

**Using Courthouse Portfolios to Establish Rapport and Motivate
College Students**

Presentation Proposal

For

The Academic and Business Research

Institute International Conference

Four Points by Sheraton French Quarter (504-524-7611)

New Orleans, LA

March 21-23, 2013

By

Ruben Gentry, Ed.D.

Professor of Special Education

Jackson State University

Jackson, MS 39217

Using Courthouse Portfolios to Establish Rapport and Motivate College Students

Abstract

Student attention is a prerequisite to learning. Numerous techniques have been used to accomplish this objective. A unique strategy is applied in this study to establish rapport and motivate college students, county courthouse portfolios. The strategy was applied at an urban institution that attracted a large number of its students from the resident state. The professor, over a three-year period, visited all county courthouses in the state and made a portfolio for each, containing photos of the courthouse with him pictured therein, other photos, and descriptive and informative data about the facility. Back in the classroom the professor surveyed the students to determine their resident county and shared with them information contained in the portfolios. The students were also requested to provide other information about the county which could be added to the portfolio. A challenge was issued to the students, "If the professor walked a mile in your shoes, would you join him and run a marathon to educate school children?" The ultimate objective was to establish an authentic relationship with students and to motivate them to strive for excellence in the teacher preparation program. The study is supported by a review of the literature on elements essential in motivating college students to achieve and informs the profession as to how different techniques may be helpful. Initial results showed that the courthouse portfolio concept produced positive results in establishing rapport and motivating college students.

Keywords: college success, higher education, motivation, student-teacher rapport, teaching strategies

Introduction

Something that is important or authentic to students is likely to become an object of attention. It was surmised that county courthouses have a certain appeal to all students. A county courthouse is a building in which courts of law are regularly held or the principal building in which county offices are housed (<http://www.merriam.webster.com>, n.d.). Students drive automobiles and they must purchase license plates at or through the courthouse. It is also the place where marriage licenses are acquired and many other legal documents are obtained or processed. Thus, the courthouse is an interest in common to the students and the professor.

The county-courthouse concept was instituted as a mechanism for the professor to establish genuine rapport with teacher education majors in a core course in the curriculum. Both the literature and personal experience gave credence to the value of teacher-student rapport in the learning process. Wilson, Ryan, and Pugh (2010) indicated that students who believed they had experienced rapport with their professor reported greater enjoyment of the material covered in the course and of the instructor, and they rated themselves more likely to attend class, study, contact their professor, and engage in other academically beneficial behaviors

Rapport heightens students' motivation and motivation is a major factor to enhance learning. According to Wilson, Ryan, and Pugh (2010), instructor nonverbal and verbal immediacy has been associated with student motivation, perceptions of learning, and favorable attitude toward the course and the instructor.

Since achievement in college is such a complex phenomenon, certain indicators of success were more manageable to orchestrate and assess than identification and use of a specific rapport or motivation scale. Therefore, careful attention was given to such factors as class attendance, participation and demeanor in class, submission of assignments, and performance on assignments.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine if the use of county courthouse portfolios would facilitate a professor in establishing rapport and motivating college students to be successful in a teacher preparation program. A portfolio was developed for each county courthouse in the resident state. For out-of-state students, general information was gathered about the state or principal cities. The basic question was, "Given that the professor had visited the students' county courthouses and compiled portfolios on them, would the students show major interest in photos and data on their respective county courthouse? And if so, would there be evidence of heightened rapport between the professor and the students and motivation for them to perform at a high level in the course?"

Review of Literature

Courthouses in Mississippi have been addressed to some extent in documented sources. A comprehensive list of courthouses in the state, organized by the city or town

in which they are located was discovered (<http://www.serv-now.com/resources/courthouses/mississippi>).

It had been established from inspection of data on official state maps that there were 92 courthouses among the 82 counties in Mississippi. Another source (<http://www.co.jasper.ms.us/courthouses.html>) also validated the count. It stated that only ten Mississippi counties have dual county seats, which is due to the division of court districts. Jasper County was listed as an example; it has a courthouse in Bay Springs and another in Paulding. With the relatively small population that it has, we wondered why two county seats. But in addition to Legislative action, the source stated that while Paulding was settled in 1833, it was 1935-36 that a road was built from Bay Springs to Rose Hill, the first road connecting the two districts. For a period of time, Paulding was the only city of which we could not determine its population, including a search on the Internet. However, the previous source stated that prior to the Civil War Paulding was “The Queen City of the East” and the metropolis had a population of over one thousand.

Relevance of courthouses and portfolios.

According to Keen (2011), in Europe, cathedrals were the great buildings of a community; in the USA the courthouse is where the public invested money. They are important symbols of government and democracy. People are very proud of their courthouses. The author further stated that people identify with their courthouses; that courthouses are their palaces because they represent the cornerstones of our civilization; and county courthouses are the landmarks, cathedrals, and icons in their communities.

The term portfolio is used extensively in teacher education. In the context of performance-based assessment, a portfolio allows preservice teachers to demonstrate what they know and what they are able to do. It can provide a dual focus on basic knowledge retention as well as the application and demonstration of teaching-related skills that span an entire teacher education program and beyond. One strength of portfolios in teacher education is the connection that students make between their professional growth that occurs as a result of coursework and fieldwork during the process of learning to teach (Fiedler, Mullen, Finnegan, 2009).

According to Jones (2010), a number of benefits have been reported for the use of portfolios in assessment. Students take greater responsibility for their learning. This occurs through the decision-making process involved in selecting evidence and reflecting on what that evidence demonstrates. The author went on to describe the preparation of a portfolio as a theoretical act because the process of selecting and reflecting on evidence requires compilers to make decisions based on their personal theory of what is worthy of inclusion. The promotion of reflection is often cited as a positive feature of portfolios. Reflection occurs at three stages of the portfolio process: during selection of evidence, during annotation of evidence for presentation in the portfolio and during conversations with peers, faculty advisers and others about their portfolio entries (Jones, 2010). Cimer (2011) reported that the portfolio process, especially combining self-reflection with weekly tests, encouraged students to study regularly, increased retention and made learning more enjoyable.

For this study, a portfolio is used to mean a collection of materials relative to a specific county courthouse. Also, the portfolios were compiled by the professor as opposed to the students; though they allow for later input from students. While rather simplistic in design, the courthouse portfolios do adhere to many of the preparation criteria listed by Jones (2010), a theoretical position, a process of material selection, and an opportunity to reflect on the material.

The significance of rapport

Wilson, Ryan, and Pugh (2010) stated that rapport is positive relationship between teacher and student, with professor immediacy as one way to create a positive relationship. Additional ways given by the authors to create rapport included fair grading practices, treating all students with dignity, and numerous other ways to enhance the classroom milieu. Weimer (2010) posited that rapport is the ability to maintain harmonious relationships based on affinity. It often happens when two people are very much alike or have lots in common; a reason it is not always easy for professors to establish with students. Sometimes there is a big age difference between professors and students and other times they may have few (if any) shared interests. The author went on to state that there are good reasons for faculty to work on establishing rapport with students. The outcomes, based on research, include higher motivation, increased comfort, increased quality, satisfaction, enhanced communication, and trust. While rapport does not result in learning, it certainly helps to create conditions conducive to learning, things like higher motivation, increased comfort, and enhanced communication. Neither does teaching always result in learning, but like rapport, it is one of those factors that can contribute positively to learning. Factors for building rapport are respect, approachability, open communication, caring, and positive attitude. It is important to realize that rapport is not something developed by announcement; it is developed by actions that result from things teachers do. Weimer (2010) stated that the good news is knowing empirically what teachers can do to establish rapport; even better news is that the actions required aren't all that difficult to execute. According to Granitz, Koernig, and Harich (2009), rapport refers to when two people "click," and when it exists between faculty and students, it can improve learning and bestow other positive benefits. The authors developed a faculty-student model of rapport. It shows that approach, personality, and homophily factors serve as antecedents to the development of rapport. Student benefits such as enhanced learning, greater involvement, and greater communication are important outcomes of rapport.

Buskist and Saville (2001) reported that rapport contributed to effective teaching, but in their study found that only slightly more than half of the students reported having experienced rapport with a professor. Factors that the students identified as contributing to the development of rapport included showing a sense of humor, availability outside class time, encouraging class discussion, showing interest in them, knowing students' names, sharing personal insights and experiences, relating material in everyday terms, and understanding that students occasionally have problems that hinder course progress. The students reported that the most common positive effects of rapport on their academic behavior were increased enjoyment of the teacher and subject matter, motivation to come to class more often, and to pay more attention in class. The authors reported that rapport seems to facilitate both student motivation for

learning and their enjoyment of the course, and enhances student receptivity to what is being taught.

Wilson, Ryan, and Pugh (2010) showed where student reports led to a list of teacher qualities that build rapport. The qualities were, according to order, encouraging, open-mindedness, creative, interesting, accessible, happy, having a good personality, promoting class discussion, approachability, concern for students, and fairness.

Motivation and learning

Wang (2012) posited that motivation is very important when it comes to student learning. Students who have high motivation to achieve generally do well academically, whereas students with low motivation do not do well academically. For Halawah (2011), motivating college students is an essential goal for teachers and educators in higher education institutions. Effective learning in the classroom depends on the teacher's ability to maintain the interest that brought students to the course in the first place. The author discovered that learning appeared to be most compelling when the students were curious about topics and when the activity was appropriately challenging. Students expressed feeling proud, satisfied and important when they learned something new, acquired new skills, and when they shared this knowledge with other people. To encourage students to become self-motivated independent learners, instructors can give frequent, early, positive feedback that supports students' beliefs that they can do well. They can also ensure opportunities for students' success by assigning tasks that are neither too easy nor too difficult, help students find personal meaning and value in the material, and create an atmosphere that is open and positive and help students feel that they are valued members of a learning community. Halawah (2011) stated that most students respond positively to a well-organized course taught by an enthusiastic instructor who has a real interest in students and what they learn. Given the different factors affecting college students' lives, motivating them is an essential role of every teacher for a successful teaching-learning environment. Therefore, teachers need strategies that will help students build their self-esteem and confidence. Teachers who were open-minded, friendly, enthusiastic, and knowledgeable about students' names and interests demonstrated several of the personal qualities that motivated students the most. College teachers might enhance students' motivation by allowing student input and by maintaining a flexible class environment. The author indicated that active lessons connecting to the real world promote motivation and excitement for learning where students are treated as thinkers and doer. Remember, how these factors affect and in which direction are different from culture or context to another.

According to Lei (2010), motivation is an internal state that arouses learners, steers them in particular directions, and keeps them engaged in certain activities. It often determines whether and to what extent students actually learn a challenging task. Once college students have learned how to do something successfully, motivation is largely responsible for whether they continue to do it. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are the two major categories with which college students are engaged in the process of learning new knowledge and skills. The author goes on to evaluate the benefits and drawbacks of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in relation to student learning (achievement and performance) from the perspectives of college instructors.

Method

Courthouse visits and portfolio development

In February 2008, the author (accompanied by his wife, and sometimes, grandchildren) set out on an odyssey to visit all courthouses in the state of Mississippi. No time frame was set for completing the task. Initially, the intended benefits were personal, but they instantly turned professional as it was realized that the experience stood to impact the author's college teaching. Thought was given to a systematic way of collecting data on each courthouse. The portfolio was to include a photo with the name of the courthouse (either from the courthouse building or a marker on the grounds), a photo of the wife (and grandchildren when there) posed in front of the courthouse, a photo of the author (and grandchildren when there) posed in front of the courthouse, and an illustration outlining the county's location in the state. On the latter, the particular county was highlighted; then printed on the same were the county courthouse name, the city/town and its population, and the date of the visit.

The plan of action was to first identify or recognize available time to visit a courthouse or several of them. Thought was given to trying to cover adjacent counties on the same trip and to especially cover out-of-the-way counties to reduce the amount of drive time. A basic tool used was a current state map. It provided the counties, the city of the county seat/courthouse, and the city's population. It took a while to reach the final decision of what to include in the portfolio, so some backtracking had to take place to bring earlier portfolio entries up to current standards. Entries were generally made when a roll of film was processed. The original idea was to have one portfolio. But it was later realized that the material was too indispensable for one copy; there should be two duplicate portfolios, reserved at separate locations. The way the films were processed, there were still extra photos which went toward preparation of a third portfolio.

The original camera used was 35 millimeters. Later a digital camera was also used. It is advisable to use more than one camera in an undertaking such as this project. A malfunction using a single device can be devastating.

The first courthouse visit began on the hills of a professional conference. The author made a presentation at the National Association of African American Studies (NAAAS) conference in Baton Rouge, LA. The return home trip on February 13, 2008 was mapped to cover a few courthouses in the mid-southwest portion of Mississippi, starting with Wilkinson County Courthouse in Woodville; then to Amite and other adjacent counties. But "believe it or not" occurred. In Amite County, it was discovered that the camera was empty of film. So there were no pictures of Wilkinson County Courthouse. The 35 millimeter camera was film loaded and the Amite County Courthouse in Liberty (population 633) became the first official courthouse visit of record. On this same date the Pike County Courthouse in Magnolia (population 2,071) was visited. These courthouses were real nice buildings and served as motivation for continuation of the project. A detailed accounting of all the courthouse visits is beyond the scope of this manuscript.

The courthouse visitation goal was reached when the author and wife arrived at the Hinds County-Raymond Courthouse on August 21, 2011. This was the 92nd

courthouse of the 92 courthouses among the 82 counties in the state of Mississippi that they had visited. The couple had gone “over hills and over dales” to reach their goal that was begun more than three years ago (Ruben & Bessie, 2011). However, putting the finishing touch on the portfolios continued, and they remain a work in progress as the author studies ways to make them as available as possible and technologically interactive for class use and other persons of potential interest.

The portfolios are alike in terms of the four major components, three pictures and an illustration. Figure 1 is a sample portfolio. In the example, the identification marker contains considerable information of interest. From it a person can learn a lot about the role of key people and construction of the facility. Each courthouse seems beautiful in its own way and is often the centerpiece of the town or city. The illustration specifies the location of the county in the state, the city’s population, and the date we visited the courthouse.

Class use of the portfolios

The initial class for use of the county courthouse portfolios was an exceptional children course with 30 teacher education candidates that was taught by the author. Early in the session the professor distributed a survey form (Residential Status of Students) to ascertain from state residents the county in which they graduated high school and from out-of-state students the state and city in which they graduated high school. Each student was also requested to state something special about their county or city/state. This information was tabulated and used to personalize distribution of the county portfolios and to use as feasible the special information that they provided about their county/state in subsequent discussions.

Some “ice breakers” were used to call the portfolios to the attention of the students. A standard procedure in the class was to have students introduce themselves, indicating their major, hometown, and other information that they would like to share. The professors would at times make mention of something in their hometown that was surprising to the students. He would then ask “If I demonstrate that I have walked a mile in your shoes, will you join me in running a marathon of children in our schools?” Of course, no direct response was solicited.

Results

Visiting the courthouses was met with remarkable success. There was so much to see and to learn. There were also opportunities to meet and talk with interesting people. Some gave us information that they figured we might not know, for example, pointing out that some counties had two courthouses. On the very last visit, a county resident saw us looking and taking pictures, she made the block and asked to take a photo with the two of us on it in front of the courthouse. She also encouraged us to contact the editor of the local paper as she would be interested in the story. We followed her recommendation and the project did get coverage (Ruben & Bessie, 2011). We also came upon some good food as we traveled the state.

Figure 1: Sample courthouse portfolio

Rankin County Courthouse

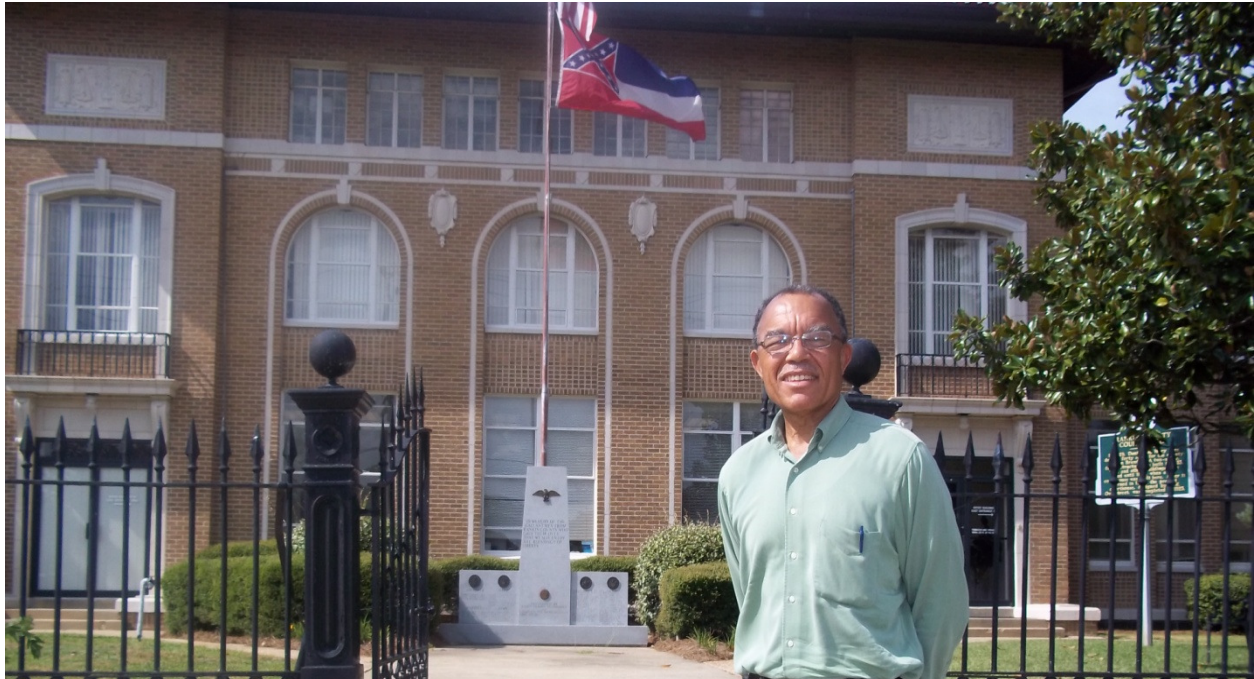
Identification Marker



View 1



Rankin County Courthouse – View 2



Rankin County (Courthouse) Demographics, Visitation Date, Etc.
Location: Brandon; Population: 16,436; Date Visited: August 10, 2011



Image from http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/maps/mississippi_map.html

There were some let downs along the way: unknowingly, one time pictures were supposedly taken but the camera had no film in it; there still is one courthouse without the three photos (Franklin County Courthouse); a few courthouses (for example, Copiah and Covington) have poor exposure as it was almost dark when we visited them (some thought was to revisit them, but leaving them as they are show authenticity in the visits); and in some instances, trying to visit too many courthouses in one day wore our nerves a little thin.

There was reasonable spread among counties for in-state residents (see Table 1). Forty-three percent were from Hinds County and the other in-state residents were spread across twelve (12) counties. Ten percent of the students were from out-of-state, representing three different states (Florida, Illinois, and Tennessee).

Table 1
Residential Status of Students (N = 30)

	Number	Percent
Mississippi residents	27	90%
<u>Counties</u>		
Coahoma	1	3
Copiah	1	3
Grenada	1	3
Harrison	1	3
Hinds	13	43
Jones	1	3
Leake	1	3
Leflore	1	3
Lincoln	2	7
Madison	2	7
Rankin	1	3
Scott	1	3
Yazoo	1	3
Out-of-state residents	3	10
<u>State (City)</u>		
Florida (Miami)	1	3
Illinois (Chicago)	1	3
Tennessee (Memphis)	1	3

A compilation was made of the "Major things students remembered about their county/state" (see Table 2). Most of the comments were positive in nature; they referenced such things as people, nature, facilities, weather, and even being home of a celebrity. Only one comment was considered a complaint (roads are terrible). An out-of-state resident heralded her city as a tourist attraction.

Table 2
Major Things Students Remembered about their County/City, State

Mississippi residents

- Beautiful trees (H2)
- Nice place, friendly people (H2)
- Peaceful (R)
- Good school and lunch program (H2)
- Leaving, returning (H2)
- State Capital located here, hosts state fair (H2)
- Elected first Black police chief, prayer an issue in school (L2)
- Beautiful city, friendly and caring people (M)
- Day nephews were born (L2)
- Friendly town (C2)
- Bought my first home (M)
- Birthplace of Leontyne Price (J)
- Great place to reside, people friendly (H2)
- It means red panther (C)
- Lived across from the school (H2)
- Recovered from devastating tornado (Y)
- Roads are terrible (H)
- Going to the car show (H)
- Square, central; in distance of local places in state (L)

Out-of-state residents

- Beautiful downtown (CI)
 - Mixed races, fun and interesting, always something to do (MT)
 - Great tourist attractions, huge melting pot of cultures (MF)
-

The classroom experience was exciting. To sometimes keep the class's attention, the professor would make a statement and ask the class if it were "fact" or "fiction?" When the professor first stated that he had visited all courthouses in Mississippi to walk a mile in their shoes, because he sensed that one day they would come to the university and be in his class and asked, "fact" or "fiction," they did not much believe it was true. But afterward, it was an atmosphere where nothing appeared impossible.

The students rallied to the information about their county. They discovered that others were from their county and that they should get to know each other. Even more surprising was the notion that they wanted their county to be best represented in the class in terms of performance.

Particular indicators showed that rapport between the professor and students was associated with achievement (see Table 3). Class attendance and participation were at a very acceptable level. On daily average, 92% of the students were in attendance. Individual student attendance ranged from 18% to 100%. An overwhelming majority of the students purchased the textbook (87%). Collective

assignment submission was 90%; individual submissions ranged from 20% to 100%. Performance achievement was overall barely acceptable (71%). However individual performance ranged from 13% to 92%. As for out-of-class relationship, the professor experienced an increase in requests to complete recommendation forms and to advise in the search for specific information.

Table 3
Students' Performance on Achievement Indicators (N = 30)

	Number Possible/Actual	Percent
Class attendance	330 / 303	92
Textbook	30 / 26	87
Assignment submission	150 / 135	90
Performance	15,240 / 10,840	71

Discussion and Summary

It took a labor of love to engage in a project of the magnitude of this one. But many of the tenets of motivation discussed in this manuscript manifested themselves. If the author had been extrinsically motivated, no one could have paid him enough to make the pursuit. But under the intrinsic motivation mode, once started, a mighty force could not have stopped him. The courthouse odyssey perhaps ranks among the most exhilarating ventures that combined personal interest and professional life, in which the author has engaged. Then when the portfolios were developed and brought to the classroom, and the rapport between the professor and students reached new heights, it all was made worthwhile.

Obviously, visiting 92 courthouses is not for every professional. But this manuscript can be used as a reference to enhance faculty-student rapport and serve as encouragement to develop other strategies for motivating students to achieve success.

In summary, the author visited all courthouses in the state of Mississippi, developed portfolios for each, and strategically used them in the classroom to develop rapport and motivate college students to achieve excellence in their teacher education coursework. The initial use of the strategy was considered a success, in terms of specific indicators (class attendance, acquired textbooks, assignment submission, and to a modest extent, performance achievement). There appeared to be room for making the material more accessible and thereby, an opportunity to increase its utility.

References

- Buskist, W., & Saville, B.K. (March, 2001). Creating positive emotional contexts for enhancing teaching and learning. *APS Observer*, 12-13, 19.
- Cimer, S.O. (2011). The effect of portfolios on students' learning: student teachers'

- views. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 34(2), 161-176.
- Definition of courthouse. (n.d.). <http://www.merriam.webster.com>
- Fiedler, R.L., Mullen, L., & Finnegan, M. (2009). Portfolios in context: A comparative study in two preservice teacher education programs. *Journal of Research on Technology in Education*, 42(2), 99-122.
- Granitz, N.A., Koernig, S.K., & Harich, K.R. (2009). Now it's personal: Antecedents and outcomes of rapport between business faculty and their students. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 31(1), 52-65.
- Halawah, I. (2011). Factors influencing college students' motivation to learn from students' perspective. *Education*, 132(2), 379-390.
- Jones, E. (2010). A professional practice portfolio for quality learning. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 64(3), 292-312.
- Keen, J. (01/17/2011). Old courthouses standing trial. *USA Today*, 03a.
- Lei, S.A. (2010). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation: Evaluating benefits and drawbacks from college instructors' perspectives. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, 37(2), 153-160.
- Ruben & Bessie. (21/15/2011). Raymond courthouse visit makes 100% for couple. *Hinds County Gazette*, 170(37), 6.
- Wang, M. (2012). Effects of cooperative learning on achievement motivation of female university students. *Asian Social Science*, 8(15), 108-114.
- Weimer, M. (2010). Building rapport with your students. *The Teaching Professor*, 23(6), 2.
- Wilson, J.H., Ryan, R.G., & Pugh, J.L. (2010). Professor–student rapport scale predicts student outcomes. *Teaching of Psychology*, 37, 246-251.