

Cues of Caring: How Students Perceive That Faculty in Online Classes Do (or Don't) Care

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Abstract

Caring has been an animating driver of the scholarship of teaching and learning and the founding of the *Journal of Management Education* 50 years ago. However, as business schools have moved quickly toward offering more online courses, researchers have not systematically explored the cues that students in online classes use to evaluate whether or not their instructors care. Drawing inspiration from Hawk and Lyons' classic JME article on student perceptions of faculty caring in face-to-face classes, this study uses concept mapping to identify cues that students use to evaluate whether faculty do or do not care. Our findings suggest that students in online synchronous classes rely on many of the same interpersonal and attributional cues to infer that faculty care (e.g., responsiveness, personalization, faculty enthusiasm, and willingness to invest time) as students in face-to-face classes. In particular, we highlight a distinction between caring for students as people and caring

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for students' learning outcomes. We also find, however, that the cues used to perceive that faculty don't care are qualitatively different from those used to determine that faculty care. We discuss the implications of our findings for equipping management educators to communicate care to students in the 21st century.

Keywords

faculty caring, online classes, future of management education, pedagogical caring, student mental health, student support

"Since Hawk and Lyons's (2008) article was published in the Journal of Management Education, much has changed about the nature of pedagogical caring. . ."

- Hawk (2017), p. 669

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

- Theodore Roosevelt (attributed)

It is not an overstatement to conclude that the entire scholarship of teaching and learning movement in business education was founded on an ethic of caring. The thousands of faculty members who have participated in the half-century history of the Management and Organizational Behavior Teaching Society (MOBTS) and the *Journal of Management Education* (JME, celebrated in this special issue) testify to their colleagues and the profession about how much they care about creating effective educational experiences for students. Moreover, management educators have been at the vanguard of calls for also caring for students holistically as people beyond learning outcomes (Burton & Dunn, 2005; Heath et al., 2019). However, in their classic article in JME a decade-and-a-half ago, Hawk and Lyons (2008) raised an important question: How do students determine whether their instructors care?

The question posed by Hawk and Lyons (2008) has taken on new meaning and greater urgency because of the dizzying pace of societal and technological changes (Ali, 2020; Hawk, 2017; Paudel, 2021). Outside the classroom, for instance, well over 9 out of 10 traditional college-age (18–29 years old) adults report regularly using at least one online or social media platform (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). Students need faculty who care now more than ever because the growing use of social media has had dramatic (and largely

negative) implications for students' overall well-being and mental health (Bettmann et al., 2021; Groth et al., 2017). More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the trend of business schools offering courses online and forced many instructors who had previously taught primarily face-to-face courses to suddenly move their courses online (Krishnamurthy, 2020). The move to remote work and remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic coincided with a dramatic increase in depression and anxiety among students that underscored the critical need for care in university communities (Brunier, 2022; Nash & Churchill, 2020; Schuch et al., 2023). In response, a growing number of educators and practitioners have argued more explicitly that the boundaries of caring have expanded beyond pedagogical caring (i.e., caring for student learning outcomes) to caring for students and their holistic well-being (Davidson, 2020; McKoy, 2021).

Finding ways to connect with and show care to students is one of the fundamental challenges of moving to online methods of course delivery (Mastel-Smith et al., 2015; Plante & Asselin, 2014) and students in online courses are more eager than ever for faculty who demonstrate care (Guzzardo et al., 2021). However, we suggest that the speed at which faculty have had to move courses online has substantially outpaced our knowledge of students' perceptions of whether their instructors in online classes are showing care. In the spirit of this special issue, as JME celebrates its 50th anniversary and contemplates what it means to be a management educator in the 21st century, the purpose of this paper is to build on Hawk and Lyons' (2008) initial question in the context of the emerging digital age of education. In this paper, we explore the following research question: What is the content of the cues used by students in online synchronous business classes to describe when instructors are perceived to care—and when they are perceived to not care?

Our work highlights three particularly important considerations for faculty who seek to show care to their students in the 21st century. First, we make an important distinction between instructors' caring for students and caring for students' learning. Second, we unpack areas where caring may be perceived differently by students in electronically-mediated (e.g., online synchronous) courses relative to in-person courses. Third and finally, we discover that caring and not caring are not necessarily perceived as ends of the same conceptual continuum. Instead, our findings suggest that the cues associated with students' perceptions that faculty care are qualitatively different from those guiding students' perceptions that faculty don't care.

A Selective Review of Perceptions of Instructor Care

Caring in business education draws from literatures on ethical instruction and particularly ethics of care (e.g., Eden et al., 2018; T. B. Lawrence & Maitlis,

2012). Hawk and Lyons (2008) framed their paper around an ethic of care, positioning it as an alternative ethical framework for teaching and learning in management education. Originally drawn from feminist theory, ethics of care are fundamentally relational, focused on process, and interested in the well-being of the involved parties as an important outcome of interaction (Atkinson, 2013). For the purposes of this paper, we share Hawk and Lyons' (2008) concern for the two-way relational perceptions (i.e., representing student perceptions in addition to those of faculty) of caring reflected in their ethic of care framework, particularly because other research about online learning in higher education has often focused on faculty perceptions (e.g., Wingo et al., 2017).

We began by reviewing the literature on the cues used when students describe faculty who care. Our review was selective, choosing seven seminal papers that represented thought leadership from the last three decades of research on faculty caring in higher education. As a research team, we individually read each paper and then we engaged in an iterative process of identifying key themes that emerged from the papers and classifying the emergent themes into tentative overarching categories for the purposes of comparison. We also excluded potential themes that we initially believed might have special relevance in an online environment (e.g., technology-related issues), but which turned out to be only peripheral in the actual literature.

From that process, we identified three overarching categories of themes describing distinct sets of cues for evaluating whether faculty care (see Table 1). Similar to other domains of management research (e.g., Bolinger et al., 2020) and consistent with the spirit of prior management education literature on caring (e.g., Hawk & Lyons, 2008), we chose to focus on the cues as described by participants themselves to foreground the stimuli that students themselves pay attention to and rely on (i.e., among the innumerable variety of behaviors, words, non-verbal cues, and other signals). As we will describe in more detail in the Methods section, focusing on participant-derived cues enables an inductive research approach that seeks to delay the imposition of researcher influence until later in the process (Jackson & Trochim, 2002). Also, while two of the papers that we reviewed explored student perceptions of care in online classes (e.g., A. J. Lawrence, 2018; A. J. Lawrence & Frisby, 2016), the remaining papers follow the majority of past research that has focused on care in face-to-face settings (e.g., Buttner, 2004; McCroskey & Teven, 1999).

Across prior literature, the best-represented category involves interpersonal aspects of caring, which describes how instructors relate to and respond to students in interaction. Interpersonal aspects of caring can include emotions that are conveyed in how faculty listen and respond to students

Table 1. Aspects of Caring About Students and Pedagogical Caring Identified in Select Prior Literature.

Literatures related to two types of faculty caring	Interpersonal aspects of caring about students	Effort-related aspects of caring about students	Pedagogical aspects of caring
McCroskey (1992)—Model of Student's Perceptions of Caring Instructors	Empathy; Understanding	Responsiveness	
McCroskey and Teven (1999)—Model of Students' Perceptions of Caring Instructors	Concerned; Sensitive; Understanding and not self-centered; Appears to have students' best interests at heart		
Buttner (2004)—Model of Respectful Instructor Behavior	Recognition of student perspectives; Treatment of students; Affirmation of students' efforts; Defensiveness in response to student requests	Giving task-related help to students; Responsiveness to students' unusual situations	
Straits (2007)—Indicators of Caring Instruction	Respects students as individuals; Gets to know students; Welcomes questions in class	Willing to give extra effort; Available to students	Utilizes various teaching strategies; Offers multiple learning opportunities; Promotes higher-level think skills
Hawk and Lyons (2008)—Course Attributes that Communicate Caring	Establishing a safe and encouraging environment; Recognizing student learning differences	Instructor preparation and enthusiasm; Availability; Providing constructive feedback	Involving students and checking for comprehension
A. J. Lawrence and Frisby (2016)—Faculty Perspectives of Caring Behavior in Online Courses	Compassion (empathy and understanding); Immediacy	Presence (frequent and timely responses); Feedback; Motivation	
A. J. Lawrence (2018)—Student Perceptions of Care in Online Courses	Sensitive to the needs of the student population	Presence (frequent and timely responses); Feedback; Affect (passion) toward the course/material	Increased student engagement and participation; Increased student motivation

(e.g., empathy, concern, sensitivity, and compassion, A. J. Lawrence & Frisby, 2016; McCroskey, 1992; McCroskey & Teven, 1999). Additionally, interpersonal aspects of caring can include the understanding that faculty demonstrate (McCroskey & Teven, 1999), the extent to which their responses affirm the efforts that students make (Buttner, 2004), the extent to which faculty welcome questions and try to get to know students (Straits, 2007), and sensitivity to students' individual needs and learning differences (Hawk & Lyons, 2008; A. J. Lawrence, 2018). Although not necessarily explicitly labeled as such in prior literature, interpersonal aspects of caring appear to emphasize faculty care about students as people, beyond educational outcomes.

A second category of cues relate to aspects of caring associated with the effort that faculty exert on behalf of student outcomes. For instance, students often cite faculty responsiveness as a mark of their care (e.g., Buttner, 2004; A. J. Lawrence & Frisby, 2016). Consistent availability, frequent and timely responses to student emails, provisions of constructive feedback, and willingness to provide task-related help are all examples of extra effort that students interpret as evidence that faculty care (Hawk & Lyons, 2008; A. J. Lawrence, 2018; Straits, 2007). Effort-related aspects of caring also appear to emphasize caring about students' well-being, above and beyond their learning outcomes.

Less frequently mentioned are a third category of cues, which involve what Hawk and Lyons (2008) describe as pedagogical aspects of caring. Pedagogical aspects describe how the structure of the class and the content of the curriculum reveal to students how instructors care about them. For instance, Straits (2007) describes how faculty show care by utilizing various teaching strategies, offering multiple learning opportunities, and promoting higher-level thinking skills. Similarly, Hawk and Lyons (2008) describe how involving students during class sessions and checking for their comprehension (with the intent of adjusting the course schedule if the class as a whole needs additional time on particular concepts) are valuable pedagogical aspects of care. Pedagogical aspects of care do not preclude broader aspects of caring about students, but do tend to focus more directly on caring about learning outcomes.

This brief review of existing literature suggests at least two observations that provide helpful grounding for our primary research question. The first observation from prior literature is that the cues used by students to perceive that faculty care are relatively similar whether the work took place in face-to-face or online classes. Perhaps not surprisingly, however, the prior literature reviewed here examined student perceptions prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced faculty members who had only previously taught face-to-face to teach online (Krishnamurthy, 2020). Our current study, which

draws on data collected after the COVID-19 pandemic, seeks to uncover whether student perceptions of faculty caring have shifted in the context of online instruction.

A second observation, highlighted by Hawk and Lyons (2008), is that the cues associated with student perceptions that faculty care have received substantially more attention than the cues students use to determine that faculty do not care. Hawk and Lyons (2008) join Buttner's (2004) emphasis on various forms of disrespect or defensiveness as the opposite of showing care to students, whereas Boice (1996) focuses on incivilities that instructors may knowingly or unknowingly perpetuate against students. However, researchers have not directly addressed whether the cues that students use to perceive that faculty do not care are directly opposite or qualitatively distinct from the cues associated with caring.

Method

Participants

Our study drew on responses to a pair of standardized questions included in a series of in-depth interviews with 28 participants from a mid-sized university in the western United States. The interviews took place in the spring of 2021. Participants included 10 men and 18 women ($M=26.2$ years old) who were current and recently graduated students in an online synchronous (i.e., via Zoom web conferencing software) Masters of Business Administration (MBA) program. The participants reported substantial experience with online courses ($M=9.4$ online synchronous courses at the time of the interviews).

The interviews were conducted by members of the research team and lasted between 12 and 35 minutes ($M=20$ minutes) per interview. The interviews were semi-structured, with a list of questions addressed to each participant along with opportunities for follow-up questions (Locke et al., 2022). For the purposes of this project, we focused on analyzing participants' open-ended responses to two questions. In the first question, we asked participants to describe up to three specific examples of times when a faculty member showed care in an online course, which could have been offered either synchronously or asynchronously. In the second question, we asked participants to describe up to three specific examples of times when they perceived that a faculty member did not care in an online class.

Procedure

We selected concept mapping, a robust, multi-step mixed method designed to uncover the underlying thematic structure of open-ended textual data

while continually foregrounding the perceptions of participants themselves (Jackson & Trochim, 2002). In other words, concept mapping enables researchers to allow participants to initially interpret the perceptions of other participants and thereby delays the imposition of researcher involvement until the latter stages of analysis (Bolinger et al., 2020). The process of concept mapping begins by analyzing single “thought units” from human participants that can be analyzed (Jackson & Trochim, 2002). The 28 participants in our interviews provided an average of 2.1 responses with examples of faculty who showed care in online classes and an average of 2.3 responses with examples of faculty who showed a lack of care in online classes. We (as a research team) condensed these broader open-ended responses into digestible (e.g., one-sentence) responses and eliminated responses that were substantially redundant. Thus, our data collection resulted in a total of 50 unique descriptions of cues for faculty who showed care ($M=1.8$ responses per respondent) and 52 unique descriptions of cues for faculty who failed to show care ($M=1.9$ responses per respondent).

The second step in concept mapping requires involving a second set of respondents who are blind to the purposes of the study to sort the original responses. Consistent with the recommendations of Jackson and Trochim (2002), we used a set of 19 MBA students who were not part of the original interviews (11 women and 8 men, $M=27.8$ years of age) to sort the original statements. The sorters were asked to responses into categories based on responses that they perceived to be related (i.e., similar).

For instance, if Response #1 and Response #2 were perceived by a sorter to be similar, they were put in the same pile (or, electronically, the sorter would put a “1” where the two responses intersected on a spreadsheet grid). Conversely, responses that sorters perceived to be unrelated (i.e., dissimilar) were placed in separate piles (or electronically assigned a “0” where the two responses intersected on a spreadsheet grid). By categorizing each response, the sorters created individual binary matrices. In order to limit potential researcher influence at this stage of the process (as recommended by Kane & Trochim, 2009), the sorters were instructed to group the responses as they saw fit, except that they could not have a “miscellaneous” pile for difficult-to-categorize responses.

Empirical Analysis

Once the sorting was complete, we aggregated the responses from the individual binary matrices of each sorter to derive an aggregate Euclidean distance matrix, in which we calculated the averages of the responses from each

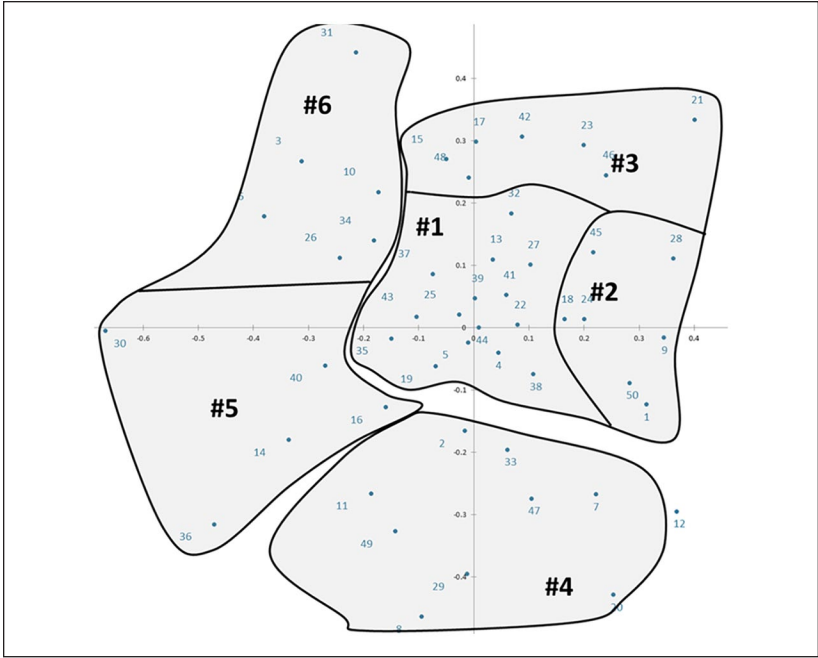


Figure 1. Multidimensional scaling (MDS) output for faculty who care.

cell across sorters. This aggregate matrix represented each combination of responses somewhere between 0 and 1. The closer the number was to 1, the more of our sorters determined that those two responses were similar. The closer the average was to zero, the more of our sorters determined that those two responses were relatively dissimilar.

After finalizing the Euclidean distance matrix, we used Multidimensional Scaling (MDS) to graphically depict the interface of clustered responses that emerged from the sorting data (see Figures 1 and 2). MDS is a computer-based tool that locates each of the data responses in a way that shows the relative proximity in participants' aggregated perceptions of pairings of items to represent how closely related each of the items are to the others in two-dimensional space (Simon & Eby, 2003). To provide more fine-grained distinctions among the clusters that emerged, we took the output from MDS and engaged in Agglomerative Hierarchical Clustering (AHC). AHC involves a process of considering each data point its own group and then pairing them a tree-based representation of the response items that cluster

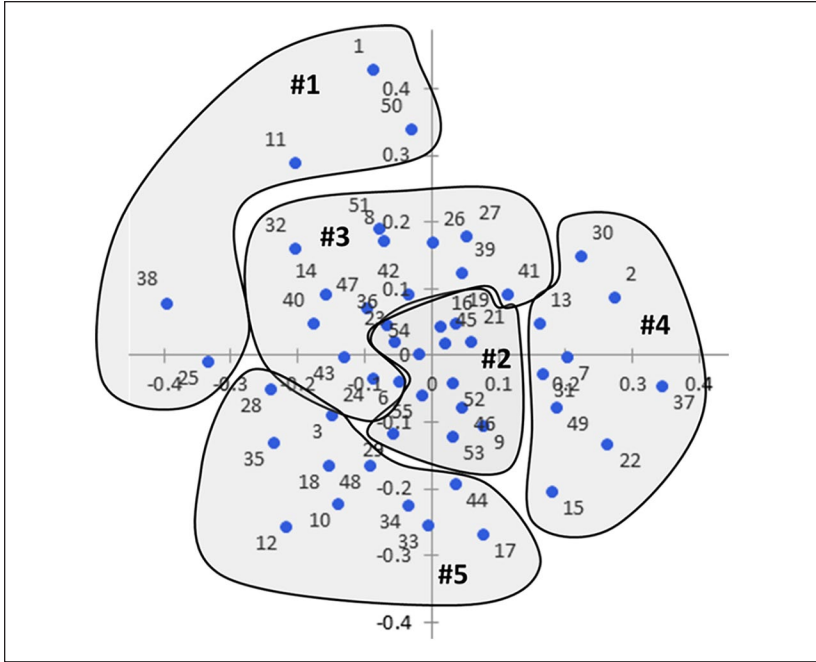


Figure 2. Multidimensional scaling (MDS) output for faculty who don't care.

together (i.e., were perceived across the aggregate of sorters as more similar, Murtagh & Contreras, 2012). AHC provides the advantage of providing empirical guidance to the task of distinguishing among aggregated clusters in qualitative data (Jackson & Trochim, 2002). Our AHC analysis suggested a six-cluster solution for responses about faculty who showed care and a five-cluster solution for responses about faculty who did not show care (see Figures 1 and 2).

The final step in concept mapping requires that researchers interpret the themes (or “cues”) that emerge from the participant-generated clusters (Jackson & Trochim, 2002). We labeled each of the clusters based on the types of cues that were included in that cluster. Importantly, we sought to use terminology that stuck closely to the wording used by participants in their responses (and, in some cases, we used their words verbatim). Each of the clusters, with illustrative examples and the number and percentage of participant statements included in it, are included in Table 2 (for responses about faculty who showed care) and Table 3 (for responses about faculty who failed to show care).

Findings

When Faculty Care

Responsive. There were 15 statements within this cluster representing 30% of the total statements. This category of criteria focuses on faculty conduct that responds to and is interactive with students, and the perceptions of care that such actions cultivate in students. Representative statements noted that faculty inquired about respondents' recommendations and feedback, asked for their opinions on controversial topics, and gave breaks or cut class short when it ran long. Some professors asked students to give feedback about their course a few weeks into the semester to make sure the class structure was working for the majority of students. Other professors gave more specific, proactive feedback to students who underperformed on an exam or assignment. One respondent had a professor who reached out to her after receiving a C on the first exam, and set up a time when they could go through the exam together. These faculty actions would seem to reflect a desire to positively engage students and an attitude of concern for students, and may have helped respondents to feel that their needs for the classroom were being met and they were being heard.

Personalized. There were seven statements within this cluster representing 14% of the total statements. Personalization reflects how caring faculty know their students by name and can remember specific details about their lives. Respondents expressed appreciation for faculty who remembered the career field they were pursuing, the company they worked for, and consistently asked how things were going in their lives outside of their class. They also described faculty who made personal connections by tying specific concepts from the class to personal experiences that specific students had described. One student commented, "Both professors [X and Y] ask about personal life and genuinely care to connect. They also ask what you have planned for the weekend and the future down the line." Another mentioned that a professor liked to incorporate details from his students' hobbies and personal interests into his lessons, which made the respondent feel listened to and cared for, while still others perceived personalization when professors took time to answer questions in a way that they could understand, and were honest about their progress. Several respondents suggested that that faculty showed care with beginning-of-the-course icebreakers. Ironically, even respondents who found icebreakers annoying noted that these activities made them appreciate their professors more and gave them a good first impression of their instructor's teaching style. Moreover, when respondents were asked to give an interesting fact about themselves during these get-to-know-you activities, the

Table 2. Cues Associated With Faculty Who Care.

Clusters of cues	Size of cluster	Example statements	Overlap with Hawk and Lyons (2008) findings
#1—Responsive	15 statements [30% of total statements]	Gives breaks or cuts class short when classes run long. They ask for recommendations and feedback.	Moderately high degree of overlap
#2—Personalized	7 statements [14% of total statements]	Asks about students' opinions on controversial topics. Takes times to answer questions in a way that I can understand. They know you by name and recognize when you are attending class. They are honest about individual students' progress.	High degree of overlap
#3—Involved	7 statements [14% of total statements]	Asks the class how things are going and gauges where students are at mentally. Sends out weekly emails with updates, assignment information, and acknowledges the status of the class. They are involved in projects/papers.	High degree of overlap
#4—Visible enthusiasm	10 statements [20% of total statements]	Shows visible enthusiasm for the materials that they teach. They make a statement about caring. Creates an interactive class environment.	High degree of overlap
#5—Invested	5 statements [10% of total statements]	They are interested in your future career goals. Provides resources to help students pass their class. They are invested.	Moderately low degree of overlap
#6—Takes Time	6 statements [12% of total statements]	Takes time to get to know students. Open/receptive to one-on-one help. Comes prepared to Zoom meeting/class.	Moderate degree of overlap

Table 3. Cues Associated with Faculty Who Don't Care.

Clusters of cues	Size of cluster	Example statements
#1—Uninterested in interaction	5 statements [10% of total statements] Doesn't ask for or expect interaction from the students. Dismissive of student comments.	Solely lectures with zero interaction.
#2—Inattention to detail	10 statements [19% of total statements] Content has not been updated from prior semesters. Does not test technological components of the curriculum prior to class.	Syllabus is not provided until after the first week of class.
#3—Lazy	16 statements [31% of total statements] Slow or no responses to student emails. Won't stay after class to answer student questions.	Arrives late to online class.
#4—Closed-off communication	9 statements [17% of total statements] Just reads off their slides, sometimes without looking up. Tone in emails or Zoom discussions sounds annoyed or bothered when you ask for help.	Closed-off communication.
#5—Inattention to curricula	12 statements [23% of total statements] They use McGraw-Hill Connect to teach their class for them. They regurgitate materials from a previous professor who taught the class without thinking about how it will work for this semester's students.	Class materials have no association with assigned work.

faculty members who remembered those facts and brought them up throughout the semester made the respondents feel remembered. One of the respondents mentioned a professor who did these icebreaker activities and made sure to acknowledge each student by commenting on their personal facts/interests. The same professor was said to acknowledge the majority of students each class session, which helped this student perceived as a very personalized learning experience.

Involved. Respondents perceived involvement through faculty actions such as asking the class how things were going, gauging where the students were mentally, and sending out weekly emails containing updates, assignment information, and acknowledging the status of the class. There were seven

statements within this cluster representing 14% of the total statements, and many of these statements described actions not necessarily required of the faculty members. This may offer clues as to why respondents interpreted involved conduct as a sign of caring.

Visible Enthusiasm. There were 10 statements within this cluster representing 20% of the total statements. Visible enthusiasm occurs when faculty communicate their excitement about a topic to students using non-verbal and/or verbal communication. Respondents perceived this when faculty made explicit statements about caring, but also when they showed (non-verbal) excitement for the topic of the class. Visible enthusiasm was also perceived through proactive faculty efforts, such as attempts to create an interactive and enjoyable class environment. Visible enthusiasm lets students know that the faculty member considers the course to be important, and suggests that the students should adopt a similar opinion.

Invested. This cluster was composed of five statements, representing 10% of the total statements. According to these statements, faculty were perceived to be invested when they engaged in actions suggesting an interest and desire in students' current and future welfare. This includes expressing interest in students' future career goals, and providing resources to help students pass their class. Such actions suggest that it matters to faculty how their students are doing, and that they are willing to expend effort to help their students succeed.

Takes Time. This was the final cluster of cues associated with student perceptions of faculty care, and included six statements representing 12% of the total statements. Statements in this cluster involved faculty expending temporal resources that may not be required of faculty members, and in ways that benefited students. This included taking time to get to know students, and being open and receptive to one-on-one help. Respondents also perceived time sacrifices when faculty came to Zoom meetings or class prepared, demonstrating that they care enough about the class and student experience that they had used their own time to prepare.

When Faculty Don't Care?

Uninterested in Interaction. There were five statements within this cluster representing 9.6% of the total statements. These statements described instructor actions and attitudes that lead students to believe that a faculty member was

not truly interested in or engaged with either the course or the students, and perhaps was only interested in doing the bare minimum to get by. This included when faculty lectured with no student interactions, and neither solicited nor expected such interactions. Students also concluded that faculty were uninterested in interaction and thus, did not care, when they were dismissive of student questions or comments.

Inattention to Detail. There were 10 statements within this cluster representing 19.2% of the total statements. These statements describe faculty inaction and mistakes consistent with a lack of caring. Respondents described instructors who were tardy in posting foundational course materials like the syllabus, assignments, and quizzes, and failed to update content from past semesters. Respondents also mentioned situations in which they perceived that faculty had not tested technological components of the curriculum before class, presumably due to the presence of technical issues that could have been avoided. The respondent statements may reflect a belief that taking care of details is a proxy for caring, leading to the perception of an absence of caring when details have not been attended to.

Lazy. The 16 statements in this cluster represented 30.8% of the total statements, and involved faculty actions that were perceived to be miserly in effort, and show a refusal to go beyond the minimum of what would be expected of a faculty member. For example, respondent described faculty members who were either slow or did not respond to student emails, suggesting they did not consider doing so to be worth the effort. Other statements reflected instructors who lacked respect for student time and/or a refused to be generous with their own time. This included faculty who arrived late to online class and refused to stay after class to answer student questions.

Closed-Off Communication. There were nine statements within this cluster representing 17.3% of the total statements. These statements described faculty who engaged exclusively or nearly exclusively in one-way communication from instructor to student. Respondents described faculty who gave terse responses to student inquiries through email or Zoom discussions that suggested that faculty members were annoyed or resented having to engage with students. Respondents also noted and expressed frustration with a lack of two-way communication in class, particularly with faculty who read directly from their PowerPoint slides without inviting discussion. As one respondent noted, such communication practices can feel to students like “a waste of my time and an insult to my intelligence.”

Inattention to Curricula. There were 12 statements within this cluster representing 23.1% of the total statements. These statements discussed teaching practices the students felt were irrelevant, inadequate, or otherwise flawed. For example, one respondent lamented that a faculty member clearly did not care because she did not update course information, which “made it look like materials were just copied and pasted from one semester to the next” with no consideration of the appropriateness of the material for the new semester’s students. Other respondents highlighted faculty members who relied on prepackaged content from textbook companies and “didn’t bother” to come up with original material for themselves. Overdependence on prepackaged content in online classes gave students the impression that faculty were not interested enough to make teaching them a priority. Finally, another respondent complained that instructors showed a lack of thoughtfulness and care by assigning work that was not relevant to the class materials.

Comparing our Findings to Those of Hawk and Lyons (2008)

A striking aspect of our findings is how well the cues used by students to determine if faculty care in online synchronous classes align with several of the cues used by students in face-to-face classes, as described by Hawk and Lyons (2008). In one particularly striking instance, both our sample and the students in Hawk and Lyons’ sample described instructors’ enthusiasm as an important indication that they cared about students. Similarly, the cue *Personalized* in our findings maps onto the recognition of individual student learning differences described in Hawk and Lyons. The responses underlying the cue *Involved* in our findings also relates closely with Hawk and Lyons’ descriptions of involving students and checking for understanding.

Although the overall spirit of our findings fit nicely with those of Hawk and Lyons (2008), the responses in our findings were more explicit about the importance that students in online classes appear to place on faculty investments of time as an indication of the extent to which they care. Three of the categories of cues described by our respondents (over one-third of the total responses)—*Involved*, *Invested*, and *Takes Time*—included direct examples of faculty taking extra time, often outside of the regular class, to reach out or help students. In contrast, the references to giving extra time in Hawk and Lyons’ findings are present (e.g., availability) but less prominent, suggesting that students in online classes may be especially cognizant of and impressed by faculty investments of time. We unpack the implications of this emphasis for instructors in the Implications for Practice section later in the paper.

Comparing Our Findings When Faculty Do and Do Not Care

We were taken by the qualitatively different character of the cues generated by our respondents in describing when faculty show care and when faculty do not show care. In particular, we observed that responses associated with faculty who do not show care were much more likely than descriptions of faculty who care to discuss shortcomings associated with the curriculum or structure of the class. Two of the five categories of cues (constituting over 40% of the total responses), *Inattention to Detail* and *Inattention to Curricula*, specifically referenced elements of the course's content, the syllabus, or other aspects of the structure of the class that showed a lack of faculty care. Especially striking for us, the only responses that mentioned the use (or failed use) of technology in connection with perceptions of caring were in connection with faculty who are perceived not to care.

In contrast, the cues associated with faculty who care were much more closely aligned with the more prevalent emphasis in prior literature on caring as a reflection of the tone of faculty interactions with students, the attitudes and demeanor that they convey, and the extent to which they personalize and treat students as individuals. These findings suggest, then, that students in online classes perceive faculty who care not as the direct opposite of faculty who don't show care, but as qualitatively different. That is, students appear to rely on very different cues to evaluate faculty caring than to assess whether they believe that faculty do not care.

Additionally, our findings suggest an important distinction in the types of caring described by respondents in reference to faculty who are perceived to care and those who are not. We found that the categories of student statements about faculty who showed care overwhelmingly reflected a sense of faculty members caring holistically about students as people. Categories such as *Responsive*, *Personalized*, *Invested*, and *Takes Time* reflect instructors who show individualized care toward students as people (e.g., their career goals, their experience in the classroom, and their mental health and well-being). Similarly, the categories *Visible Enthusiasm* and *Involved* reflect a sense of caring about the experience of the class as a whole that goes even beyond learning outcomes.

In contrast, over one-quarter of the statements describing faculty who were perceived not to care (represented in *Inattention to Detail* and *Inattention to Communication*) focused explicitly on pedagogical learning (i.e., curricula, syllabi, and other course-related considerations associated with students' educational outcomes). Prior work, including Hawk and Lyons (2008), has made few direct distinctions between caring for students as people and caring about their pedagogical outcomes. However, particularly in the wake

of the COVID-19 pandemic, a growing number of educators and practitioners have called for instructors to take more holistic approaches to caring for students in addition to caring for students' learning outcomes (e.g., Davidson, 2020; McKoy, 2021). Our findings highlight the importance of the distinction between caring for students as people and caring about students' learning outcomes, especially in connection with faculty who are perceived to not show care.

General Discussion

We opened this paper by highlighting how the entire scholarship of teaching and learning movement that birthed the *Journal of Management Education* 50 years ago was founded on an underlying ethic of care for students, often directly connected to facilitating their pedagogical outcomes. Yet, as Hawk (2017) expressed, the expectations associated with showing care to students changed dramatically in less than a decade following the publication of Hawk and Lyons (2008). Now, in a post-pandemic educational landscape irrevocably shaped by online course offerings and greater expectations for showing care for students, as people and beyond their learning outcomes, there is a concomitant need for understanding the cues that students in online classes use to determine whether or not faculty care.

In this paper, we used qualitative interviews and concept mapping to explore the cues that students in online classes generated to explain their perceptions of whether or not faculty care. In this section, we highlight three primary insights from our findings about what it will mean to be a caring management educator in an online synchronous course space. We then describe the implications for practice (and caveats) raised by our findings.

Insight #1: Caring Online Can Look a Lot Like Caring Face-to-Face

An important overall takeaway from our findings is that students look to many of the same (or similar) cues in evaluating whether faculty care in online synchronous and face-to-face classes. For instance, researchers investigating student perceptions of faculty caring in face-to-face classes have concentrated on personalization as one of the primary bases for student perceptions of care in face-to-face courses (e.g., Bandura & Lyons, 2012; Hawk & Lyons, 2008). Similarly, our respondents described *Personalization* as one of the categories of cues associated with instructors who they perceived as caring. Additionally, other categories of cues such as *Visible Enthusiasm*

overlapped with descriptions from prior research of cues used by students in face-to-face classes (e.g., Hawk & Lyons, 2008). Our insight regarding the similarities in cues used by students to evaluate faculty care in online synchronous and face-to-face classes is also consistent with recent work by Lawrence (e.g., A. J. Lawrence, 2018; A. J. Lawrence & Frisby, 2016) that shows overarching consistency in the cues used by online students and face-to-face students in evaluating faculty who care. Faculty words and actions that signal caring in face-to-face classes turn out to be valuable signals of caring in online contexts, as well.

Insight #2: Investing Time to Exceed Online Students' Expectations

Our findings also contribute to literature on the small but emerging literature on disconfirmation of student expectations in higher education (Schwarz & Zhu, 2015). In particular, our findings illustrate ways in which instructors of online classes can positively disconfirm (i.e., exceed) student expectations by showing care through investing extra time. As described in our findings about faculty who were perceived to care, three of the six categories of cues, more than one-third of the total responses, focused on involvement and investments of time (i.e., *Involved*, *Invested*, and *Takes Time*).

A valuable implication of this insight is that the instances of caring described by participants can sometimes involve only relatively mundane investments of time. For instance, our respondents specifically inferred care from faculty actions such as getting on Zoom early and staying late to answer student questions, answering emails outside of class time, offering to write letters of recommendation, and taking the time to respond quickly to voicemail and emails. Faculty members who take the time to use emerging technologies, even if they are not the most technically proficient, can further enrich student perceptions that they, as instructors, care. For instance, an anecdote shared by one of the original respondents during the initial interviews described a faculty member who cared because he responded to a student's email with a short video message, enabling the student to see the professor's face and more closely simulate the feel of an in-person classroom.

Our finding of how faculty in online classes can use investments of time to positively disrupt student expectations offers a terrific opportunity for faculty to capitalize on students' perceptions of online classes relative to face-to-face courses (Byrne & Donlan, 2020). Specifically, we suggest that the extra effort that faculty make to give extra time to students in online classes may

be especially vivid and impactful for students who are accustomed to a lack of faculty care in other online courses. At least until an ethic of care becomes more widespread in online course delivery in business education, positive disruptions of student expectations represent an opportunity to delight students (Sahney, 2011) and to overcome other challenges that online classes present in demonstrating care to students.

Insight #3: Caring and Not Caring Involve Qualitatively Different Cues

A third contribution of our findings is the insight that student perceptions of when faculty do not care are not necessarily the mirror opposite of their perceptions of when faculty do care. To the contrary, we found that participants used qualitatively different categories of cues for evaluating faculty who they perceived not to care. For instance, two of the five categories of cues associated with faculty who were perceived not to care dealt specifically with inattention to aspects of the content and structure of the course (*Inattention to Detail* and *Inattention to Curricula*). However, none of the six categories of cues associated with perceptions of faculty who show care focused on course content or structure. Conversely, the cue *Personalization* was described in connection with faculty who care but there was not a corresponding category focused on a lack of personalization in evaluating faculty who don't show care.

Our findings suggest an important direction for future research because the cues associated with faculty who fail to show care are undertheorized relative to cues associated with faculty who show care (Hawk & Lyons, 2008). Indeed, giving more systematic attention to the cues associated with faculty who fail to show care may reveal classroom dynamics that have received only minimal attention in the extant literature. For instance, researchers have specifically called for more attention to course structures and policies as important sources of influence on student perceptions that tend to be systematically overlooked by faculty (Fornaciari & Lund Dean, 2014). Perhaps, as our findings would suggest, this relative lack of attention to course structures and policies can at least partly be explained by how course content and structures may not come to mind as readily when students are evaluating whether faculty care.

Similarly, although responses about the use of technology did not encompass a full category of cues, they were present in multiple responses (e.g., "Does not test technological components of the curriculum prior to class" in the *Inattention to Detail* category; "They use McGraw-Hill Connect to teach

their class for them” in the *Lazy* category). Importantly, respondents appeared to care about faculty’s technological competence less in terms of mastery of the technology and more in terms of demonstrating that they are making the effort to avoid preventable and repeated technical difficulties (“Not good with technology and makes no effort to improve it” was another response in the *Lazy* category of cues). We suggest that this finding is actually good news for faculty, because course content and structures are often readily amenable to improvement (Fornaciari & Lund Dean, 2014) and prior research has found that faculty tend to be more satisfied with their roles and the online learning environment when adequate support and training is provided for structural and technical aspects of course design (Stickney et al., 2019). Our findings suggest that even failures in using technology may be mitigated by demonstrating that faculty are taking the time to learn and improve (e.g., in using web conferencing tools such as Zoom or online course content tools such as Moodle, Blackboard, or Canvas).

Implications for Practice

Implications for Instructors

Our findings have a number of key implications for business educators who teach (or will teach) online courses, along with important caveats. We start with one of the more obvious caveats, that a limitation of this research is that we focused on online synchronous classes, but many management educators teach courses that are online asynchronous (i.e., they do not meet electronically at set times). We suspect that online asynchronous courses are likely to foster even greater challenges to faculty in demonstrating care, as others have described (e.g., Fehrman & Watson, 2021). Future research is needed to systematically investigate the cues that students use to perceive that faculty care for them when even electronically-mediated interaction is further limited.

With respect to implications for practice, we first suggest that faculty should seek to maximize expressions of care by engaging in activities that tap into multiple categories of student cues for perceiving whether faculty care. For instance, one of the authors sends out weekly emails to students in his online synchronous class prior to the first class of each week to review upcoming topics and assignments, as well as to highlight upcoming opportunities outside of the class (e.g., career fairs, specific job postings, campus events, popular press articles relevant to the course topic, and other resources). He has received feedback from past students about their appreciation for those emails, which communicated the instructor’s visible enthusiasm (*Visible Enthusiasm*), showed a high degree of investment in the class

(*Investment*), and made visible the extra time that he was putting in behind the scenes to prepare for upcoming class sessions (*Takes Time*). Perhaps most importantly, many of this instructor's current students are part of a generation that is used to constant feedback and reassurance (Venne & Coleman, 2010) and providing consistent email communication can help to assuage student insecurities about upcoming schedules and due dates.

Conversely, faculty should be aware that students' overall perceptions of whether or not faculty members care in online classes are likely shaped by the interactions among multiple categories of care. Thus, it makes sense that students may not consider instructors to be particularly caring if instructors answer emails quickly but do none of the other things described in our findings. That is, rapid faculty response time to student questions is important, but if that is the only caring quality a student sees, they are unlikely to perceive that the instructor cares about them as a person. More investigation is needed to understand what factors influence the relative weight different students place on the types of care identified in our findings.

Second, we suggest that faculty should be strategic about allocating (and communicating) time and energy toward showing care to students. Our findings highlight the value that students often experience from faculty who expend even small additional amounts of time outside of their job requirements. However, such expenditures of time come with a pair of important caveats. Additional time caring for students is often exerted beyond faculty role requirements. For faculty who are already overburdened with heavy academic workloads (e.g., Griffith & Altinay, 2020; Townsend & Rosser, 2007), allocating too much time to showing care may be a recipe for declining motivation or even burnout.

Additionally, effort exerted toward showing care for students is not always obvious (or even visible) to students, which can hinder the fruitfulness of the sometimes-invisible work of faculty who labor to show care for student outcomes. For instance, although our findings suggest that students in online classes appreciate when faculty invest extra time toward student learning, faculty investments in certain activities (e.g., in learning new technology, providing timely feedback, and crafting better syllabi) may go largely unrecognized. Moreover, extra-role work by women and individuals from minority and indigenous populations are often "disappeared" or made invisible by cultural norms and institutional arrangements (Fletcher, 2001; Rayfield, 2022).

Management education researchers could take inspiration from service management literature on operational transparency, which has shown how simple indicators of effort taking place behind the scenes (e.g., a progress bar to provide information to online customers about the loading status of an

e-commerce website) can greatly influence customer perceptions of service quality (Buell & Norton, 2011). As the example of weekly email communication suggests, ongoing communication can serve as a critical tool for revealing to students the extent of faculty labor that may otherwise remain behind-the-scenes. More broadly, instructors need to be thoughtful both about the time they allocate and the ways in which they represent their caring to manage (and, ideally, exceed) student expectations about caring in ways that are not perceived as excessively self-promoting or disingenuous.

Third, we recommend that instructors seek to leverage course policies, rules, procedures, and technology to signal caring to students. One of the great challenges of showing care through personalization, for instance, is that providing personalized learning opportunities for individual students may sometimes be in tension with ensuring fairness to the class as a whole (Fellenz, 2006). Having clearly established policies in place from the outset of the course that provide transparency about grades, faculty expectations, and student responsibilities are indispensable tools for enabling faculty to balance individualized considerations with class-wide fairness concerns.

Our findings also provide a potentially reassuring implication that faculty do not have to be perfect with technology in order to be perceived as caring. What appears to matter most is the effort that faculty demonstrate to students. That is, categories of cues such as *Responsive* may reflect ways that instructors show students that they have prepared in advance and that they are actively trying to figure out the technology (rather than repeating the same mistakes continually). Moreover, extending grace is a two-way street between faculty and students. An important way that instructors can show that they are *Invested* is by extending the same grace to individual students who are struggling with technological issues of their own.

Finally, we return to Hawk and Lyons' (2008) warning about how easily faculty can convey attitudes, demeanors, or behaviors that are perceived by students as disrespectful. Many of the responses (e.g., particularly in the *Lazy*, *Inattention to Detail*, and *Inattention to Curricula* categories) about faculty who were perceived not to care were not about direct disrespect in interaction with students, but rather indirect behaviors that students perceived as communicating a lack of care. A practical implication of our findings, then, is the fragility of preserving student perceptions of respect in online courses. Our findings vividly illustrate how faculty behavior that conveys disrespect and a lack of care can manifest in distinct and sometimes subtle ways (e.g., inattentive responses to student emails, not updating content from prior semesters, even the timing of delivering the course syllabus) that are not merely the absence of respect.

Implications for Institutions and Administrators

In addition to the numerous implications of this paper for instructors, our findings also suggest important implications for administrators who seek to support faculty in showing care to students in online courses. For instance, our findings concerning faculty who are not perceived to care suggest that providing faculty with support in using standard educational technology could mitigate repeated fumbling with technology over time that respondents in our study used as a signal that faculty don't care. Similarly, our findings add student perceptions that faculty care to the list of potential benefits that can occur when administrators provide educational technology scaffolding and support resources to instructors in technologically-mediated course contexts (Richardson et al., 2022).

Our findings also suggest how opportunities for coaching and role-modeling can benefit faculty teaching online synchronous courses. Past research has highlighted the benefits of coaching primarily in face-to-face classroom contexts (e.g., McDowell et al., 2014). However, remote interaction can impair perceptions of responsiveness and depersonalize working relationships by reducing physical immediacy, limiting access to informal conversations (e.g., interactions in the hall on the way to class), and hindering vicarious learning from the observation of others (Lund Dean & Bolinger, 2024). We suggest that additional research is needed to explore how to adapt coaching to meet the needs of faculty teaching in online synchronous contexts.

Finally, our findings suggest that there may be opportunities to incorporate student perceptions of instructor caring more directly into institutional and learning outcomes. For instance, researchers have long lamented the shortcomings of student evaluations of teaching (i.e., course evaluations), which are often biased (Goos & Salomons, 2017), frequently are disconnected from what students actually learn (Clayson, 2009), and too often fail to accurately judge teaching effectiveness (Carpenter et al., 2020). An interesting implication of our findings is that, even as students may be imperfect judges of what they learned or the overall effectiveness of their instructor, they are subject matter experts when it comes to whether they perceived that the instructor cared about them. Future research is needed to consider whether and how to integrate perceptions of caring into more holistic and potentially helpful uses of student evaluations of teaching.

Potential Risks and Downsides of Caring

While it did not specifically emerge from our data, prior research in the *Journal of Management Education* has specifically highlighted an important

point of caution with respect to potential risks or downsides of caring. In particular, an exchange between Chory and Offstein (2017) and Hawk (2017) offered a specific critique of Hawk and Lyons' (2008) article by highlighting how expectations that students will know their instructors personally could create the potential for blurring professional and personal boundaries. Our findings did not capture these specific concerns. The lack of attention to the risks of caring in our data may be a reflection of the nature of our research question, or they could also be an artifact of the relational limitations of electronically-mediated, online synchronous courses relative to face-to-face courses.

However, there are broader questions about the risks of showing care in online course settings that deserve future research attention. For instance, researchers have found that substantial efforts associated with showing care may be associated with burnout among in-person professionals ranging from public administration (Hsieh, 2014) to oncologists and nurses (Kleiner & Wallace, 2017). From our experiences and observations, we suspect that a greater risk for burnout may come from putting substantial emotional energy into showing care only to not receive recognition or reciprocity from students. Indeed, students of different ages, generations, and life circumstances often vary in the degree of their emotional investment in their own education (Collier & Morgan, 2008), and we have observed how giving high levels of effort toward showing care without an accompanying acknowledgment from students can leave instructors feeling empty.

One avenue for future research could use Morgan-Thomas and Dudau's (2019) "hogs, possums, and horses" framework as a starting point for differentiating student engagement (e.g., "hogs" as those students who are fully engaged, "possums" as those who are hesitant but somewhat involved, and "horses" as those who are disinterested). The metaphor is that, like horses, some students can be led to water (e.g., provided with multiple types of care) but cannot be made to drink (i.e., engage wholeheartedly with the material). Similarly, instructors may have to frame their expectations with the recognition that a subset of students may fail to respond to instructor care, regardless of faculty efforts.

Another valuable avenue for future research, then, could be to investigate ways in which instructors respond to students who fail to embrace care may influence instructors' ability to avoid burnout and maintain motivation. To that point, one of the authors once taught an evening undergraduate management class in which the majority of the students were particularly uninterested in the content and indifferent to the efforts of the instructor. It caused a crisis of motivation for the instructor, who finally resolved the dilemma by concluding that if only one student cared about the class, then the instructor

would prepare and teach as though every student cared about the class. We suggest that acts of caring are, at their core, acts of prospective trust (Berg & Danielson, 2007). That is, some instructors may have to resolve to show care as an ethic foundational to their approach to teaching, trusting that at least some students will appreciate it.

Conclusion

As business schools continue to evolve from traditional instructional models that prioritized face-to-face teaching toward an increasing emphasis on online courses (Gallagher & Palmer, 2020), finding ways to show care in online courses is a strategic imperative. Our findings speak to fundamental questions of what it means to be a caring management educator in the midst of an historic transition for our profession. In an effort to understand student perceptions and to seek to exceed student expectations, however, it is important that we not lose sight of the foundational motives of caring about students and their outcomes. At a time when college-age adults are facing struggles as a cohort (Bettmann et al., 2021) and the demands on the emerging workforce are increasing dramatically (Parker & Grote, 2022), students need more faculty to find ways to show care in training and inspiring the next generation of leaders (Hawk, 2017). We commend these findings to management educators to help with devising strategies for how to demonstrate care in their online classes.

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