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Caring After COVID: Faculty Perceptions of Care Toward Students in the Post-Pandemic Climate

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Abstract

Prior research demonstrates that instructors' care toward students has a meaningful influence on students' success. However, as higher education navigates an ever-evolving climate following the COVID-19 pandemic, how instructors perceive and express caring behaviors merit further study. Employing Noddings's ethic of care framework, this article aims to explore how college instructors understand and practice care toward students in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings from phenomenological analysis of interview data reveal that instructors conceptualize care as a negotiated relationship between teacher and student, which entails significant emotional labor. Findings further indicate that the exceptional needs of the current college student and often-demoralizing campus climates complicate the practice of providing care. Implications for both faculty and higher education administrators are discussed.

Keywords:

teacher-student relationship, ethic of care, COVID-19 pandemic, college faculty

In the early 1980s, care ethics began to emerge as a moral philosophy, with scholars Nel Noddings (1984) and Carol Gilligan (1982) publishing seminal works on caring. Interest in care ethics has grown substantially since then, and care ethics is now studied across a variety of contexts, including philosophy, education, political science, nursing, and business (Noddings, 2012). Within higher education, research shows that instructors' demonstrations of care toward their students have a positive influence on student learning (Guzzardo et al., 2021; Miller & Mills, 2019). Furthermore, scholars have suggested that instructor caring behaviors are crucial in the development of instructor-student relationships (Strachan, 2020). Such relationships are essential components of the college experience and critical to student success (Felten & Lambert, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted how instructors' caring behaviors were instrumental in supporting students during an unprecedented time (Graham et al., 2022). Despite the acknowledged significance of instructor care in higher education, few studies have investigated care from the instructor's perspective. In addition, much of the extant scholarship on instructor caring either originated in disciplines traditionally associated with care, such as nursing (Post et al., 2017; Sitzman, 2016), or was conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Mariskind, 2014).

Employing phenomenological inquiry, the present study aims to address these gaps in the literature by exploring how instructors from varied disciplines perceive and conceptualize their own expressions of care. Through this

investigation, a more robust understanding of care in the post-pandemic climate emerges.

Literature Review

Although teacher caring behaviors are widely explored in the P-12 literature, research on care in higher education is limited (Anderson et al., 2020). However, scholarly interest in care has grown in recent years, with an emphasis on the role of care in fostering instructor-student interactions (Strachan, 2020). During the pandemic, researchers explored student perceptions of instructor caring behaviors (Graham et al., 2022; Hensley et al., 2022), as well as the emotional stress experienced by faculty at the time (Ray et al., 2023). As academia continues to navigate the post-pandemic era, instructor caring behaviors will likely attract further scholarly attention.

Care in Higher Education

A majority of the scholarship on care in higher education explores students' perceptions of instructor caring behavior. Specific instructor behaviors, such as verbal and nonverbal immediacy, self-disclosure, and clarity, have been associated with teacher caring (Comadena et al., 2007; Teven, 2001; Teven & Monte, 2008). Additionally, the literature suggests that students recognize when their teachers care for them and for the practice of teaching itself (Anderson et al., 2020; Miller & Mills, 2019; Therrell & Dunneback, 2015).

The link between teacher caring and multiple positive student outcomes has been well established. For example, Therrell and Dunneback (2015) found that teachers' care and enthusiasm were the two most important factors in motivating students, claiming that "students want to feel cared about, and they want to feel that what they learn is worth caring about" (p. 58). Similarly, Dickinson and Kreitmair (2021) reported that students were more likely to attend class and expect higher grades when they perceived that their instructors cared about them.

Challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented challenges to higher education, with instruction shifting to online or hybrid modes of delivery, an abrupt transition that resulted in significant stress for instructors and students alike (Hensley et al., 2022).The pandemic exacerbated existing feelings of burnout among faculty (McMurtie, 2020; Roos & Borkoski, 2021), while students struggled with financial burdens, time management challenges, and general anxiety (Hendrickson et al., 2021). One survey revealed that 87% of faculty members believed students' mental health "significantly worsened" or "worsened" during COVID-19, and a fifth reported that responding to students' emotional needs had taken a toll on their own mental health (Healthy Minds Network, 2022). In a review of the literature on college students' mental health, Li and colleagues (2022) found that the prevalence of depression among college students globally was 33.6%, while the prevalence of anxiety was 39% (pp. 1226-1227). In addition, students are entering college less academically prepared. For example, recent data from the National Assessment of Education Progress indicated that 45% of high school seniors scored below basic proficiency in math, and 32% scored below basic proficiency in reading (Cochran, 2025). These figures were the lowest since 2005 and 1992, respectively. Collectively, these findings demonstrate the need for the expression of care to be analyzed in a post-COVID climate.

College Instructors' Conceptualizations of Care

Current scholarship on faculty members' perceptions of their own caring behavior is limited. The extant research examines care in online contexts (Sitzman, 2016), explores differences in caring approaches by gender (Mariskind, 2014), or investigates specific disciplinary experiences such as nursing (Jones et al., 2020). However, faculty perspectives from varying disciplines and institutional types are necessary for enhanced understanding of instructors' perceptions of their own caring behavior (Walker & Gleaves, 2016). The present study contributes to the literature by considering

more diverse disciplinary viewpoints. In addition, this research offers insight into faculty members' expressions of care in the ever-evolving, post-pandemic climate.

Theoretical Framework

Philosopher and educator Nel Noddings has written extensively on the phenomenon of human caring behaviors, particularly as care relates to teaching (Noddings, 2005, 2013, 2014). The underlying premise of Noddings's work is that caring occurs within a relationship between the one-caring and the cared-for. Noddings (2005) explained that the one-caring must exhibit "engrossment," or attentiveness to another's needs, and "motivational displacement, the sense that our motive energy is flowing toward others and their projects" (p. 16). Engaging in engrossment and motivational displacement enables the one-caring to be "seized by the needs of another" (Noddings, 2005, p. 16). Noddings claimed further that both the one-caring (teacher) and the cared-for (student) must mutually contribute to the relationship and that the roles are not "permanent labels" (p. 17). Rather, the one-caring and the cared-for acknowledge each other and may trade roles if circumstances warrant.

A fundamental assertion of Noddings's work is that all human beings wish to be cared for. From this desire, she argued, human beings practice natural caring, defined as "situations where we act on behalf of the other because we want to do so" (Noddings, 2013, p. 79). However, there are many instances in which individuals are not compelled to care, including within educational contexts. When natural caring is not possible, Noddings claimed we must summon the ethic of caring. Ethical caring requires recognition of when we ought to care, even if the natural inclination is absent. To achieve ethical caring, we must return to our own memories of caring and being cared for, utilizing those moments as a "guide" for our comportment (p. 80). Noddings argued that by calling upon these memories of caring, we recognize the value of human caring as the most basic form of human relatedness.

Method

This study aimed to highlight how college faculty conceptualize and express care for their students post-pandemic. As this study was exploratory in nature, qualitative methodology was selected to provide an enhanced perspective of instructors' caring behaviors. More specifically, a phenomenological approach was employed to "deeply understand a phenomenon's fundamental dimensions based on the inner essence and structure of participants' lived experiences" (Urcia, 2021, p. 1). As a method, phenomenology seeks to produce "in-depth descriptions" of the phenomenon (Yuksel & Yıldırım, 2015, p. 1). To achieve the study's aim, the following research questions were posed:

1. How do college instructors conceptualize expressions of care toward students?

2. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, what challenges do college instructors face when demonstrating care to their students?

Sampling and Participants

This research was conducted at a midsized, public, regional university in the southeastern United States. For selection in this study, participants were required to have full- or part-time faculty status at this university. Following approval from the researchers' Institutional Review Board, email communication was distributed to the university's department chairs, deans, and other campus leaders to assist with identifying potential participants for the research. Purposeful sampling was employed for this study to ensure that broad disciplinary perspectives were represented in the research. As Patton (2002) explained,

> The logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry…. (p. 232)

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As the current literature lacks instructors' perspectives from diverse disciplines, participants were chosen to represent each academic college. Given the concentration of caring literature in fields such as nursing and education, the authors intentionally sought broader representation across academic disciplines. This study adhered to Gentles and colleagues' (2015) recommendation that a phenomenological study should include a minimum of 10, but not more than 30, participants. As such, 12 faculty members were interviewed for this research. The participants' teaching disciplines included English (two), criminal justice (two), history, public health, Spanish, statistics, business, social work, nursing, and education. To ensure the anonymity of participants, pseudonyms and gender-neutral pronouns are used throughout this manuscript (see Table 1).

The data source for this study was composed of one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with college faculty. Eatough and Smith (2017) noted that semi-structured interviews are "by far the most common way of collecting data" for phenomenological analysis (p. 199). Interviews were conducted in person or via video conferencing technology (i.e., Zoom) and recorded on a hand-held device. General inquiries about the participants' teaching and academic background were used as icebreaker questions and to build rapport with the participants (Orcher, 2014).

Analysis

To prepare for analysis, interview data were transcribed with the software, Sonix. The primary researcher also completed and reviewed handwritten notes immediately following each interview (Orcher, 2014).

Initially, the primary researcher reviewed the handwritten notes and each transcription, searching for common themes and repeated words and phrases (Alase, 2017). Each transcript was reviewed multiple times, allowing opportunity for additional insights to emerge with each subsequent review (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Next, the primary researcher identified significant statements within the data. Significant statements are defined as words, groups of words, or passages that are given equal attention by the researcher (Dabengwa et al., 2020). These significant statements were then clustered into common themes, or "meaning units" (Dabengwa et al., 2020). As advised by Smith (2011), the primary researcher made

Table 1

Participant Characteristics

Participant Pseudonym	Rank
Ariel	Associate Professor
Cameron	Associate Professor
Terry	Assistant Professor
Lane	Professor
Morgan	Professor
Emerson	Professor
Jules	Associate Professor
Aubrey	Professor
Jesse	Associate Professor
Quinn	Professor
Robin	Professor
Jordan	Part-time instructor

interpretations and descriptions for each theme and noted convergence and divergence among the participants' experiences. (See Appendix for example coding). The second author and another scholar evaluated the primary researcher's interpretation of the data through peer debriefings (Moon et al., 2016). When repeating themes emerged from the interviews, data collection ceased due to saturation (Suri, 2011).

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore how college faculty conceptualize and express care for their students in the post-COVID-19 environment. The findings revealed that faculty perceive care to be a negotiated relationship between themselves and their students. Additionally, participants referenced the level of support required by students and the current climate in higher education as common challenges associated with providing care.

Care as a Negotiated Relationship Between Teacher and Student

Multiple participants identified the teacher-student relationship as the baseline component of instructor caring behaviors. Jesse, an Associate Professor, shared, "It's just relationships. It's a cliché, that they've got to know that you care …. I mean, it's a combination of enthusiasm for the content. But the main thing is the relationships and being connected with students." Morgan, a Professor, highlighted how fostering the connection between instructor and student is an important goal in their classroom:

> I do believe, you know, in the research that says an important factor for retention is developing that connection with professors. And so I try to make myself accessible in terms of … just not being so self-important, and … having fun with them. Making conversations before and after class. Making sure they know my door is always open.

These statements reveal that a "connection" is essential to demonstrate care. The participants in this study did not view themselves as simply conveyors of content; rather, they sought to build a baseline rapport with students.

In addition, participants indicated that balancing care with expectations is part of the negotiated relationship. When discussing balancing care with academic rigor, Lane, a Professor, stated:

> I guess my approach to caring is … two-fold. It's trying to find the balance between, 'I absolutely care for you as a human being' … but at the same time, I'm there to teach them something …. If I'm not challenging them in some way to adjust their worldview or to try something new, or learn a new skill … I think I'm not caring about them as a person.

Terry, an Assistant Professor, mentioned the "burden" of balancing care with professional standards. Terry shared, "I don't think any of us don't worry about students passing … and being successful ….That's a heavy burden. We can't be graduating people that don't have the bottom-line skills."

Responding to Students as Individuals

Other faculty participants focused on responding to students' individual needs as a crucial aspect of the teacher-student relationship. Terry elaborated on responding to students as individuals:

> I think it's empathy. I think that it is … not adjusting our expectations of students, but figuring out how we can support students in meeting those expectations … just you know, meeting students where they are and helping them respond to their needs on an almost individualized basis.

Cameron, an Associate Professor, also spoke of the importance of recognizing students as individuals, stating, "I think it's not just educating,

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but also learning about people's lives and taking interest in that … try[ing] to connect with them on a personal level versus just an academic level." Aubrey, a Professor, offered a similar viewpoint but noted the importance of the students' role in voicing their respective needs:

> So trying to find out a little bit about what their goals are and then, you know, having them verbalize that to me, either in person or in some sort of written format allows me to then start that process [of care]. But I don't necessarily initiate that by pushing students to do any one particular thing. It's somewhat incumbent on them, as far as I'm concerned, to be clear with me.

Morgan also stressed the importance of relating to students individually: "I mean, these [students] aren't just cogs in our system, you know? And, yeah, I can teach them facts and skills and, you know, how to think critically. But I think it's important to try to relate [the content] to their lives and understand their experiences." In other words, the participants in our study emphasized that caring for students should not be approached with a one-size-fits-all mindset but rather with an intentional regard for individual student differences and goals.

Other faculty participants discussed balancing course content with "meeting students where they are" as part of this negotiated relationship. Jules, an Associate Professor, characterized this balance as follows:

> I think the essence of caring [is] commitment to students, rather than to curriculum. How that looks will be different in the classroom, outside of the classroom. But when you have a commitment to the students, the students come first …. It's important that, you know, students do receive the education they're paying for. However, we have to ask who defines what education looks like? And that's professors, instructors. We have that privilege. And I think a caring professor will modify to the realities, social realities
>
> in general … and meet students where they are at.

Ariel, an Associate Professor, offered a similar viewpoint:

> To me, instructor caring is you do your academic job. I kind of think of it as the academic CEO for the class. So you are the content expert and you understand the skills and/or competencies that students need to gain in this class, you know, like within your major …. But instructor caring is [also] seeing your students on campus and saying hi, learning their name and using it in class, asking them, 'Hey, how are you doing?' Making sure that they know where resources are, like, 'Hey guys, it's the fourth week, hang in there. But if you're stressed out, here's the link to the counseling center.'

Both Ariel and Jules emphasized that while instructors create the overall goals and competencies for a course, they must also be aware of the support students need to reach those outcomes.

Mutuality

Several participants emphasized the importance of the mutual nature of the instructor-student relationship, indicating that both parties must contribute. Lane explained this mutuality by emphasizing the "imperfectionism" in both teacher and student:

> I used to have a teaching philosophy that started at the top saying that I believed in 'imperfectionism.' That I'm imperfect, that students are imperfect, and that the way we work through the course is kind of wrangling with your imperfections and trying to find ways to grow and improve …. We're just a bunch of imperfect people trying to work our way through this course content the best we can.

Jordan, a part-time instructor, emphasized the importance of student communication in achieving mutuality by stating, "We're all human …. I just ask my students, communicate with me, talk to me. You don't have to give me every little detail of what's going on. But if [students

communicate], I'm in a better position to help [them]."

Other participants named "co-learning" as an essential component of the mutuality required in the instructor-student relationship. As Aubrey explained:

> My philosophy reflects a belief that the best type of learning environment is one in which both the faculty member and the students are co-learning …. I want to walk out of a classroom feeling as if I've learned something that day. That's the most rewarding for me, and I think that becomes the most rewarding for the students.

Ariel also characterized co-learning as essential to caring. Ariel described co-learning as "a journey together …. I like to call it a quest. A quest together is what a class is. And just showing the human side and the connection side of what a college course [can] be."

Multiple participants expressed that they feel disheartened when students neglect their role in the teacher-student relationship. As Robin, a Professor, observed:

> I've had students fall behind, they're ill or whatever, and they ask for make-up exams, or extensions, or an incomplete. And I go to the trouble of doing those things and then they don't follow through on their end, and when I've poured a lot of time into it and they don't do their part that, you know, that makes it difficult.

Terry shared a similar sentiment, stating, "I struggle with students that aren't working as hard as I am …. I have a really hard time putting energy and empathy into a student that isn't bringing that back …. I run out of juice real quick." Jordan also indicated that student investment was essential:

> I have some students, who, they show up the first day of class, then I don't see them again until the midterms, and then I don't see them again until the final exam … and it's when they show that lack of effort, if they ask me for an extension or additional time or something like that, and they haven't made the effort to come to class, then I'm not that adamant about being caring or helpful.

Challenges of Providing Care

While the participants in this study generally characterized instructor caring as a negotiated relationship between teacher and student, they also elaborated at length on the challenges of providing care in the post-COVID environment. Specifically, the participants cited the exceptional needs of current students and the often-demoralizing climate of higher education as the most significant barriers to providing care in the present climate.

Exceptional Needs of Current Students

Multiple faculty members discussed the various challenges students are currently experiencing, including mental health struggles, physical illnesses, and a lack of academic readiness. For example, Robin described their observations of student mental health:

> This is anecdotal, but one of the things I'm seeing is that students seem more open about their mental health issues, and I don't know if there are more mental health issues or if they're just more willing to tell me about them now. But I've seen a lot of that kind of thing.

Terry offered a similar viewpoint, stating that "These students have tales of woe, you know? They are going through so much. They carry so much. It sometimes just blows my mind how much they're dealing with." Quinn, a Professor, further discussed prioritizing students' mental health needs:

> I, like many faculty members I know of, have stopped a one-on-one session with a student and walked them down to the counseling center. It's like, okay, the stuff you brought up is beyond my pay grade basically, and we're going to go down and you need to get

> this squared away before we can ever begin to talk about, you know, [course content].

In addition to their observations about students' mental health concerns, participants discussed ongoing physical illnesses their students are experiencing. For instance, Robin relayed:

> I used to be more strict about … deductions …. It seems like these students are still having so many issues, and there's still a lot of them sick, so many out sick this semester. And so I just say, 'Yeah, go ahead and turn that in, just get it done.'

Multiple faculty members in this study perceived that students are less academically prepared for college. Terry discussed reconciling students' preparedness with program standards:

> I think we're all seeing students that are really underprepared to be in our classrooms… and how do you have compassion? ... How do we uphold, you know, the standards of our program? ... I think that's a problem a lot of us are struggling with, 'How many times do you let a student rewrite something? How late do you let them put in assignments? How wiggly are you on your attendance sheet?' I think we're all struggling with that.

Lane conveyed similar thoughts about students' academic preparedness, but highlighted the extra time spent supporting students with basic academic tasks, stating:

> Everything they don't know how to do is something I have to spend time and energy teaching them. That is not course content, right? ... I have all these students, they don't know how to save files. We have to teach them now to send emails … And I'm not talking about, do you know the difference between a sentence fragment or a comma splice … no, not that kind of stuff. Not knowing how to save a file to their desktop …basic computer literacy. Every time that happens with a student, I have to show them again how to do it, right? ... I can't do the class until they've accessed their own content. At this point, I [spend] literally hours individually, because especially with these students, if you don't do it individually, I've learned they don't get it …. sometimes we have to do it individually two or three times [for students] to get it.

Offering a slightly different perspective, Morgan expressed that online students are often underprepared and require additional support:

> [Online students] typically have a plate that is much fuller than our traditional students. They have barriers that they've overcome. They're different populations …. And a lot of them are underprepared. We have to recognize that. We asked them to come into our program. So if we invite them to join us, then we need to do our job in helping them succeed …. That population needs a little bit more, in my opinion, care and support.

Demoralizing Climate of Higher Education

Several participants in this study expressed that one of the most significant barriers to providing care toward students was the current political climate on their campus, in their state, or within the United States. They explained that the current environment posed numerous challenges, creating an often-unsatisfying workplace and difficulties in caring for students. For example, Jules explained:

> Sometimes the state of higher ed in the United States is demotivating. And I don't want to think too righteous of myself, right? But that I might have good intentions, noble intentions toward my students, but yet those are not represented throughout the institution. And that in a way demotivates me.

Jesse provided a similar viewpoint, focusing on issues on their campus, stating, "maybe the thing that makes it rough to care not about them [students], but about the job, is when we see some of the policies and practices [at the university] level, that when we hear 'shared governance,' that's a complete, fabricated lie." Ariel also offered their thoughts about the current

state of higher education, citing conditions in their state:

> Higher ed is being disrupted. And it's been a disruption since the pandemic. You have student disengagement. You have faculty disengagement. You have faculty burnout, which is similar. You have, at least locally in our state, pushback about the value of a college education and degree.

Two participants, Quinn and Lane, voiced concerns about their institution's prioritization of retention, while students may be struggling with mental health or academic readiness. Quinn observed, "This is going to sound jaded, but what that [the university's retention efforts] often boils down to is about numbers, and we don't want too many students dropping out because of mental health issues." Lane also expressed similar concerns that there is "a lot of pressure from the university" to "bend over backwards to help these students be successful," even in cases where students may not be submitting work or attending class. Collectively, these statements indicate that providing care to students is challenging for faculty because of ongoing trends in higher education, at both the government and institutional levels.

Discussion

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, college students continue to experience mental health challenges (Alonso, 2023), and many are academically underprepared for college (American College Testing, 2023). Given these circumstances, how college instructors express care for their students needs to be analyzed in the present climate. This study investigated how college instructors conceptualize care to their students during the aftermath of COVID-19. Additionally, the challenges instructors face when demonstrating care to their students were explored.

When asked about the expression of care, statements given by participants directly reflected Noddings's (2005) work pertaining to the one-caring and the cared-for. Participants cited the teacher-student relationship as essential to demonstrating care. When reflecting on the teacher's (one-caring) role in the teacher-student relationship, participants demonstrated two common themes. First, they expressed the need to demonstrate genuine enthusiasm for the content and subject matter being taught. This involves showing passion and energy about the content being taught. The second, and more frequently discussed, theme centered on being connected to students by responding to their specific needs and relating to them on a personal level. This finding supports Noddings's (2013) framework, which suggested that the instructor-student relationship begins with attention, or engrossment, to individual students' expressed needs. As the ones-caring, participants in this study strived to relate content to students' lives, show empathy, and be connected to students through open-door policies, talking with them before and after class, and greeting them when seeing them on campus. Participants, such as Jules, stressed the importance of considering the changing social realities students face. This includes the incorporation of trends and technologies. For example, Quinn demonstrated this practice through their discussion of the use of Discord in class: "Discord is an app many students are familiar with from gaming and video gaming experiences. So this seems to them like I'm coming to them on their turf." In the discussion of practices used to express their role in the teacher-student relationship, participants demonstrated that the teacher role goes beyond that of being passionate and knowledgeable of one's own subject matter. To express care to students, an instructor must be grounded in attentiveness to students' lived experiences and evolving needs, meeting them where they are.

Participants also emphasized the importance of the teacher-student relationship being mutual in nature, meaning that the cared-for (students) must also put work in for care to be expressed effectively. Noddings (1996) elaborated on the role of the cared-for by stating:

> Students have tremendous effects on their

> teachers, and these possibilities should be discussed openly. The contributions of teachers and students are necessarily unequal, but they are nonetheless mutual .... [Students] can be expected to respond with growing sensitivity to attempts to promote their own growth. (p. 108)

In their understanding of the cared-for role, instructors cited communication and effort as the minimum engagement needed from students. Furthermore, instructors described student effort as students doing their part and putting in energy not only in coursework and learning, but also when falling behind. These findings are congruent with previous scholarship. For instance, Miller (2021) found that students' lack of effort or commitment to their academics (e.g., ignoring feedback from their instructor) were positively correlated with instructor compassion fatigue. While instructors can influence student effort through clearly communicating their expectations for student communication and performance, the findings of this study demonstrated that the teacher-student relationship is a mutual exchange. For care to be expressed in an authentic manner, both the instructor (one-caring) and student (cared-for) must participate.

Participants identified three main challenges they face when expressing care to their students. One of these challenges is the current political climate at their university, state, or nation. Participants stated that policies and agendas that misrepresent what they believe to be good intentions for students, devalue or demoralize higher education degrees, and doggedly pursue higher enrollment numbers hinder their ability to care and lead to burnout. The second challenge given by participants is students not doing their part in the teacher-student relationship. Students' lack of effort, especially when falling behind in coursework, and communication were cited as the main reasons for this challenge occurring. Lastly, participants discussed the learning and mental health needs of students as being more challenging and detrimental than the pre-COVID-19 era. These circumstances have resulted in the need to support college students in ways instructors may not feel prepared for. These challenges were mentioned across participants in this study. This occurrence demonstrates a need for instructors to be supported in facing these challenges.

Support Needed

Findings of this study exhibited the need for college instructors to be supported in demonstrating care to their students. One area of support needed is enhanced professional development for faculty. Teaching and Learning Centers might offer programming specifically related to the topic of care. Workshops or seminars designed to foster conversations about instructor caring provide opportunities for partnerships with various entities on campuses, including counseling centers, multicultural offices, and residence life. This professional development must also focus on student and faculty mental health. Research published by the Healthy Minds Network (2022) found that nearly three-quarters of faculty (73%) would embrace further professional development on understanding students' mental health. Ray et al. (2023) found that almost 97% of faculty reported feeling emotionally exhausted, which is a key predictor of burnout. Given these realities, college administrators must recognize the emotional labor expended by instructors and prioritize the mental health and well-being of their institution's faculty and students. As Shalka (2022) cautioned, administrators must discourage faculty overinvolvement and create opportunities for instructors to rest and renew. Additionally, McClure (2025) recommends that institutions implement more comprehensive onboarding programs for faculty, as well as one-on-one coaching support for faculty, to help create a university culture that cares for its instructors. Lastly, professional developments which equip instructors with teaching practices that foster the expression of care should be implemented. Such professional developments should emphasize the use of inclusive strategies that promote accessibility, such as the Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2024) and integrate principles of trauma-informed pedagogy (Carello & Butler, 2015).

Limitations

As every university is unique, the findings from this study cannot be easily transferred to faculty at other universities. Replication of this study at other institutions will increase the transferability of these findings. As semi-structured interviews were used in this study, data were self-reported in nature. A limitation to this is social desirability, which occurs when participants have the "tendency to present reality to align with what is perceived to be socially acceptable" (Bergen & Labonté, 2020, p. 783). To mitigate the possibility of social desirability, techniques such as identifying cues that indicate the behavior (e.g., providing partial answers or the use of inconsistent vocabulary) (Bergen & Labontè, 2020) were used. The final limitation of this study is the relative lack of perspectives from part-time adjunct and non-tenure track faculty. Eleven of the 12 participants in this study were full-time tenure-track professors. Only one participant was a part-time, non-tenure track professor.

Future Research

Future research on how college instructors express care for their students in a post-COVID-19 era needs to be completed. One emerging issue in this topic is the concept of how artificial intelligence (AI) is impacting the way faculty care for their students. As Petricini et al. (2024) point out, trust is an important contributor to the teacher-student relationship, and early research suggests that faculty are concerned about students' misuse of AI. This mistrust can lead to a disruption in the expression of care to students and needs to be examined. An emerging theme in this study pertains to how the current political climate and possible demoralization of higher education is negatively impacting instructors' ability to express care for students. Further research that examines these phenomena can lead to strategies to support instructors in these challenges. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2022) indicated that 61% of undergraduates in the U.S. were enrolled in at least one distance education course in the fall of 2021, with 28% of undergraduates enrolled exclusively in distance education courses. This shift demonstrates the need for expression of care in varying course format offerings (online asynchronous, online synchronous, hybrid, or face-to-face) to be researched. Instructors may feel that it is more difficult to express care for students in online courses (in which they may never meet the student) versus face-to-face courses. Therefore, as online course formats become higher enrolled, examining how care is and can be expressed to students in this format can offer support and strategies to online instructors. Furthermore, the perspectives of part-time and/or non-tenure-track faculty need to be explored in studies about expression of care. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2023), part-time faculty account for 44% of the professoriate. Thus, it is essential to include part-time faculty as participants in studies about expression of care in higher education.

Additionally, this study's purpose was purely to gain, and report, perspectives on how instructors express care to college students in the aftermath of COVID-19. Due to this, the study was phenomenological in approach and design. The purpose was not to analyze pedagogical teaching practices (such as the use of inclusive and/or trauma-informed practices) and how these relate to the expression of care. This is another potential area where future research is needed. Finally, the focus of this study was not to draw comparisons as to how care is expressed differently than it was prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, or to determine how COVID-19 may have contributed to changes in the expression of care. Therefore, investigating possible shifts in the expression of care pre/post-COVID-19 may be another valuable direction for future research.

Conclusion

Since COVID-19, college students and instructors have faced changing circumstances. The shifting political climates at the national, state, or institutional level, increase in mental and physical health concerns of students, and academic unpreparedness of students are some of the circumstances instructors have expressed as detrimental to expressing care to students.

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Burnout and lack of effort and communication from students were also cited as challenges that hinder the ability to express care to students.This study demonstrated that the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a need for strategies to support college instructors in the expression of care to their students, while maintaining the mutuality of the teacher-student relationship. With the right support and strategies, instructors can successfully meet the needs of their students, protect their own mental health, and mitigate burnout in a post-COVID-19 era.

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Appendix

Examples of Coding Themes

Significant Statement	Meaning Unit	Theme
"This is anecdotal, but one of the things I'm seeing is that students seem more open about their mental health issues, and I don't know if there are more mental health issues or if they're just more willing to tell me about them now. But I've seen a lot of that kind of thing."	Students are experiencing increased mental health struggles	Caring requires responding to students' exceptional needs (RQ2)
"I, like many faculty members I know of have stopped a one-on-one session with a student and walked them down to the counseling center…and that to some extent gets to the boundaries thing. It's like, okay, the stuff you brought up is beyond my pay grade basically, and we're going to go down and you need to get this squared away before we can ever begin to talk about, you know, developing good thesis statements."	Students are experiencing increased mental health struggles	Caring requires responding to students' exceptional needs (RQ2)
"Everything they don't know how to do is something I have to spend time and energy teaching them. That is not course content, right?...I have all these students, they don't know how to save files. We have to teach them now to send emails…Not knowing how to save a file to their desktop…basic computer literacy. Every time that happens with a student, I have to show them again how to do it, right?...I can't do the class until they've accessed their own content. At this point, I [spend] literally hours individually because especially with these students, if you don't do it individually, I've learned they don't get it."	Students are underprepared	Caring requires responding to students' exceptional needs (RQ2)