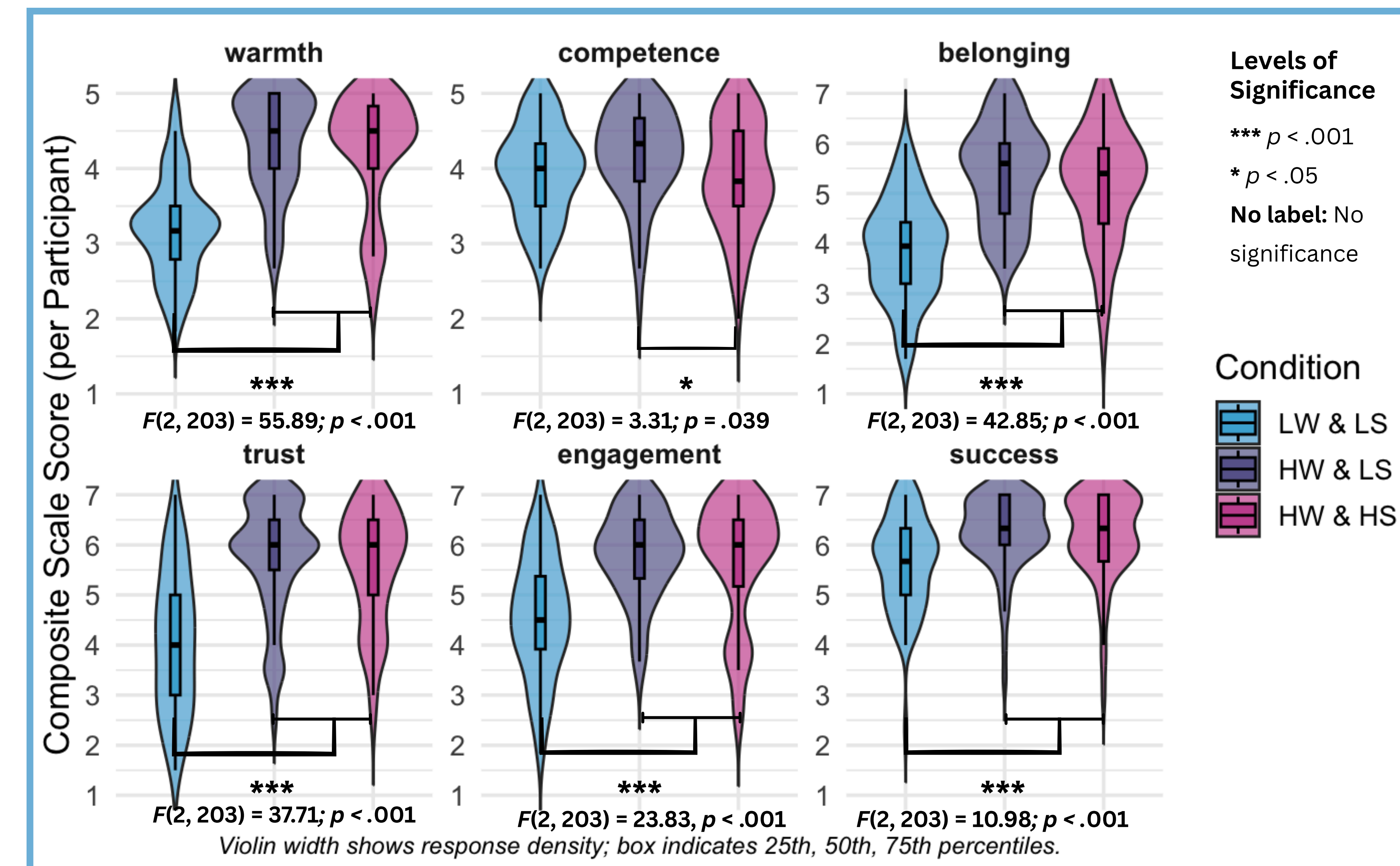
Academic Engagement: 6 items ($\alpha = .89$); e.g., [How likely are you to] interact with the professor outside of class"

Academic Success: 3 items ($\alpha = .80$); e.g., It would be important to me to do well in this class"

Belonging as a Priority: 9 items ($\alpha = .84$); e.g., I care about fostering belonging and community on campus"

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Results



Differences by Condition

- Relative to **Condition 1** (Low Warmth, Low Self-Disclosure), students perceived the **Condition 2** and **Condition 3** professors as warmer and anticipated **more** belonging, trust, academic engagement, and academic success.
- Interestingly, students in **Condition 3** (High Warmth, High Self-Disclosure) viewed their professor as **less** competent than those in **Condition 2** (High Warmth, Low Self-Disclosure).

Discussion

Our results reveal that **students anticipate greater belonging and academic success in classes taught by instructors who communicate with a warm tone, whether that tone is accompanied by self-disclosure or not.** Importantly, this "warm" tone was not accompanied by a guarantee of more lenient policies (e.g., all classes maintained a 10% per day late penalty), suggesting that faculty can maintain authority and still be perceived positively by students. This indicates that the interpersonal tone used to communicate expectations may have a greater impact on students' perceptions of the classroom climate than the policies themselves.

This warmth, when expressed consistently and without self-disclosure, may also strengthen student-faculty relationships without undermining respect or academic rigor, thereby setting off a virtuous cycle in which faculty feel a sense of belonging, which in turn leads to their facilitating student belonging, and so on (e.g., the "ripple effect" of belonging).

Future Directions

- Though we attempted to maintain the same list of policies across conditions, while only varying the tone, it is possible that students perceived the "warmer" professors to be less likely to enforce their policies. Future research might examine this possibility.
- Our operationalization of self-disclosure was a direct statement of perspective-taking (e.g., "I've been in your shoes"). Future research might examine whether other types of self-disclosure (e.g., humanizing details about one's life, personal interests, etc.) may have a similar effect on perceptions of competence.
- To activate this "ripple effect" of belonging between faculty and students, we recommend creating intentional spaces for open dialogue and mutual perspective-taking. Early relationship-building can lay the groundwork for authentic pedagogical partnerships, which have been shown to foster greater belonging for both groups (see Cook-Sather & Felton, 2017 for a unique example of this).

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Perceived Warmth

Students who perceived the professor as warmer:

- Anticipated higher classroom belonging ($r = 0.86$)
- Trusted the professor more ($r = 0.77$)
- Were more likely to engage with the course ($r = 0.74$)
- Anticipated greater academic success ($r = 0.55$)

Perceived Competence

In comparison to faculty warmth, perceptions of faculty competence were more weakly though still positively correlated with belonging ($r = 0.30$), trust ($r = 0.31$), academic engagement ($r = 0.40$) and success ($r = 0.39$).

"She sounds very welcoming and like she genuinely cares about all student's wellbeing"

"She was very fair and accommodating"

"The idea that you need a note from the dean is a bit ridiculous, but I question whether he really requires that"