Warmth without Burnout:
Tending to Students without Exhausting Yourself
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What's Warmth?

rapport and expressions of friendliness that lead to a sense of belonging for students, so they feel that someone is on their side, rooting for their success, hopeful and understanding

Why Warmth?

Students who experience a warm relationship with college instructors are more likely to

- achieve academic success (Guzzardo et al., 2020)
- reach out for help (Gurung & Galardi 2021), particularly if they experience stress or trauma (Sleigh, Nelson, Ritzer, & Nelson 2025)
- report positive classroom experiences (White, Olson, & Canning 2024)
- thrive professionally after graduation (Clark 2020)
- experience positive well-being after graduation (Clark 2020)
- have strong emotional connections to their alma mater (Clark 2020)

Warm faculty are more likely to

- be seen as likeable by their students (Widmeyer & Loy 1998)
- be seen as more effective by their students (Widmeyer & Loy 1998)
- report higher job satisfaction (Nassar, Heinz, Jasimuddin, & Proctor 2022)
- have more success in demanding more effort from students (Pancansky-Brock 2022)

References and Full Text

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Warmth as Burnout Risk

Too cool and we risk underserving students and feel disengaged. Too warm and we resent working harder than students and burn through our reserves of energy.

Warmth-Stealers

- unreasonable workload (Taylor & Holley 2024)
- role strain (Bieber, Jan, & Mirakhur 2024)
- sexism, ableism, racism, and other oppressions (Wolbring & Lillywhite 2023)
- sidelined research and writing goals (Hawkins 2021)
- bullshit tasks (Husain 2025) and bureaucracy (Pace, D'Urso, Zappulla, & Pace 2019)

Warmth-Demanders

- increased student expectations for emotional support from women and instructors in helping professions (Chiarelli-Helminiak, McDonald, Tower, Hodge, & Faul 2022)
- more requests for accommodations from women
- harsher student critiques of women who do not perform warmth compared to "cold" men (El-Alayli, Hansen-Brown, & Ceynar 2018)
- "consumer mentality" among students (Gates, Heffernen, & Sudore 2015)
- extra demands for mentoring or modeling for faculty of color and queer or disabled faculty (Johnson, Behling, Miller, & Vandermaas-Peeler 2015)
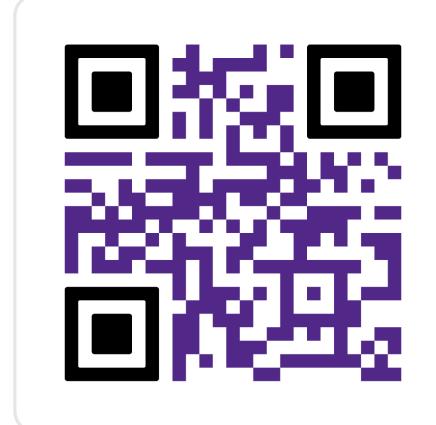
Despite challenges, we can maintain our Goldilocks temperature!

Sustainable, Warm Practices

- require little or no additional time, ideally replacing practices that take more time for worse or equivalent outcomes
- are universally applicable rather than requiring frequent exception-making and adaptability from you
- are easy to implement, with low startup costs, so you don't have to learn difficult skills or buy expensive new products
- have few barriers to success and no negative side effects, so you don't have to navigate challenges in implementation or collateral problems
- do not depend on student reciprocation to be maintained, so that they are successful and we are not disappointed even when students don't live up to our hopes

Goldilocks Practices

- Invite students to share details of their life that are meaningful but not too much for you to carry or for them to share.
- Announce off-limits research topics early to avoid reading tiring content.
- Praise students in public and one-on-one.
- Praise students for extracurricular accomplishments too!
- Show up to events. Tell your students that you're coming. Attend performances, games, gallery openings, poetry readings, research symposia, and open houses.
- If the tutoring center offers group sessions just for your classes, stop in to encourage students.
- Hang out in the cafeteria occasionally, or eat lunch or sip coffee on a patio on campus so you can be seen from a distance.
- Walk your dog on campus. Students miss their pets!
- Frequent places where you know students work, even just once.
- Ask students for suggestions for shopping and services. They love to recommend local businesses!
- Grade small assignments based on completion so you can focus your feedback on praise. Scan the work until you find something specific to comment on.
- Contact students who score poorly or don't submit an assignment promptly to express concern and point them to the missing-work policy.

Analyze your syllabi to identify policies you frequently modify for individual students and change them to warmer policies so you don't have to make accommodations.

Warm policy ideas!

- Provide regular reminders of due dates, which you can schedule at the start of the course. Use Canvas's gradebook to remind students who haven't submitted work to do so shortly before the deadline. They'll appreciate it!
- Use the student alert system to identify struggling students early—and to praise excellent work!
- Check in early and frequently with students. Require them to email you at the start of the course, offer a mid-term evaluation, or schedule small-group or one-on-one conferences.
- Send sympathy cards. Always go to funerals if they lose a parent or sibling and live locally.
- Inform students of the counseling and other support available to them. Direct them to clubs of interest, especially if they are lonely.
- Take their struggles and grief seriously.