

**What Effect Does an Encouraging Email Have on Motivating Students
for a Course before the Semester Starts?**

Lauren Lewis Cline
Oklahoma State University
445 Agriculture Hall
Stillwater, OK 74078
(405) 744-3036
lauren.l.cline@okstate.edu

Dr. J. Shane Robinson
Oklahoma State University
PIO 304B
Stillwater, OK 74078
(405) 744-3094
shane.robinson@okstate.edu

What Effect Does an Encouraging Email Have on Motivating Students for a Course before the Semester Starts?

Introduction

Since Chickering and Gamson (1987) published the seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education, faculty have been encouraged to promote communication between students and faculty. Communication is essential for building rapport with students (Granitz, Koernig, & Harich, 2009). Tickle-Degnan and Rosenthal (1990) espoused that rapport is established through a three-component model: 1) attentiveness – a mutual interest in what another person says or does; 2) positivity – an exhibition of friendliness, kindness, and genuine care between one person and another; and 3) coordination – creating a harmonious, fair, and balanced relationship between what people are asked to do. Faranda and Clarke (2004) stated that faculty should establish rapport with their students by being empathetic to their needs and being approachable and accessible to them. Faculty also should treat students with respect and dignity (Granitz et al., 2009). When done, both faculty and students can benefit by having better overall relationships with enhanced communications that lead to trust (Granitz et al., 2009).

A positive relationship between student/professor rapport and students' expectancy for success and values has been found in college of agriculture courses (Estep & Roberts, 2013). College faculty build rapport with their students in various ways – both verbal and nonverbal – to motivate students for success in their classrooms (Wilson, Stadler, Scwhartz, & Goff, 2009). For female instructors, a personal handshake on day one of class motivated students to perform (Wilson et al., 2009). However, the same study showed that a handshake from a male instructor was a demotivator to student success. Because the literature on personal touch is contradictory, other modes of rapport building should be investigated to determine the effect, if any, they may have on students' motivation to succeed.

Theoretical Framework and Purpose of the Study

This study was undergirded using the expectancy-value theory (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008). People's expectations and values can affect why "they might engage in a task" (Schunk et al., 2008, p. 44). If people believe they can succeed at a task, they are more motivated to participate (Schunk et al., 2008). Faculty can motivate students through both verbal and non-verbal encouragement (Wilson et al., 2009). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine the effect of pre-course communication (i.e., a personalized email) on students' motivation for courses in a [College of Agriculture]. The following question was investigated: Does motivation for a course differ between students who receive a personalized email from the instructor and those who do not?

Methods

A quasi-experimental design (Privitera, 2017) guided this study and included students enrolled in the agricultural college's lower division plant and soil science courses and upper division oral and written communications courses ($N = 630$). The courses selected serve a variety of majors in the college and have diverse student enrollment representative of the college's undergraduate population. One-half of the students from each course were randomly selected to receive an email from their course instructor three days before the first class session ($n = 316$). A template welcome email providing tips for success was addressed individually for each randomly selected

student and distributed by the course instructor. The remaining students ($n = 314$) did not receive email communication from their instructor before the first day of class.

Instrumentation

Keller's (2006) *Course Interest Survey* (CIS) was adapted for this study. The CIS was developed to measure student's motivation across four constructs of the ARCS model of motivation (Keller, 1984) through a series of 34 Likert-type questions with a response scale ranging from 1 to 5 (Keller, 2006). Internal consistency of the instrument, based on Cronbach's alpha, was .95, with each of the four subscales maintaining a Cronbach's alpha between .81 and .88 (Keller, 2006). Of the four subscales (Attention, Relevance, Confidence, Satisfaction), items related to Satisfaction were removed from the instrument (questions 7, 12, 14, 16, 18, 19, 31, 32, 33, and 34) since students had no prior experience with the course before participation in the study. Additional questions were removed and/or wording slightly edited to fit the context of the study, resulting in a total of 18 questions measuring the Attention, Relevance, and Confidence subscales.

Data Collection and Analysis

Course instructors administered the CIS to all students during the last 10 minutes of the first class meeting day of the Fall semester. A total of 608 students participated in the study. Data were inputted and calculated using SPSS® v.23. After confirming assumptions for homogeneity and normality, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was chosen to determine if statistically significant differences in motivation existed between the student groups, with statistical significance determined *a priori* ($\alpha = .05$).

Results

Results from the one-way ANOVA indicated group means were similar among the student groups for course motivation ($F(1, 606) = 0.381, p > .05$); therefore, the null hypothesis was retained. According to the Omega squared measure of association, less than 1% ($\omega^2 = 0.001$) of the variability in course motivation could be attributed to whether a student received the pre-course email from the instructor. Similarly, the reported effect size was negligible ($f = 0.03$), confirming the group means did not differ significantly. As a result of the study's low power (0.11), the probability of conducting a Type II error, or concluding the pre-course email intervention did not have an effect on the student course motivation, was 89%. Because any difference between means of the student groups were not statistically significant, a post-hoc analysis was not used to explore and compare the means of course motivation of the two groups.

Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations

An email from the instructor prior to the beginning of class did not have an effect on students' motivation for the course. The College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources at Oklahoma State University is noted for its devotion to teaching. Numerous instructors advise students, have an open-door policy, and participate in hosting students on campus via recruitment events. It is possible that students had already met their instructor prior to receiving the email and that it was not the first point of contact. As such, the results of this study may have been skewed. Future research should assess how emails can be used to encourage and motivate student success throughout the semester.

References

- Chickering, A. W., & Gamson, Z. F. (1987). Seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education. *American Association of Higher Education Bulletin*, 39(7), 3–7. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED282491.pdf>
- Estep, C. M., & Roberts, T. G. (2013). Exploring the relationship between professor/student rapport and students' expectancy for success and values/goals in college of agriculture classrooms. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 54(4), 180–194. doi:10.5032/jae.2013.04180
- Faranda, W. T., & Clarke, I., III (2004). Student observations of outstanding teaching: Implications for marketing educators. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 26(3), 271–281.
- Granitz, N. A., Koernig, S. K., & Harich, K. R. (2009). Now it's personal: Antecedents and outcomes of rapport between business faculty and their students. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 31(1), 52–65. doi:10.1177/02734475308326408
- Keller, J. M. (1984). The use of the ARCS model of motivation in teacher training. In K. E. Shaw (Ed.), *Aspects of educational technology volume XVII: Staff development and career updating*. London: Kogan Page.
- Keller, J. M. (1987). Development and use of the ARCS model of instructional design. *Journal of Instructional Development*, 10(3), 2–10. doi:10.1007/BF02905780
- Keller, J. M. (2006). *Development of two measures of learner motivation*. Unpublished manuscript, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL.
- Privitera, G. J. (2017). *Research methods for the behavioral sciences* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Schunk, D. H., Pintrich, P. R., & Meece, J. R. (2008). *Motivation in education: Theory, research, and applications* (3rd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Tickle-Degnan, L., & Rosenthal, R. (1990). The nature of rapport and its nonverbal correlates. *Psychological Inquiry*, 1(4), 285–293.
- Wilson, J. H., Stadler, J. R., Schwartz, B. M., & Goff, D. M. (2009). Touching your students: The impact of a handshake on the first day of class. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 9(1), 108–117.