INSTRUCTOR AND STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF ONLINE WELCOME MESSAGES

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ABSTRACT

This study explored community college and university instructors' and students' perceptions of online welcome messages in college courses. Based on survey responses from 417 participants (72 instructors and 345 students), instructors and students agreed that a welcome message helps students get to know their instructor and how the course is set up, and that a welcome message can engage and motivate students. Also, instructors and students strongly agreed that video welcome messages were preferred over written ones. Recommendations are made to help faculty develop instructor presence in their courses through online welcome messages.

Keywords: *instructor presence, welcome message, introductory message*

Research has demonstrated that higher levels of cognitive, social, and teaching presence are linked to higher levels of course satisfaction, increased learning, and improved student outcomes (Choo et al., 2020; Community College Research Center, 2013; Rosser-Majors et al., 2022; Wang, 2022). According to Garrison et al.'s (1999) framework, cognitive presence is the extent to which students construct meaning and critically think about course content, social presence occurs when students feel connected to their professor and classmates, and teaching presence refers to both the design and facilitation of the learning experience. Fu (2019) defined instructor presence as "being there" in your class so students see that the instructor is a real person. Instructor presence is often based on "observable instructional behaviors and actions" (Richardson et al., 2015, p. 259) and is important in both online and face-to-face courses (Gazier & Harris, 2021).

Although there is research showing that students in online courses perform more poorly than students in face-to-face classes (Gregory & Lampley, 2016; Romeo et al., 2021), there is also research illustrating that high levels of instructor presence can eliminate these achievement gaps. Kennett and Redd (2015), for example, found that students in online and face-to-face sections performed equally well when the instructor utilized presence strategies in the online course. More specifically, there were no statistical differences in student final grades, exam grades, or written assignments between students in the online and face-to-face courses. In their study, presence strategies included sending a welcome email that provided students with an overview of the course and an animated introductory meeting (Kennett & Redd, 2015).

Students have reported that social interactions between instructors and students foster instructor presence (Wang et al., 2021). Instructor presence is important throughout the semester but can be especially important at the start of the semester. One type of initial interaction that demonstrates instructor presence is a welcome message. Mathieson and Leafman (2014) found that most students at a health sciences university who responded to a survey agreed or strongly agreed that introductions helped them form a sense of community. Researchers have found that instructor-student relationships can play an especially important role in the sense of belonging for students of color (Meeuwisse et al., 2010).

WELCOME MESSAGES: INSTRUCTOR PRESENCE AT THE START OF THE SEMESTER

Instructor presence at the start of the course is especially important. Welcome messages have

been identified as a way to promote a sense of instructor presence at the beginning of the semester (Oyarzun et al., 2018). Parker and Herrington (2015) argued that developing social and teaching presence early serves an important role in setting the climate for the course. In a study conducted with 228 students in undergraduate and graduate courses, Bickle and Rucker (2017) found that introductions and the opportunity to connect with peers were significant predictors of a sense of community in the classroom. Students who viewed a syllabus with a welcome statement reported a more positive perception of their instructor and higher levels of motivation to learn in the course as compared to students who viewed a syllabus without a welcome statement (LaPiene et al., 2022).

Best practice in online instruction calls for instructors to include an introductory or welcoming statement in the learning management system. Two Quality Matters (n.d.) standards relate to welcome messages. Standard 1.1 states, "Instructions make clear how to get started and where to find various course components," and standard 1.8 states, "The self-introduction by the instructor is professional and available online" (para 1).

When instructors share information about themselves with students, it can help students get to know them. Self-disclosure is one way for instructors to be present (Richardson et al., 2015). It can be especially helpful for students to see the similarities between themselves and their instructors (Gehlbach et al., 2016). Graduate students surveyed in a study conducted by Martin et al. (2018) reported that an introductory video helped them connect with their instructor. The importance of professors sharing information about themselves was also illustrated in a study conducted by Rosser-Majors et al. (2022). These researchers found that when teachers used instructor engagement approaches, such as sharing pertinent biographical and professional information in a welcoming tone, student performance in the course improved and fewer students dropped the course.

Welcome statements are also an opportunity for instructors to share their excitement and passion with students. Harrington and Thomas (2018) suggested instructors share in their welcome statement why they are passionate about their discipline and what they enjoy about teaching. In a study on online instructor presence, Reupert et al. (2009) found that "a salient personal quality was for instructors to demonstrate passion and enthusiasm about their subject" (p. 51). Student engagement and motivation are often higher when they see their instructor is passionate about their discipline. This was illustrated in a study conducted by Jackson et al. (2010) where instructor enthusiasm was one of the best predictors of student satisfaction in an online course. Orcutt and Dringus (2017) also found that the instructor's interest and passion for teaching played an important role in student engagement.

Instructors can also use a welcome message to help their students learn how to navigate the course and become familiar with resources that can support their success. Instructors can share their screens in the learning management system to show students how the course is set up and bring awareness to the resources available. Jones et al. (2008) reported that 68% of students in an asynchronous online graduate course agreed that the instructor video was valuable because it helped them "learn how to access the technological resources and supports that were available to them" (p. 4).

Although the use of video has not been explicitly communicated via the Quality Matters standards, Fu (2019) encouraged online instructors to "create a video-based introduction video to welcome students and let them see you and know you as a real person" (para 4). Jones-Roberts (2020) also encouraged faculty to use a variety of videos in their courses, including a course introduction video, to foster a strong sense of community. They found that 87% of students in an online course perceived the videos to be valuable. Because videos enable students to see the instructor's facial expressions, gestures, and inflections in their voice, they can keep student engagement high.

Research has also shown the extent to which students have reported watching welcome messages by instructors. In a study conducted by Jones et al. (2008), for example, almost all graduate students in an online course (97%) and most (88%) in a hybrid course who completed a survey reported that they watched the instructor's introductory video.

Not all research, however, has indicated that instructor videos are perceived to be of high value by students. For example, Sheridan and Kelly (2010) found that having a video where students

could hear and see their professor was only moderately important to them, as indicated by an average score of 5.74 ($SD = 3.17$) on a 10-point scale. In an interesting study by Collins et al. (2019), students participated more in an online class, as measured by the number and length of discussion posts, when the instructor engaged via text versus a recorded video. This may be in part due to the fact that watching videos is often more time-consuming than reading text. Borup et al. (2015) found that text was perceived to be more efficient while video was perceived to be more supportive in nature.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Most of the research on introductory instructor videos has been focused on online courses. Some research has explored the use of this instructor presence strategy in hybrid environments. For example, 88% of students in a hybrid graduate course reported that they found it valuable to "meet the instructor virtually by seeing their face as well as hearing the teacher's voice" (Jones-Roberts, 2020, p. 4). Instructors teaching blended, face-to-face courses may also be able to utilize welcome statements or videos to increase their presence and foster higher levels of student engagement. To my knowledge, there are no studies investigating the use of online introductory messages, regardless of modality. Given that many students are taking a combination of online, hybrid, and face-to-face courses, it is important to understand student perceptions of an online tool such as the welcome message for all types of courses. In addition, much of the previous research has explored instructor and student perspectives on the modality of the introductory messages used rather than asking instructors and students their opinions on their preferred modality for the welcome message. Finally, the data on welcome messages has typically been presented in the aggregate. I was interested in whether instructor and student perspectives might vary based on demographic variables such as type of institution, race, gender, or years teaching or year in school, as these variables, to my knowledge, have not been reported in the past literature.

The following research questions guided the study:

1. Do instructors and students agree that a welcome statement or video helps students get to know the professor and how the course is set up? Is there a difference between instructor and student perceptions of whether the welcome statement or video helps students get to know the professor and how the course is set up?

2. Do instructors and students agree that a welcome statement or video motivates and engages students? Is there a difference between instructor and student perceptions of whether the welcome statement or video engages and motivates students?

3. Do instructors and students more strongly believe that welcome statements help students get to know their professor and how the course is set up or increase student engagement and motivation?

4. Do instructors and students prefer welcome videos over welcome statements?

5. Do community college and university instructors differ in their perceptions of welcome statements?

6. Do instructor perceptions of welcome statements vary by race, gender, or years of teaching?

7. Do community college and university students differ in their perceptions of welcome statements?

8. Do student perceptions of welcome statements vary by race, gender, or undergraduate or graduate status?

METHOD

The university's Institutional Research Board (IRB) approved the study. Instructors and students at a community college and a public, four-year university, both located in the Northeast, were invited to participate in this study. Information about the participants, the procedure followed, and the survey questions used is provided next.

Participants

The results of this study are based on the responses from a total of 417 participants. Three hundred and ninety-six students clicked on the survey link and 98.74%, or 391 of them, consented to participate. Seventy-five instructors clicked on the survey link and 98.6%, or 74 of them, consented to participate. A total of 72 instructors and 345 students responded to the survey items.

Of the instructors who responded to the survey item about where they worked, 53 indicated they worked at a community college and 15 at a university. Of the students who responded to the survey items about which college they attended, 211 indicated the community college and 73 indicated the university.

Instructor respondents were mostly White (79%), with 10% identified as Hispanic or Latinx, 7% as Asian, 3% as two or more races, and 1% as Black. None of the instructor respondents identified as Alaskan Native or Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. Most instructor respondents identified as female (63%) while 36% identified as male and 1% identified as nonbinary. Instructor teaching experience ranged from 1 to 52 years ($M = 17.1$; $SD = 10.7$).

Most students were undergraduates ($n = 288$ or 83%), with most undergraduates being first-year students ($n = 104$) or sophomores ($n = 77$). There was diversity in terms of race with 34% of students identifying as White, 28% as Hispanic or Latinx, 18% as Asian, 12% as Black or African American, 7% as two or more races, and 1% as American Indian or Alaskan Native. Most student respondents identified as female (70%), while 27% identified as male, 2% as nonbinary, and 1% preferred to self-describe.

Procedure

Participants were recruited via email. During the Fall 2021 semester, the Vice President of Academic Affairs emailed the invitation to participate in the study to all full- and part-time faculty at the community college. The director of the Online Learning department at the four-year university emailed the invitation to participate during the Fall 2021 semester to faculty who had engaged with the office. Participation involved completing the online survey. The survey was available for over a month, and all faculty who were initially invited received a reminder email approximately one week after the initial email. In addition to descriptive analyses, student and instructor responses on similar items were analyzed via *t*-tests and ANOVAs.

Survey

There were two versions of the survey. One version was developed for students while the other was developed for instructors. Faculty and students were asked to indicate their level of agreement with three statements related to welcome statements or videos using a 7-point Likert scale, with 7 indicating strongly agree. In addition to the three Likert scale questions shared in Table 1, demographic questions were also included in the survey. Student demographic questions focused on race, gender, and status as either an undergraduate or graduate student. Instructor demographic questions focused on race, gender, and years of teaching.

Table 1.
Student and Faculty Survey Items

Item Focus	Student Version of the Item	Instructor Version of the Item
Get to know the professor and how the course is set up	A welcome and getting started statement or video where the professor introduces themselves and provides an overview of the course helps me get to know the professor and how the course is set up.	I believe adding a welcome and getting started statement or video in a Learning Management System (i.e., Blackboard, Canvas) helps students get to know me and how the course is set up.
Increase engagement and motivation	A welcome and getting started statement or video increases my engagement and motivation.	I believe adding a welcome and getting started statement or video increases student engagement or motivation.
Prefer video	I would prefer that the professors introduce themselves and the course through a video rather than a written statement.	I believe students prefer a welcome and getting started video versus a written statement.

RESULTS

Descriptive data on the instructor and student responses to the survey items overall and by institution type is shared in Table 2. A series of t-tests and ANOVAs were conducted to answer the research questions. Findings for each research question are presented below.

> Research Question 1: Do instructors and students agree that a welcome statement or video helps students get to know the professor and how the course is set up? Is there a difference between instructor and student perceptions of whether the welcome statement or video helps students get to know the professor and how the course is set up?

Instructors (M = 6.22; SD 1.13) and students (M = 6.03; SD 1.27) both agreed that a welcome statement or video helps students get to know their professors and how the course is set up (see Table 1). Instructor level of agreement to the statement, "I believe adding a welcome and getting started statement or video in a Learning Management System (i.e., Blackboard, Canvas) helps students get to know me and how the course is set up," was compared to student level of agreement to the statement, "A welcome and getting started statement or video where the professor introduces themselves and provides an overview of the course helps me get to know the professor and how the course is set up." Results from an independent samples t-test indicated that there was no statistically significant difference between instructor and student perceptions about the welcome statement or video helping students get to know their professor and how the course is set up (t = 1.21 (415), p = .227, d = .157).

Research Question 2: Do instructors and students agree that a welcome statement or video motivates and engages students? Is there a difference between instructor and student perceptions of whether the welcome statement or video engages and motivates students?

Instructors (*M* = 5.81; *SD* 1.36) and students (*M* = 5.61; *SD* 1.42) both somewhat agreed that a welcome statement or video engages and motivates students. The instructor's level of agreement to the statement, "I believe adding a welcome and getting started statement or video increases student engagement or motivation," was compared to the student's level of agreement to the statement, "A welcome and getting started statement or video increases my engagement and motivation." Results from an independent sample *t*-test indicated that there was no statistically significant difference between instructor and student perceptions about the welcome statement or video engaging and motivating students ($t = 1.06$ (415), $p = .288$, $d = .138$).

Research Question 3: Do instructors and students more strongly believe that welcome statements help students get to know their professor and how the course is set up or increase student engagement and motivation?

Descriptive data indicated a stronger level of instructor and student agreement that the welcome statement or video assisted students with getting to know their professor and how the course is set up as compared to instructor and student agreement that the welcome statement or video engaged and motivated students. Results of a paired samples *t*-test indicated that this difference was significant ($t = 8.95$ (417), $p < .001$, $d = .438$). Instructors and students were significantly more likely to agree that the welcome statement or video helped students get to know their professor and how the course is set up than that it increased student engagement and motivation. There was a medium effect size.

Table 2.
Instructor and Student Welcome Statement or Video Survey Responses

Survey Question Topic	Overall		Community College			University		
	n	M	n	M	SD	n	M	SD
Get to know the professor and how the course is set up								
Instructor	72	6.22	53	6.11	1.24	15	6.60	.23
Student	345	6.03	211	6.02	1.04	73	6.26	1.13
Increases engagement and motivation								
Instructor	72	5.81	53	6.02	1.24	15	6.07	.88
Student	345	5.61	211	5.55	1.46	73	5.97	1.08
Prefer video								
Instructor	72	5.74	53	5.00	1.43	15	5.87	1.30
Student	345	5.30	211	5.28	1.53	73	5.36	1.70

Research Question 4: Do instructors and students prefer welcome videos over welcome statements?

Based on descriptive data, instructors ($M = 5.17$; $SD = 1.43$) and students ($M = 5.30$; $SD = 1.58$) indicated they somewhat agreed that welcome videos were preferred over written welcome statements. Results from an independent sample t-test indicated that these differences between instructor and student responses were not significant ($t = -.639$ (415), $p = .523$, $d = -.083$).

Research Question 5: Do community college and university instructors differ in their perceptions of welcome statements?

A series of independent sample t-tests were conducted to determine if there were significant differences between the perceptions of instructors at a community college and faculty at a university with regard to the welcome statement. A total of 68 instructors indicated whether they worked at a university or community college. Only data from these individuals were included in this analysis. Results indicated that there were no significant differences between community college instructors ($M = 6.11$; $SD = 1.24$) and university instructors ($M = 6.60$; $SD = .63$) on their level agreement with the statement, "I believe adding a welcome and getting started statement or video in a Learning Management System (i.e., Blackboard, Canvas) helps students get to know me and how the course is set up," ($t = -1.467$ (66), $p = .147$, $d = -.429$). Similarly, there was no significant difference between community college ($M = 5.74$; $SD = 1.48$) and university instructors ($M = 6.07$; $SD = .88$) responses to the statement, "I believe adding a welcome and getting started statement or video increases student engagement or motivation" ($t = -.821$ (66), $p = .415$, $d = -.24$). There was, however, a significant difference between community college and university instructor responses to the statement, "I believe students prefer a welcome and getting started video versus a written statement" ($t = -2.114$ (66), $p = .038$, $d = -.618$). University instructors were more likely to agree with the statement, ($M = 5.87$; $SD = 1.30$) as compared to community college instructors ($M = 5.00$; $SD = 1.43$). The effect size was medium.

Research Question 6: Do instructor perceptions of welcome statements vary by race, gender, or years of teaching?

Most instructor respondents were White (n = 48) and 10 preferred not to answer this question. It was not possible to conduct an ANOVA due to the low number of instructors in different racial categories. Instructors who indicated Hispanic or Latinx (6), Asian (4), Black or African American (1), and two or more races (2), were recategorized as persons of color for the purpose of this analysis. To determine if responses varied by race, an independent t-test was conducted to compare the responses of instructors who were White and instructors who were persons of color. Although the mean scores were higher for instructors of color, as compared to instructors who were White, on all three items, the results indicated that there were no significant differences based on race for any of the three survey responses. More specifically, there were no significant differences based on instructor race for the question related to getting to know the professor and how the course was set up (t = -1.733(59), p = .088, d = $-.542$), or for their perception about how well the welcome message serves to encourage or motivate students (t = -1.157 (59), p = .252, d = $-.362$), or for preference of a video for the welcome message (t = $-.477$ (59), p = .635, d = $-.149$). Although not significant, there was a trend that instructors of color (M = 6.77; SD = .60) were more likely to agree that the welcome message helped their students get to know them and how the course is set up as compared to instructors who were White (M = 6.17; SD = 1.21). See Table 3 for all mean scores and standard deviations based on instructor demographics.

Forty respondents identified as female and 23 as male, while seven preferred not to answer and one indicated being nonbinary. As an ANOVA was not possible due to the cell sizes, a t-test comparing responses for men and women respondents was conducted. Results of the independent t-tests indicated no gender differences in responses to the statement related to welcome statements or videos helping students get to know professors and how the course is set up (t = $-.362$ (61), p = .719, d = $-.095$). There were also no significant gender differences on the statement about welcome statements engaging and motivating students (t = .048 (61), p = .962, d = .013), or on the statement about

preferring a video over a written welcome statement ($t = .102$ (61), $p = .919$, $d = .027$).

Instructor years of teaching experience were categorized into three groups: 10 or fewer years, 11 to 19 years, or 20 or more years of teaching experience. A series of one-way ANOVAs were conducted. No significant differences based on years of teaching were found for the responses related to the welcome statement and video helping students get to know their professor and how the course is set up ($F = .197$ (2, 42), $p = .822$), for the statement on if the welcome statement or video engages and motivates students ($F = .528$ (2, 44), $p = .593$), or for the statement about preferring video over written statements ($F = .52$ (2, 43), $p = .598$).

Research Question 7: Do community college and university students differ in their perceptions of welcome statements?

Descriptive data indicated that both community college ($M = 6.02$; $SD = 1.24$) and university students ($M = 6.26$; $SD = 1.13$) agree with the statement, "A welcome and getting started statement or video where the professor introduces themselves and provides an overview of the course helps me get to know the professor and how the course is set up." To determine if this difference was significant, an independent samples t-test was conducted. Results revealed that this was not a significant difference ($t = 1.43$ (282), $p = .145$, $d = .199$).

Community college ($M = 5.55$; $SD = 1.46$) and university students ($M = 5.97$; $SD = 1.08$)

also agreed with the statement, "A welcome and getting started statement or video increases my engagement and motivation." Results of an independent samples t-test revealed that this was a significant difference ($t = 2.30$ (282), $p = .022$, $d = .312$). University students, as compared to community college students, were more likely to agree with this statement. This is a small to medium effect size.

Students attending a community college ($M = 5.28$; $SD = 1.53$) and a university ($M = 5.36$; $SD = 1.70$) somewhat agreed with the statement, "I would prefer that the professors introduce themselves and the course through a video rather than a written statement." Results of an independent sample t-test indicated that these differences were not significant ($t = .358$ (282), $p = .72$, $d = .049$). See Table 2 for descriptive data by institution type.

Research Question 8: Do student perceptions of welcome statements vary by race, gender, or undergraduate or graduate status?

It was not statistically appropriate to include American Indian or Alaskan Native as there was only one student who provided this response. Students who indicated they preferred not to answer were also not included in the analysis due to the small number of respondents. There were no significant differences based on student race for perceptions related to getting to know the professor and course setup through welcome statements or videos ($F = .815$ (4, 79), $p = .519$), or engaging

Table 3:.
Instructor Demographics and Welcome Message Survey Responses

Instructor Demographics		Get to know the professor and how the course is set up		Increase Engagement and Motivation		Prefer Video	
	n	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Race							
White	48	6.17	1.21	5.83	1.40	5.17	1.46
Instructor of Color	13	6.77	.16	6.31	.86	5.38	1.45
Gender							
Woman	40	6.15	1.29	5.80	1.42	5.13	1.44
Man	23	6.26	.92	5.78	1.31	5.09	1.41
Years of Teaching							
10 or less	20	6.25	1.25	5.80	1.44	5.45	1.61
11 to 19	26	6.31	.88	6.00	1.27	5.12	1.45
20 or more	26	6.12	1.28	5.62	1.42	5.00	1.30

Table 4.
Student Demographics and Welcome Message Survey Responses

Student Demographics		Get to know the professor and how the course is set up		Increase engagement and motivation		Prefer Video	
	n	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Race							
White	91	6.08	1.10	5.38	1.36	5.08	1.61
Hispanic or Latinx	75	5.95	1.36	5.80	1.39	5.31	1.52
Black or African American	33	6.06	1.30	5.55	1.62	5.52	1.58
Two or more races	19	5.89	1.70	5.74	1.33	4.89	1.76
Gender							
Woman	205	6.22*	1.14	5.80*	1.32	5.39	1.53
Man	79	5.77*	1.43	5.41*	1.48	5.23	1.66
Student Status							
Undergraduate	230	6.00*	1.32	5.56	1.47	5.23	1.60
Graduate	58	6.41*	.73	6.05	.98	5.50	1.48

*Significant difference.

and motivating students through the welcome statements or videos (F = .1838 (4, 82), p = .129). There was also no significant difference in student agreement on a video being preferred over a written welcome statement by race (F = 1.126 (4, 82), p = .35; see Table 4).

There was a significant gender difference in responses to the statement, "A welcome and getting started statement or video where the professor introduces themselves and provides an overview of the course helps me get to know the professor and how the course is set up" (t = 2.79 (282), p = .006, d = .369). Students identifying as female were more likely to agree with this statement (M = 6.22; SD = 1.14) than students identifying as male (M = 5.77; SD = 1.43). The effect size is small to medium. There was also a significant gender difference in responses to the statement, "A welcome and getting started statement or video increases my engagement and motivation," females (M = 5.80; SD = 1.32) were again more likely to agree with the statement as compared to males (M = 5.41; SD = 1.48; t = 2.184 (282), p = .03, d = .289). The effect size was small to medium. There was no gender difference in responses to the statement about preferring videos over written welcome statements (t = .76 (282), p = .448, d = .101).

A series of independent sample *t*-tests were conducted to determine if there were differences in undergraduate and graduate student perceptions of welcome statements or videos. There was a significant difference in the responses for the statement related to perception about the welcome statement or video helping students get to know their professor and how the course was set up. Graduate students (M = 6.41; SD = .726) were more likely to agree with this statement than undergraduate students (M = 6.00; SD = 1.32; t = 2.33 (286), d = .342). This was a small to medium effect size. Graduate students (M = 6.05; SD = .981) were also more likely to agree that welcome statements or videos engaged and motivated them as compared to undergraduate students (M = 5.56; SD = 1.47; t = 2.43 (286), p = .016, d = .357). This was again a small to medium effect size. There was no significant difference between graduate (M = 5.50; SD = 1.48) and undergraduate (M = 5.23; SD = 1.60) responses to a statement about preferring videos over written welcome statements.

DISCUSSION

Instructors and students both agreed that welcome statements or videos can help students get to know their professors and learn how the course is set up, and that these can be used to engage and motivate students, but both instructors and students more strongly agreed with the former than the latter. These findings illustrate the perceived value of welcome statements and are consistent with what other researchers have found. For instance, Bickle

and Rucker (2017) found that introductions foster a sense of community in undergraduate and graduate classes, and Richardson et al. (2015) reported that instructor self-disclosure was an approach used by instructors to increase presence. In terms of navigation, Jones et al. (2008) also found that most students reported that the introductory video helped them learn how to access resources and the support that were available to them. In another study by Sheridan and Kelly (2010), students rated making course requirements clear, as evidenced by an average score of 9.95 ($SD = .21$) on a 10-point scale, as the most important action that shows instructor presence. Welcome statements or videos can be a vehicle for instructors to share personal and professional information, articulate expectations, and share navigational tips and how to access resources and support.

Instructors and students also agreed that they preferred a video welcome versus a written one. This finding was somewhat consistent with what others have found. Lewitzky (2022) reported that videos have been used to promote a sense of teacher presence in online courses. In an experimental study conducted by Wong et al. (2022), they found that students who viewed videos with the instructor looking directly at the camera, as compared to videos of a professor in a lecture hall or audio-only videos, rated the professor more positively on several characteristics such as likeability, immediacy, trust, and teaching excellence, and the students were also more likely to indicate that they would participate in class. Martin et al. (2018), however, found that faculty perceived a video-based instructor introduction to be only moderately useful at fostering instructor presence ($M = 3.83$; $SD = 1.21$) and instructor connection ($M = 3.40$; $SD = 1.35$). A 5-point Likert scale was used in this study, with 5 indicating *strong agreement* (Martin et al., 2018). In another study conducted by Fiorella et al., (2019), eye contact in an instructor video recording was shown to have a positive impact on academic performance. The results of this study, however, indicated that other indicators of instructor presence, such as clear communication about expectations and timely feedback, were viewed as more important by students. Thus, although welcome statements or videos are an excellent way for instructors to be present, this one action alone will not likely be enough. Richardson et al. (2015) found that instructors use a variety of ways to demonstrate instructor presence. Instructors will need to continue to be present throughout the course through clear expectations, regular communication, active participation in discussions and other learning activities, and timely feedback (Fu, 2019; Jones-Roberts, 2020; Wang et al., 2021).

Although there were no significant differences in faculty and student responses based on most demographic variables, female and graduate students more strongly agreed with statements about the value of welcome statements. To my knowledge, these findings have not been previously identified by other researchers. It may be that women and graduate students, who are typically older, may place a higher value on their relationships with instructors and therefore appreciate it when instructors share information about themselves via a statement or video.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations need to be considered. First, the sample size is relatively small and is from only two postsecondary institutions. The results may therefore not be generalizable to other settings. In addition, data were collected in Fall 2021 when the COVID-19 pandemic was still substantially impacting educational experiences. Although face-to-face courses were again being offered, there was still a high number of online course offerings. Instructors and students alike were feeling a sense of isolation and disconnect during this time, so it is possible that this experience influenced their responses. For instance, the isolation of the pandemic may have led to higher levels of preference for video because videos may be a way to feel more connected. Perhaps instructors and students would have had different perspectives related to the modality of the welcome message before or after the pandemic.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, students and faculty in a community college and university setting believed that a welcome statement or video can have a positive impact on students. Both students and faculty indicated a preference for instructors to use a video to share information about themselves and the course. During a welcome video, instructors can share their professional background and interests, communicate course expectations, illustrate how to navigate the online course materials,

and encourage the use of support and resources shared. Some instructors may also opt to disclose personal information. Although there was a preference for video, it may be helpful for instructors to use both a video and a written statement. It can be easier for students to refer back to content in a written versus video format.

Despite the value perceived by both students and faculty, a welcome statement is only one strategy for establishing instructor presence and beginning to establish professor-student relationships. Faculty may benefit from training on how to further demonstrate instructor presence and connect with students, especially in the online learning environment. Paquette (2016) found that when instructors were provided with professional development opportunities related to increasing social presence in their online classrooms, they significantly increased connecting actions such as self-disclosing personal information and greeting students by name.

Given the importance of the welcome message, future research could explore what content is most important to convey. For example, researchers could investigate the value of sharing both personal and professional information in a welcome message. It could also be helpful for instructors to know what type of information would be most valued by students. For example, would students find it most helpful if the focus of the welcome message was on getting to know their instructor or if it provided navigational support illustrating how the course is set up? Another important line of inquiry could be to further explore how instructors and students from different demographic backgrounds perceive welcome messages. Perhaps there are strategies that can be used in welcome messages that would assist students from historically marginalized populations to connect to their instructor and learn how to navigate the learning environment.

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