

From Hesitation to Help-Seeking: The Role of Faculty Communication and Expectancy Violations in Shaping Student Disclosure

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Abstract

This study investigates how college students' expectations of faculty communication, shaped by positive and negative expectancy violations, influence their willingness to disclose personal or academic challenges. Using Expectancy Violation Theory (EVT) as a framework, the research highlights how faculty behaviors, including empathy, accessibility, and responsiveness, can create supportive environments that foster trust and open communication. Data from a qualitative survey of undergraduate students reveal the critical role of past interactions, perceptions of faculty approachability, and emotional calculus in disclosure decisions. The findings offer theoretical contributions to EVT by illustrating its application in educational contexts and practical implications for fostering faculty-student relationships that enhance student well-being and academic success. This study provides actionable insights for educators and administrators seeking to reduce student stress and promote engagement through effective communication strategies.

Keywords: Expectancy Violation Theory, Faculty-Student Communication, Student Stress, Disclosure

In 2022, the American College Health Association (ACHA) conducted its ACHA–National College Health Assessment (NCHA) survey on college students' habits and behaviors. The survey revealed concerning levels of stress, with 79.4% of the 54,204 undergraduates surveyed experiencing moderate to high stress in the past month (American College Health Association, 2022, p. 14). Similarly, a March 2023 Gallup Poll of 2,430 bachelor's degree students found that 66% felt stressed and 51% felt worry during much of the previous day (Hrynowski & Marken, 2023).

Chronic stress among college students has wide-ranging consequences, impacting psychological, physical, and social well-being (Aloia & McTigue, 2019). Studies link academic stress to mental health issues like depression, anxiety, and physical health problems such as illness and diminished self-esteem (Chiauzzi et al., 2008; Hudd et al., 2000; Macgeorge et al., 2005). Stress also affects retention, correlating with increased dropout rates and poor academic performance (Pritchard & Wilson, 2003). Notably, 43.7% of the respondents on the NCHA survey identified their stress as a meaningful "impediment to academic performance" (American College Health Association, 2022, p. 6).

Fortunately, strong student–faculty relationships can mitigate these effects, improving academic achievement, satisfaction, persistence, and personal development (Cuseo, 2018; Guzzardo et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2019; Trolan & Parker III, 2017). Social support from family, peers, and faculty is also proven to buffer the effects of stress (Bland et al., 2012; Chao, 2012; Maymon & Hall, 2021; Maymon et al., 2019; Reeve et al., 2013). However, little is known about what influences students' decisions to confide in faculty, particularly when experiencing high stress. While students often seek help from family and friends, they are less likely to approach faculty (Longwell–Grice & Longwell–Grice, 2008; Thompson, 2008).

Expectancy Violation Theory (EVT) (Burgoon, 1978; 1993) offers a framework for understanding how students might navigate these decisions. EVT posits that individuals assess and react to unexpected communication behaviors based both on their expectations and the perceived valence of any violations to those expectations. In student–faculty interactions, such deviations—positive or negative—can influence perceptions of faculty as approachable, trustworthy, or supportive when students consider reaching out in times of distress.

This study applies EVT to explore how students' expectations of faculty communication, along with the outcomes of faculty behavior, affect

their decisions to disclose struggles or stress. Understanding these expectancy violations could provide both theoretical insights and practical strategies for creating supportive environments that encourage disclosure, retention, and success challenges.

College Student Stress and Faculty Relationships

College student stress is an increasing concern in higher education, with surveys showing rising distress levels among students (Chiauzzi et al., 2008). Chronic stress negatively impacts academic performance, increases dropout rates, and causes significant mental and physical health challenges (Aloia & McTigue, 2019; Dusselier et al., 2005; Macgeorge et al., 2005). Understanding factors influencing student stress—and how faculty can mitigate it—has become a central focus of research.

Social support is vital for reducing stress and enhancing well-being. Support—especially that from family and friends -- is linked to lower stress and better mental health (Abdul Aziz et al., 2023; McLean et al., 2022). Faculty are uniquely positioned to provide both academic and emotional support in addition to these sources, directly influencing stress levels for students. Research highlights the importance of faculty relationships in reducing stress, increasing motivation, and fostering success. Key aspects of faculty–student interactions—like supportive environments, inclusivity, and engagement beyond teaching—alleviate pressures and encourage student growth (Guzzardo et al., 2021). Strong faculty–student rapport, characterized by mutual understanding and open communication, also improves motivation, participation, and satisfaction (Frisby & Myers, 2008).

Effective faculty/student communication is equally critical. Frey and Lane (2021) show that mismatched communication styles can increase stress, while responsive faculty reduce stress and support learning. Myers et al. (2000) note that friendly, attentive communication fosters engagement and a supportive environment. Faculty openness further encourages students to disclose struggles, helping create a positive atmosphere (Meluch et al., 2022). Overall, meaningful faculty–student interactions—shaped by rapport, effective communication, and openness—are essential for reducing stress and fostering a positive learning experience.

College Students and Instructor Disclosure

Research on student disclosure of academic or personal challenges has highlighted several key factors influencing whether students seek faculty support. While students tend to turn to peers for minor issues, Thompson (2008) found

that they are more likely to approach faculty for assistance with significant academic concerns, underscoring the critical role faculty play in addressing stressors that can impact student well-being. Miller Henningsen et al. (2019) further explored the dynamics of disclosure, revealing that students' privacy orientations—whether they tend to keep information private or are more open to sharing—greatly influence their willingness to share academic challenges with faculty. This suggests that faculty can encourage disclosure by creating a safe, trustworthy environment that respects students' privacy. Zengaro et al. (2022) expanded by examining how relational closeness between students and instructors influences disclosure decisions, particularly regarding personal health information. They found that students were more likely to disclose sensitive issues when they felt a strong connection with their instructors. Yet, concerns about potential risks—such as how disclosure might impact grades or how instructors might respond—remained significant barriers. Together, these studies emphasize the importance of fostering a supportive, approachable classroom environment where students feel both trusted and safe to seek help.

Expectancy Violation Theory (EVT)

Expectancy Violation Theory (EVT) explains how individuals react to violations of their communication expectations, focusing on how unexpected behaviors—whether positive or negative—affect relationships (Dainton & Zelle, 2022). Originally focused on physical space (Burgoon, 1978), EVT has been expanded to include emotional and psychological violations, making it an useful framework for understanding faculty-student interactions.

The core concepts of Expectancy Violation Theory (EVT)—expectancy, communicator reward valence, and violation valence—are central to understanding reactions to unexpected communication behaviors. Expectancy refers to the behaviors an individual anticipates based on prior experiences or social norms. Communicator reward valence evaluates the perceived value of the communicator, influenced by factors like past interactions and likability. Violation valence assesses whether a deviation from expectations is seen as positive or negative, depending on the context. Together, these concepts shape how individuals respond to unexpected behaviors, either by reciprocating or compensating for them.

In the context of student stress, EVT suggests that students form expectations based on prior experiences. When faculty communication deviates from these expectations, it can either reduce or increase stress. For instance, a

supportive response may create a positive violation, fostering trust and reducing stress, while a dismissive or harsh response may increase stress and disengagement. Given EVT's implications for communication, faculty may be able to use positive violations strategically to encourage open communication, reduce stress, and promote academic success. This leads to our research question:

RQ1: How do students' expectations of faculty interactions, shaped by past experiences with positive or negative violations, influence their decisions to reach out to faculty members when facing personal or academic challenges?

Method

To explore how students' expectations of faculty communication, along with their perceptions of faculty behavior, influence their decisions to disclose struggles or stress, a survey was administered to a sample of college students. The survey focused on college student stress and communication. Participants were recruited using network and snowball sampling (Baxter & Babbie, 2004; Creswell, 2007) with the assistance of the second author's Communication 3150 (Communication Research Methods) undergraduate students during the Spring 2024 semester. Initial invitations were sent via email to students within the researchers' and 3150 classmates' networks, who were then asked to forward the invitation to others. Eligibility criteria required participants to be at least 18 years old and currently enrolled in a college or university. Participation was voluntary, with no compensation provided.

The data for this study were drawn from a broader survey on college student stress and communication. This particular study focuses on students' responses to open-ended questions about students' choices to share personal stresses or struggles with faculty, reasons for sharing, and both positive and negative experiences when they chose to share.

A total of 254 students completed the survey, with a mean age of 23.4 years ($sd = 6.37$). The sample included 164 females (64.6%), 82 males (32.3%), and 8 students (3.2%) identifying as nonbinary or with another gender identity. In terms of academic standing, 11.4% were freshmen, 19.7% sophomores, 31.5% juniors, 33.9% seniors, and 3.5% graduate students. Regarding enrollment status, 77.5% were full-time students (enrolled in 12 or more credit hours), while 22.5% were part-time. Approximately 25.2% identified as first-generation college students.

To analyze the data, the research team began

by reviewing all responses to the open-ended questions to familiarize themselves with the data. First-level codes were identified to capture significant responses, and these were organized into initial categories. After discussing these initial codes, the team refined and reorganized them into broader themes and subthemes during a secondary coding phase (Creswell, 2007; Lindlof, 1995; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Themes were identified based on keyword repetition, the recurrence of meaning, and the forcefulness of responses (Owen, 1984). The themes were further refined and named through additional data checks. Expectancy Violation Theory was chosen as a lens to help clarify and elaborate on emergent themes by the research team during data analysis because the theory provided additional insight into the stories students were sharing. Finally, representative examples were selected to illustrate each theme.

Results

The analysis revealed three interconnected themes highlighting how students' expectations of faculty interactions, shaped by prior positive or negative expectancy violations, influenced their willingness to seek support. These themes include: memory of prior violations, communicator reward valence, and violation valence in decision-making.

Memory of Prior Violations

Students consistently referenced past experiences with faculty as a critical factor shaping their expectations for future interactions. Positive expectancy violations—such as unexpected empathy or personalized support—fostered trust and openness. One participant shared, “I was struggling with a family emergency, and my professor didn’t just extend the deadline but checked in with me the next week. That’s not something I expected, and it made me feel like I could go to them for anything.” This example highlights how a single supportive interaction can establish a foundation for future communication.

In contrast, negative violations—such as dismissive or rigid responses—left lasting impressions that diminished students' confidence in faculty as sources of support. A participant recounted, “I once asked for an extension because I was sick, and the professor just said, ‘You should have planned better.’ Now I hesitate before asking for help because I don’t want to be judged.” This memory underscores how negative interactions can discourage help-seeking behavior long-term. Another student noted, “I will say that like a reason why I don’t like to talk to teachers about things is because of like past experiences. I’ve had teachers get mad at me for trying to like work with them.

So, it kind of makes it harder to work with them now.” This theme demonstrates that students' decisions to seek faculty support are deeply rooted in their memories of prior interactions, which continue to influence their perceptions and behaviors over time.

Communicator Reward Valence

Students assessed faculty approachability based on communicator reward valence, or the perceived ability of faculty to meet emotional, relational, or academic needs. Faculty who exhibited warmth, enthusiasm, and responsiveness were perceived as having high reward valence. One participant noted, “When you can tell a teacher loves their job,” emphasizing how visible enthusiasm fosters approachability. Another student highlighted, “how welcoming they feel,” showing how initial impressions can affirm or violate students' expectations.

Specific behaviors further reinforced reward valence. Students valued faculty who made themselves available and responsive. As one participant remarked, “If their contact information is available,” or when faculty “stick around after class long enough for you to talk to them,” these behaviors signaled approachability. Conversely, perceptions of low reward valence discouraged students from seeking support. One student explained, “If I know they will not respond or will not care, then there is no point to reach out.” Another shared, “I have had a very unfriendly and unapproachable professor, and it made me scared to reach out to her even when I desperately needed her help.”

Examples of negative faculty behavior further illuminated the impact of low reward valence. A student recounted an interaction with a professor who required students to schedule Zoom meetings but then failed to be attentive: “He didn’t answer any of my questions and ended our meeting without warning,” leaving the student feeling unheard and dismissed. These perceptions strongly influenced students' willingness to engage, reinforcing the importance of faculty's perceived availability and responsiveness.

Violation Valence in Decision-Making

The decision to reach out to faculty during personal or academic challenges was shaped by students' assessment of violation valence—the perceived positivity or negativity of potential interactions. Anticipation of positive violations often motivated students to overcome hesitations. As one participant noted, “I don’t like asking for help, but I thought, ‘Maybe they’ll surprise me and be nice about it.’” This highlights how hope for a supportive response can drive help-seeking behaviors.

Emotional calculations emerged as a critical process in students' decision-making, involving the weighing of emotional risks (e.g., rejection, judgment) against potential rewards (e.g., understanding, assistance). Students who anticipated negative violations often avoided seeking help. For example, one participant shared, "I didn't ask for help because I thought they'd just see me as another student who couldn't keep up." Another recounted, "I sent her [a professor] a message asking for basic help that any reasonable teacher would give. She refused and told me I wasn't working hard enough on her class." This violation of expectations discouraged further communication.

Negative feedback—whether accurate or not—also influenced students' willingness to engage. One student explained, "Gives more negative feedback than positive feedback. ... It makes me shut down and feel like I can no longer reach out to them when I'm stressed or worried." Another remarked, "I will always ask for help one time, but if a professor shuns me for asking a stupid question or refers me elsewhere because I seem bothersome, I won't reach out. I will reach out continuously if I can sense that they are compassionate and willing to see me succeed." These reflections underscore how students evaluate faculty interactions to determine future engagement.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide meaningful insights into how students' expectations of faculty communication, shaped by expectancy violations, influence their willingness to disclose personal or academic challenges. By examining students' memories of prior violations, perceptions of communicator reward valence, and emotional calculus in decision-making, this study extends the applicability of Expectancy Violation Theory (EVT) to faculty-student interactions in higher education.

Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to EVT literature by highlighting the significant role of expectancy violations in academic contexts, specifically how students interpret positive and negative violations through a lens of trust and emotional safety. Positive violations—such as unexpected empathy or personalized support—foster rapport and create an environment conducive to disclosure. For example, participants' descriptions of unanticipated faculty support during stressful periods illustrate how positive violations can increase students' trust in faculty and willingness to seek help. Conversely, negative violations—such as dismissive responses or rigid policies—leave

lasting impressions that diminish students' confidence in faculty as sources of support. These results echo findings in the literature that faculty behaviors significantly impact students' emotional well-being and academic outcomes (e.g. Cuseo, 2018; Trolan & Parker III, 2017).

Additionally, this study emphasizes the interplay between communicator reward valence and violation valence in shaping communication outcomes. Students' willingness to disclose challenges was influenced not only by the nature of expectancy violations but also by their perceptions of faculty approachability, warmth, and responsiveness. This nuance aligns with prior research on the importance of rapport and effective communication in fostering supportive faculty-student relationships (Frisby & Myers, 2008; Guzzardo et al., 2021). By demonstrating how faculty behaviors can either mitigate or amplify the effects of expectancy violations, the findings expand EVT's applicability to complex interpersonal dynamics in educational settings.

Practical Implications

The findings underscore the importance of faculty behaviors in shaping students' decisions to seek support, providing actionable insights for higher education institutions:

1. **Faculty Development:** Training programs can emphasize the value of fostering positive expectancy violations through proactive communication strategies. Faculty can be encouraged to demonstrate empathy, check in with students during high-stress periods, and adopt flexible policies that support student well-being. These practices not only reduce stress but also enhance trust and rapport.
2. **Clarity and Accessibility:** Clear communication about availability and preferred methods of contact is essential. As students in this study highlighted, ambiguity about faculty availability can deter outreach, while transparency fosters a sense of approachability.
3. **Rapport-Building:** Small but meaningful actions, such as learning students' names, providing timely feedback, and maintaining an open-door policy, can significantly improve students' perceptions of faculty approachability. These behaviors reduce the perceived risks associated with disclosure, encouraging students to seek help when needed.
4. **Institutional Policies:** Institutions should prioritize initiatives that support faculty-student interactions, such as manageable class sizes, peer mentoring programs, and policies that integrate engagement goals into performance evaluations. These systemic changes can complement individual faculty

efforts to create supportive environments.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study offers valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. The reliance on a network and snowball sampling method limits the generalizability of the findings. Network (or snowball) sampling relies on participants recruiting others within their social or professional circles. Since this particular sample was primarily recruited by the second author's undergraduate communication research methods course during Fall 2024, the sample may overrepresent undergraduate students at four-year, mountain west regional comprehensive universities and under-represent students from other types of backgrounds. While these findings are useful as an initial point of conversation, future research should continue to gather more diverse and representative samples across institutions and disciplines.

Cultural and individual differences, such as communication apprehension or personality traits, also warrant further investigation. Understanding how these factors influence perceptions of expectancy violations could provide a more nuanced view of faculty-student interactions. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking the long-term effects of faculty behaviors on students' disclosure decisions and academic outcomes would deepen the understanding of these dynamics. Finally, while Expectancy Violation Theory emerged as fruitful lens for analyzing student experiences with faculty-student interactions, alternative theoretical lenses—such as Social Support Theory or Communication Privacy Management—could also offer meaningful insights into students' disclosure decisions. Future research might explore these perspectives to further enrich our understanding of the dynamics at play.

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