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Caring In Teaching: A Complicated Relationship

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Abstract

This article addresses how developing caring relations with students at a community college effectively supports students' needs and ultimately success. At the same time, I discuss my own personal dilemmas while creating relationships that focus on students' needs. I use Nel Noddings' ethic of care theory to discuss how her ideas and the idea of others have challenged me to think about and develop an ethic of care enriched by my own teaching and interactions with my students. In this paper, I use three vignettes to illustrate: the profound difference caring can have on one student; sometimes one's caring will lead a student to remove herself from academe; and the power of caring in terms of community. I conclude cautiously, knowing that the demands involved in developing caring relations is complicated by the needs of many: the students', my own and the institutions'.

Keywords: Pedagogy, higher education, curriculum instruction, ethic of care and teaching, student-instructor relationships.

"The professor doesn't care!" Sarah cries. I stare solemnly at the young woman sitting to the left of my desk. How many times have I heard students who come into my office make the same complaint? As Associate Professor and Deputy Chair, I teach in the English department at an urban community college. Similar complaints are made about faculty in all disciplines, and many students have reached out to me seeking an explanation for why some of their college professors just do not to seem to care about their success. I strongly believe that the majority of teaching faculty care about their students. However, education philosopher and care theorist Nel Noddings (2002) has argued, "Caring *about* [emphasis added] is empty if it does not culminate in caring relations" (p. 24). For the most part, theories of care in education are often discussed and emphasized in teaching programs where the focus is on teaching K-12. When it comes to higher education, the focus in teaching has traditionally been centered on content area expertise. Yet, the caring relationship between teacher and student is essential in higher education as well (Thayer-Bacon & Bacon, 1996). I put forward in this paper that developing such a relationship founded on common goals, intellectual pursuit, and emotional investment in another individual has the potential to meet the challenges college students face as they pursue a better life.

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As the benefactor of caring relationships with former teachers in both elementary and graduate schools, I personally know the powerful impact they can have on the human spirit and how they can lead to success inside and outside academe. My life experiences are similar to many students I teach at the community college.[2] I have felt the destructive effects of poverty on the mind and heart. I am also the second youngest of 10 and the only one in my family to earn college and advanced degrees. I know the struggle of raising children and working full-time while attending college as a full-time evening student. I am familiar with the weight of impossibility caused by low self-esteem and academic under-preparedness.[3] I have read the recent dismal statistics on graduation rates for disadvantaged groups in our society.[4] Teaching at an urban commuter community college populated by a large ethnically diverse student body means that I must use my position of power responsibly to improve student learning and achievement. In this regard, an ethic of care has helped me address how my own attitude and behavior affect the types of relationships a student can create with me, ultimately keeping in mind how these relationships can "maximize student learning" (O'Brien, 2010, p. 114). One way to change the status quo requires that we pay attention to our pedagogy at the college level so that students can achieve their academic and social dreams. Hence, fostering relationships with students is especially important for students who find school challenging (Gay, 2000; Noddings, 1984, 2012; White, 2003) and can make the difference between failing and succeeding. I am a strong proponent of an ethic of care that creates educationally effective relations with college students who, while having the statistical odds stacked against them, deserve fair opportunities for success.

An Ethic of Care: Foundations

Education philosopher Nel Noddings' (1984) expansion of psychologist Carol Gilligan's (1982)[5] work significantly influenced how schools and educators understand and practice

[2] "Community colleges play an important role for students who are underrepresented in higher education. For example, two-year institutions enroll higher percentages of first generation college students than four-year institutions, as well as higher percentages of low socioeconomic status students and older students (Provasnik and Planty, 2008). These institutions also are important pathways to degree attainment for underrepresented minorities (African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans), since individuals from these racial/ethnic groups account for a higher percentage of the enrollees at two-year colleges than at four-year colleges. African Americans comprised 15% of the enrollees at two-year colleges in fall 2009, compared with 14% at four-year colleges. Hispanics comprised 17% of the enrollees at two-year colleges, compared with just 10% at four-year colleges, and Native Americans accounted for 1.2% of the enrollees at two-year colleges, compared with 0.9% at four-year colleges (Snyder and Dillow)" (Bell, 2012, para. 3).

[3] Another study using national data found that 58% of recent high school graduates who entered community colleges took at least one developmental course. Only about one quarter of these students (28%) went on to earn any degree or certificate within 8.5 years (Attewell, Lavin, Domina, & Levey, 2006) (cited on Community College Research Center website).

[4] With so many students underprepared for college, the two-year college has faced dismal graduation rates. Recently, the American Association of Community Colleges reported that graduation rates increased from 22.1% to 27.6% (2014 online Statement), indicating there is more work to do. The urban, commuter two-year college where I teach enrolls approximately 22,000-24,000 students per semester. The graduation rate within our own institution, while recently rising, remains a major concern.

[5] In the 1980s, in work led by Carol Gilligan, care ethics became a recognized approach to moral philosophy. She argued, "Women's development was set within the context of caring and relationships and the

care in education. Noddings paved the way for many practitioners like myself to understand the importance of making a moral decision to enter into a relationship that "has both cognitive and affective dimensions" (p. 775). In *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Morals*, Noddings (1984) has reminded me to reach back to memories of being cared for in order to grow relations (p. 80). Her work has repositioned me to dismantle the often rigid and oppressive student-teacher relationship models that view students as receptors of the teacher's knowledge[6] and, in effect, construct barriers to my own and my students' education and learning. Noddings presented three key factors as a guide: *engrossment*, *motivational displacement*, and *reciprocity*. Specifically, students' needs, teacher's motivation to address student needs, and student's acknowledgment of the teacher's response to her or his needs make up the caring relationship.

Some critics of Noddings' work have questioned the need for *observable reciprocity* as discussed in her theory (White, 2003). White also called for a more "principled approach" that takes into consideration "trusting and caring relationships of the highest and deepest order" (p. 318). Challenging Noddings' notion of reciprocity, White offered that faith in humanity and faith in God "can sustain one caring in the face of situational confusion, competing needs, and hostile opposition" (p. 316). Other conceptions of care include a more "collaborative caring" (Bateson, 1989, p. 114), one which Sumsion (2000) described as "creating relationships that honour the connections and the space we all need to more effectively continue to develop our capacities, insights and talents so that we might come closer to fully realising our personal and professional potential" (p. 174). The idea is empowerment that considers the needs of both persons within the relationship: student and teacher. Working with middle-school Latino and African American students, Gay (2000) in her book on culturally responsive teaching followed the conception of Webb, Wilson, Corbett, and Mordecai's (1993, in Gay, 2000) that:

> . . . caring is a value and a moral imperative that moves 'self-determination into social responsibility and uses knowledge and strategic thinking to decide how to act in the best interests of others. Caring binds individuals to their society, to their communities, and to each other' (pp. 33-34). (p. 45)

There are various conceptions of caring and what it looks like in the classroom, and in each case, scholars have pointed to the importance of Noddings' work in the development of the field. In this regard, there is no single definition. However, within each conception, the conviction in developing a relationship with others remains consistent.

Caring in Postsecondary Settings: A Brief Review

I have heard some of my colleagues say, "Caring for your students will only cause them more harm" and "What happens when students transfer to the four-year college where the teachers care more about their research than the student?" The idea that college professors should not care about their students is limiting and detrimental to the students we

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concept of self was rooted in a sense of a connection and relatedness to others" (Medea, 2009, para. 9). (See also Gilligan's (1982) book *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*.)

[6] See Freire's (1993) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

teach and "undermine[s] instructional effectiveness" (Meyers, 2009, p. 208). Perhaps this sort of thinking accounts for the dearth of research on care and teaching in higher education beyond education departments. A search on Google Scholar for articles in higher education and caring and teaching, resulted in a short list compared to the bulk of articles found in a similar search at the elementary and secondary education levels. Furthermore, higher education journals with articles that discuss an ethic of care or caring pedagogy focus on teacher training and teacher education programs. Meyers' (2009) also mentioned that some faculty "doubt that caring has a place in college-level instruction, and instead believe that it is more appropriate for younger children" (p. 207).

Nevertheless, in recent years, a few studies in higher education have emerged. Some studies have focused on student characterization of teachers' caring behavior (Straits, 2007), such as being "open, available, and responsive" (p. 172). While office hours are part of the teaching schedule in higher education, the students in this study specifically pointed out how the teacher spent extra time outside of these hours. Haskell-McBee (2007) collected data from informants in teacher preparation, classroom teaching, and college-level preparation of new teachers, all of whom were associated with a large university-based teacher education program that serves a diverse population. The survey asked "what caring in educational context means to respondents, how they show their students that they care for them, and how they teach caring to their students" (p. 35). Overall, 78 characteristics of caring teaching were identified, but Haskell-McBee emphasized the top seven most frequently identified: "offering help, showing compassion, showing interest, caring about the individual, giving time, listening, and getting to know students—are described by at least one-third of the respondents" (p. 36). In discussing traits, Meyers (2009) added that teachers demonstrate "concern for students," "respectfulness and willingness to answer questions and foster interactions"[7] (p. 206) and "acknowledging [student] successes and struggles, and actively encouraging learning" (p. 207). Furthermore, De Guzman et al. (2008) suggested that certain "acts of caring" are exhibited by teachers who are referred to as "caring agents." The teacher "make[s] use of class time productively, shares personal experiences in classroom discussions, and observes class policies, among others" (p. 498). De Guzman et al. focused on Filipino college "students' views of their teachers' caring behavior and their orientations as cared-for individuals" (p. 498). The study also revealed that students' self-esteem and self-evaluation were heavily influenced by the teacher's caring behavior and attitude toward the students (see also Sava [2002] as noted by De Guzman et al. [2008] and Foster [2008]). These researchers asserted that "[T]eachers' caring behavior pushes students to do well and excel in class activities, meet teachers' expectations; effect positive changes through proper channels, experience self-discovery and appreciation and at times, test the limits of boundaries set in class" (p. 499).

Similarly, Foster's (2008) study of 32 underserved and economically disadvantaged students in an early college high school program at Decameron Academy elucidated the argument that caring teachers impact on student behavior and perceptions of self. Prior to entering the study, the research participants admitted to not wanting to be in school and

[7] Noted in the Abrami, d'Apollina, and Rosenfield's (1997, cited in Meyers, 2009) study using student-rating systems of their professors.

believed their teachers felt the same. On the contrary, during the study and while students attended the school, their perceptions of their teachers highlighted "their teachers' commitment to their learning and academic success" (p. 113). Through an individualized approach that offered teacher home visits, identified students' learning styles, continued cell phone communication between teacher and student, and provided access to college campus and college life, students came to view the teachers and administration as positively impacting on their desire to succeed in school. They also began to see education as it related to them as an important part of their future success—something they had not experienced prior to the study. As Foster concluded, "The medium for change is the coconstruction of a nontraditional, intense, and personalized relationship in which student and teacher embark on what is essentially a corrective experience of school, teacher, and education" (p. 118). A result of the study provides evidence that developing relationships with students as they embark on their education journey has transformative power.

Studies that have illustrated teacher immediacy stemming from communication theory have additionally pointed to teacher immediacy as an important factor in student academic success and "provides the firmest foundation for the idea that caring makes a difference in students' educational experiences" (Meyers, 2009, p. 205). Velez and Cano (2008) submitted in their research on teacher immediacy[8] and student motivation that demonstrating care is important, and "If instructors intend to facilitate an optimal classroom environment, they must send supportive, caring communication messages to all students" (p. 84). These researchers were concerned with "qualities that positively enhance teacher effectiveness" (p. 76). According to the findings, "Students will have a greater likelihood of emotionally and cognitively engaging in a course when the instructor demonstrates (positive) verbal[9] and nonverbal [10] immediacy" (p. 84). Teacher immediacy viewed from Velez and Cano's perspective had a profound impact on developing effective and rich learning experiences for students.

Using personal experience, both O'Brien (2010) and Sumsion (2000) discussed a deliberate caring practice that takes into consideration competing institutional and personal challenges that make care ethics very difficult to maximize such as overwhelming institutional stresses, including "demands for publishing and expectations for 24/7 availability that come with technology" (O'Brien, 2010, p. 113). Sumsion (2000) called for a more "comprehensive caring" which considers the needs of both parties within the relationship, a more collaborative type of caring needs to be enacted (a notion located in Bateson [1989] and noted in Sumsion [2000]), especially given the continued demands on faculty to meet student learning outcomes and institutional and professional goals.

[8] Teacher immediacy research provides an important place from which college professors can learn about how their verbal and nonverbal communications with students impact student behavior and motivation in the classroom (Velez & Cano, 2008; Witt, Wheeless, & Allen, 2004).

[9] "Praise for student efforts, humor, self-disclosure, willingness to engage students in conversation, and overall openness and willingness to meet and interact with students" (Edwards & Edwards, 2001; Gorham, 1988, as cited in Velez & Cano, 2008, p. 78).

[10] "Eye contact, body position, physical proximity, personal touch, and body movement" (Richmond et al., 1987, as cited in Velez & Cano, 2008).

Not only do caring college instructors impact on students in the classroom, but they also have a long-lasting impact on students, according to the Gallup-Purdue Index Report released in summer 2014. In *Chronicle of Higher Education,* writer Scott Carlson (2014) reported that based on that study, college graduates

> had double the chances of being engaged in their work and were three times as likely to be thriving in their wellbeing if they connected with a professor on the campus who stimulated them, *cared about them* [italics added], and encouraged their hopes and dreams. (para. 1)

The study also revealed that only "27 percent had had professors who cared about them" (para. 11). A care ethic is especially important in the community college setting where students are traditionally underprepared or academically *inexperienced* (as described by Shaughnessy [1977]), and where low self-esteem abound and societal and personal stresses often lead to low retention and unrealized dreams.

Caring Encounters

I regularly teach a second-level remedial writing course and Composition I and II courses. The regular teaching load is very heavy: an annual 27 hours teaching with 6 office hours to share with 115-145 students each semester. In addition, full-time tenure-track instructors must engage in college, department, and community service as well as publish. The general education English courses are often at capacity: 29 for Composition I and II, and 35 students per second-level course. Placing adequate caps to better prepare our academically underprepared students continues to be a major issue in our college. At times, much to the faculty's dismay, the course caps are exceeded to meet the student demand for courses. While the overwhelming workload can make adopting a caring pedagogical stance burdensome for overworked faculty, it is with honest reflection on and deep belief in our responsibility to help students succeed in community college that I share how I have enacted care in my teaching. It is not easy and often overwhelming, but also deeply fulfilling to develop caring relationships with students and see them thrive in part because of those relationships.

Vignette One: "I just don't feel like I belong here."

In Fall 2014, Marcos Williams (pseudonym), a 33 year-old student in my Composition II course, carried a large backpack and two smaller plastic bags into the classroom every day. He often looked disheveled in his dark blue jeans and puffy black winter coat, and he always apologized for being late. After two weeks of his coming late to every class, I handed him a note and asked him to meet with me to discuss his lateness. In my office, Marcos expressed his needs clearly. He was living in a temporary shelter and carrying his belongings with him wherever he went. He was also dealing with fears of belonging; he viewed himself as lacking the skills and education experiences to enter into classroom discussions of the texts we were reading. He had not been in school since he graduated at the age of eighteen. He pointed out that he really did not know how to read literature. In his college courses, he felt out of place among the many young students. Even though we

reviewed areas that concerned him in class, he was still unsure of himself—not an unusual feeling for many students to experience. We agreed that he would come see me after class on Thursdays and Tuesdays if he needed. Over the semester, these meetings proved very productive for him. While he was still late for class, he always came prepared. He spoke in class and worked diligently in groups. I encouraged him to involve his peers in his questions and concerns about the literature we were reading. Students responded to his questions and shared their own ideas. He had very different perspectives. They wanted to know what books he read. His entire attitude toward college began to change, supporting what the research on care in teaching suggests: students succeed at a higher rate and become productive learners in environments where teachers demonstrate their care about and for their students (Gay, 2000; Noddings, 1984, 2012; O'Brien, 2010; Russo-Gleicher, 2011; Straits, 2007; Sumsion, 2000; White, 2003).

Not all students feel comfortable expressing their needs as Marcos did. I would caution that expressing oneself in front of the teacher is characteristic of western education practices. In her work with culturally diverse students, Gay (2000) explained: "Immigrant students from traditional cultures with a rather rigid hierarchical social structure enter U.S. classrooms. They have been socialized to be passive and deferential in interactions with teachers and to treat teachers with respect at all times" (p. 54). Essentially, cultural differences may make expressing needs unlikely for some of our students, which suggests that instructors may have to rely on observable needs—for example, when students do not purchase required course texts or complete assigned course work, perform poorly on assignments, attend class sporadically, and do not participate in classroom activities. When there is an evident need, it is incumbent on the caring instructor to find out how she or he might address that need. Russo-Gleicher (2011) in her article "The Empty Desk: Caring Strategies to Talk to College Students About Their Attendance" spoke frankly about the absenteeism of community college students in her courses and suggested "demonstrating acts of caring" (p. 63) that include writing letters to students, speaking privately to students, and conveying empathy and hope (pp. 65-67).

Rather than wait for students to express a need, O'Brien (2010) initiated and reached out to offer a relationship that began with "one-on-one initial meetings" (p. 111) which has been tremendously beneficial to her students. The invitation essentially provides an opportunity for O'Brien and her students to get to know each other. She shared, "We almost always find a point of connection during our conversations, and this helps us both to see the other as someone we can know" (p. 112). As a teacher-educator, she understands what is at stake for her students and how student experiences in her classroom lay the groundwork for their future role as teachers. White (2003) also cautioned, "Schools are filled with outwardly unresponsive students, a situation that requires teachers to exercise patience and persistence in teaching and caring" (p. 308). Certainly most teachers have had experiences with unresponsive students who need us more than students who are able to voice their concerns more articulately.

Having understood there is a need, Noddings (2012) recommended that if it is within the instructor's power to resolve an issue or a conflict, she should; if not, she should work to maintain the caring relation (p. 771). In my experience with community-college students,

this has meant reaching out to the larger college community and utilizing such resources as the Women's Resource Center, Learning Resource Center, Counseling Department, English as a Second Language Lab, Veterans Affairs Office, Office of Accessibilities, and others. Caring for my students has expanded how I view my role as a teacher. I see myself as part of a larger network of people working together to support the students' needs. Developing caring relations has broadened my understanding of community and ensured greater success for my students. I no longer view student success as the sole responsibility of the teacher, but rather of the college community. The idea of community as part of a caring relationship is critical, particularly for students who may not have a support network at home.

Vignette Two: "Being here is not my choice."

Listening is an integral part of creating the caring experience (Noddings, 2012, p. 773). I am continually reminded by Noddings that in order to engage in a caring experience, I must listen to the students and put their needs before my own and even those of the academic institution. Not long ago, a young African American female student responded to my email to meet with me to discuss her excessive absences. Tanya (pseudonym) shared with me that she was in her second semester and hated college. She explained that her parents forced her to attend college to study business so that she could take over the family real estate business one day. But, she wanted to get her real estate license.[11] As the instructor representing the college, I understood that the administration would expect me to convince the student to stay and finish her degree, but she was adamantly exhibiting her disinterest by not attending classes and not completing course assignments. I felt motivated to help her.[12] We sat in my office over the next hour or so reading through real estate programs online. She settled on one she seemed to like and said she would look into it. She was absolutely certain that college was not where she wanted to be. She never returned to class. A week later, I learned from her classmate that Tanya had dropped the course and enrolled in a real estate school. Leaving college is a reality for some students. To show care for such a student was to see her specific need and problem, even if the solution was not the expected philosophy of the school to retain students until they graduate.

Vignette Three: "We're all in this together."

In Spring 2014, I taught a developmental English course with twenty-two ethnically and linguistically diverse students enrolled. Students test into the course if they have failed the college entrance-writing exam. The purpose of the developmental course is to prepare students for academic writing. They have two opportunities to pass the exam: tenth week

[11] Noddings (1984) suggested that the instructor does not judge; instead, "I receive the other into myself [so that] I see and feel with the other" (p. 30).

[12] A caring stance asks that I "…[s]tep out of [my] own personal frame of reference into the other's. When we care, we consider the other's point of view, his objective needs, and what he expects of us. Our attention, our mental engrossment is on the cared-for, not on ourselves. Our reasons for acting, then, have to do with both the other's wants and desires and with the objective elements of his problematic situation" (Noddings, 1984, p. 24).

and final week of the course. The pressure to succeed can be overwhelming for both the student and the teacher.

In extending the moral climate as Noddings (2012) advocated, instructors are encouraged to intentionally create a climate of care and look for ways "in which caring relations will continue to flourish" (p. 779). From a caring stance, the relationships we develop with our students are deliberative, and "an ethic of caring guides us to ask: What effect will this have on the person I teach? What effect will it have on the caring community we are trying to build?" (Noddings, 1986, p. 387). Thus, in the middle of the semester, I mentioned to the students that the Women's Resource Center director was hosting a "Good Deeds Day" event: did they want to do anything for others, and if so, what? Eventually, the students pooled their money and collected donations from friends and family to purchase coloring books for young children in the college's daycare center. The student-led acts of giving and caring for others created a strong bond among all of us.

In the classroom, we easily fell into discussions about the assignments and life in general. Students seemed more forthcoming in voicing their fears about the upcoming midterm and final standardized tests. I felt trusted and plugged into their lives; as a result, I trusted them with my own feelings and concerns. I learned that some students lived with illegal immigrant relatives at home. Another student's mother constantly belittled him by yelling that he would amount to nothing. A girl from Haiti, despite being painfully shy, shared that she wanted to become a teacher. One student from Africa felt a deep lack of confidence about his language skills compared to his American peers; the entire class encouraged him to continue to put his best effort into overcoming his challenges as an English as a Second Language Learner. Students volunteered to read each other's papers and make critical comments for improvement. Many of these voluntary peer-reading and writing activities took place outside the classroom and were brought into the classroom. In the tenth week of the semester, the group of students who passed the course became volunteer tutors on the days they did not attend class. Without my prompting, they volunteered and emailed each other with peer-review comments.

The encounters with students taught me that a caring attitude and behavior change more than one individual; they can change an entire group. We were able to have authentic conversations about our lives. The impact of caring was palpable. The experiences we had as writers, readers, and young activists promoted a sense of caring that spread outward from our classroom into the community. The students became more conscientious about their course work as a growing process. Today's nearly obsessive focus of education on measurable outcomes can easily ignore the power of care in learning within the college classroom. At the end of the semester, I asked the students to reflect on the learning and relationships that had developed and whether they had influenced persistence in the course. Some students commented:

- It's unexpected to find a professor who cares so much that she interacts so much with her students. I loved this class of students.
- Because I knew the professor cared, I gave my opinion in class. I trusted that she and the other students really wanted to know what I think.
- I probably would have dropped the class if the professor hadn't been as caring.

- I think she led us to become a community of people who cared about each other and I believe we learned to care, to truly care for each other. We helped each other even outside the classroom. We made important relationships. I will never forget.
- I like that the professor asked us questions about what we were learning. I like that she included our thoughts.
- The professor made me more responsible by giving me feedback on my work that made me want to do better. She uses language that encourages the students to work harder. She really shows she cares.

The students' comments about their classroom experiences supported the literature looking at how students perceive caring instructors (Straits, 2007; Thayer-Bacon & Bacon, 1996). Foster (2008) illuminated this further:

> The impact of perceived teacher care on students' school-related behavior and motivation is associated with a wide range of positive outcomes including higher attendance (Cornelius-White, 2007; Goodenow, 1993; Kojima & Miyakawa, 1993), time spent studying (Rosenfeld, Richman, & Bowen, 2000), increased academic achievement, and lower drop-out rate (Gill-Lopez, 1995). (p. 106)

In essence, establishing caring relations with our students can lead to better student success. Moreover, sometimes the effect of teacher-student relations can last after they have long left their classrooms and their teachers' offices (Carlson, 2014). I know this firsthand as a student and teacher.

Challenges: A Natural Part of Caring

Teaching with a care ethic involves a serious time and emotional commitment, and the pressures to be an "effective" and "good" teacher and meet professional commitments are, at the very least, challenging. As Noddings (1984) acknowledged, "There is always the fear that with so much pressure the one-caring may find herself facing the risk that she will cease to care" (p. 12) or that the emotional labor required will create the impetus to "display that which are perceived to be expected emotions" (Ogbonna & Harris, 2004, p. 1189). In all honesty, on some days I simply wanted to close my door and hide from Marcos to preserve a few minutes to myself and my other duties. Noddings (1984) has stated that "conflict and guilt are inescapable risks of caring" (p. 18). Yet, I understood deeply that Marcos had no one else and needed my assistance at that time. Noddings spoke powerfully to a deeper need that the instructor has for developing caring relations with her students: " . . . it is our longing for caring—to be in that special relationship—that provides the motivation for us to be moral. We want to be *moral* in order to remain in the caring relation and to enhance the ideal of ourselves as one-caring" (para. 4-5). As Noddings suggested, I do have a profound need to be a part of these special relations with my students. Yet, I know I have more work to do as I learn to speak candidly to students about developing an empowering relationship for *all* involved parties—one that honors each person's responsibilities to self and others.

Another particular challenge needing attention is that a teacher-student caring relationship occasionally cannot be sustained because of asymmetrical power dynamics. "I've

found it especially challenging—sometimes impossible—to keep a caring relationship intact when one person has the power to assess (read: judge) another," noted O'Brien (2010, p. 113). Failing a hard-working student who does not seem cut out for a particular field of study after having established a close relationship with him or her can be painfully uncomfortable. To address issues and concerns with student failure, intervention becomes an important act on the part of caring instructors at the community college. I have engaged in and been witness to colleagues wrapped up in negotiations with students to move a missed deadline, give extra-credit assignments, and accommodate inflexible work schedules to ensure student success.

Recently, one of my students, Frank (pseudonym), met with me and told me forthrightly, "I was a failure in elementary school, a failure in high school, and now I'm a failure in college." He had missed over two weeks of classes. Earlier in the semester he had lost his job and needed to find one quickly as he was responsible for coming up with $1200 a month in rent. During our meeting, we spoke about what he could change in order to attend regularly and meet assignment deadlines. When he left my office, I was hopeful. A day later when classes resumed, Frank was nowhere to be found—no email, no note in my department mailbox. For many students, the responsibilities of college combined with challenging personal problems and responsibilities (e.g., sudden unemployment, homelessness, pregnancy, illness, etc.) often lead them to drop courses. We have an evaluative and institutional role that should not be diminished by the relationship we have with students. As instructors, we can establish a caring learning environment to nourish student potential, but eventually the students dictate their own place in that environment—and we can continue to understand, encourage, and accept those needs.

Entering into and sustaining a caring relationship with students is not always possible or plausible, given variables that have the potential to shut down these avenues of possible growth for both students and instructors. Also of importance is that not all students are receptive to an approach built on developing a relationship.

Drawing the Line: What Is Real, What Is Possible

A particularly important area that must be given attention is the issue of boundaries and ethics in teacher-student relationships. Popular culture has created two opposing views. I grew up watching some movies that glorified and romanticized the college teacher-student relationship: *The Graduate* (1967), *Manhattan* (1979), and *Notes on a Scandal* (2006). Now, more recently trending on family television shows such as *Pretty Little Liars*, *Glee*, and *Gossip Girls*, unacceptable relationships with teachers and students abound. Romantic relationships between student and instructor do occur, and they are inappropriate. On the other hand, I have been inspired by the teacher-student relationships portrayed in movies such as: *To Sir, With Love* (1967), *Stand and Deliver* (1988), *The Great Debaters* (2007) and *The Freedom Writers* (2007) to name a few. Developing a caring relation makes us both—instructor and student—vulnerable, and we are bound by our professional role in students' lives to recognize which boundaries cannot and should not be crossed.

I would argue that my relationships with students grow out of an *educative nature*—a term used by Smith & Smith (2002) in the article "Friendship and Informal Education." I understand the term to mean that a teacher-student friendship can stem from common interests in each other as human beings and that "the shared excitement in the subject, the experience of discovery, and the search for further insight and knowledge can bring people closer together" (para. 21). The common commitment to and interest in education and the sense of community created in the classroom can cause the seeds of friendship to grow. However, Meyers (2009) cautioned, "increased investment and involvement in students' lives can potentially blur the distinction between faculty and friend" (p. 207). It is important to note that when a teacher and a student meet equally, the possibility of friendship exists, but the unequal relationship is also part of the student-teacher relationship (Noddings, 2008, p. 88). As the instructor, we have power over the students and need to use that power professionally. As a friend/teacher we also need to be aware of possibility of favoritism that may occur. While it is easy to grow closer to one student or a group of students over others, we must maintain our professionalism and treat all students equally and fairly. Meyers (2009) emphasized, "Effective, caring faculty members balance their connection with students by setting limits as needed, by enforcing classroom policies in consistent and equitable ways, and by maintaining democratic and respectful authority in the college classroom" (p. 207). We must always be clear with our students and treat everyone the same. If we let one student turn in a paper late then everyone else must have the same allowance.

Feeling Cared-for: Cautious Conclusion

While acknowledging that one's care toward others helps both parties continue to participate and develop a relationship, I am inclined to disagree with Nel Noddings on the degree to which it can make or break the relationship. As a student, I did not always let my professors who cared for me know how much their attentiveness and encouragement meant to me. Only years later did I understand the profound impact they had on my growth as a person and on my life. Similarly, White (2003) likewise troubled Noddings' claim that reciprocity needs to be observable. He declared:

> It is a mistake to judge the reception of caring (or the possibility of such reception) by sight, for reception might be present but unobservable. It might take the form of quiet reflection on the bus home from school or just before sleeping. Reciprocity might also be displayed but disguised, unrecognizable: A student could reciprocate by coming to class instead of cutting or by choosing not to take her own life. A caring teacher might never know what her caring has wrought in the lives of her students. (p. 308)

We naturally want those we care for to show some appreciation for the time and effort we expend in nurturing our relationships. As a teacher, I feel great satisfaction in seeing my students flourish.

Instructors must come to terms with their own understandings and practices of an ethic of care. There is no one way to achieve this, nor are all students interested in these types of

relationships. I can only offer what has worked for me. Taking a caring stance in my teaching has created an atmosphere of possibility that allows students to explore truly and authentically what they are learning. While caring theory is not a magic pill that dissolves the challenges that arise in teaching at the college level, it offers an important place from which to teach—one that has taught me to listen and observe student needs carefully and to think critically about how and if I can attend to them. Knowing the importance of students' needs on their journey to success has strengthened my role as an effective teacher. At the same time, I am learning to become a better teacher by enlisting the college community so that I may claim time of my own for meeting my professional and personal needs. The dilemmas associated with creating relationships with students are real and complicated. In my 11 years of teaching at a community college, I have experienced the constructive power of caring interactions with my students, and I am humbled by these extraordinary relationships founded on accentuating mutuality.

Instructional Recommendations:

Developing relationships that support college student success is key to establishing a caring environment in which both student and instructor can thrive. The following is a list of instructional approaches to help faculty to begin developing a deliberative caring pedagogy: Be open, available and responsive (Straits, 2007); offer help as soon as a problem arises, show compassion, listen to student ideas, get to know them beyond just their names (Haskell-McBee, 2007); foster interactions with students; answer student questions, acknowledge success and struggles, actively encourage learning (Meyers, 2009) through teacher feedback both verbal and written; use class time productively, share personal experiences and views with students, observe class policies (De Guzman et al., 2008); show commitment to student learning and academic success, and identify student learning styles (Foster, 2008); send supportive caring communications as well as demonstrate positive verbal and nonverbal communication (Velez & Cano, 2008); convey empathy and hope, speak privately to students about concerns (Russo-Gleicher, 2011); invite students to visit during office hours (e.g., send a standard letter or email to each student), schedule appointments for face-to-face meetings and online meetings; encourage use of college services to improve chances of success; support student interest not aligned with college success but life success, co-develop assignments with students that involve a class project where all can contribute; allow students the opportunity to hand one assignment in late without penalty; and provide opportunities for students to support and assist each other throughout the semester. Enacting an ethic of care in our teaching can have a profound impact on student success.

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