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College Students' Trauma and Stress Enhance Benefits of Warm-Tone Syllabus

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Abstract. A high percentage of students enter college with prior trauma, and trauma-informed practices are increasingly recognized as valuable in higher education. We examined if the tone of a syllabus would interact with levels of trauma or stress to impact participants' perceptions of the instructor, willingness to seek help, and self-efficacy. We tested a 2 (tone: warm vs. cold) X 2 (trauma: low vs. high) experimental design and a 2 (tone: warm vs. cold) X 2 (stress: low vs. high) experimental design. We recruited current college students and asked them to read a syllabus for a hypothetical class, which varied in tone. Students indicated their willingness to communicate with the instructor, as well as perceptions of their classroom self-efficacy and instructor attributes. Students then responded to scales that assessed their current stress and past trauma. Results revealed that in the high trauma condition, students attributed the most positive attributes to the warm-syllabus instructor and the most negative attributes to the cold-syllabus instructor. Student trauma did not interact with syllabus tone to predict perceived self-efficacy or willingness to communicate. Student stress did not interact with syllabus tone to predict instructor attributes or perceived self-efficacy; however, in the warm condition, high stress students revealed the greatest willingness to communicate with the instructor. The use of a warm syllabus as a tool to create a supportive learning environment may benefit all college students, but particularly those experiencing high levels of stress or trauma.

Keywords: syllabus, trauma, stress, instructor attributes

The syllabus plays an important role in the college classroom, typically serving as one of the first data points that students receive about a specific class and providing information about policies, grading, format, and expectations for the class (Richmann et al., 2020). In addition to this explicit information, students also can form intuitive impressions of the class and instructor based on their perceptions of the language and tone of the syllabus. These perceptions are worthy of investigation because they have the potential to impact students' immediate interest, motivation, and behavior (e.g., Tamayo et al., 2022; Waggoner et al., 2018).

A growing body of research has revealed that a highly influential factor is the tone of the syllabus. Researchers have manipulated tone in different ways, but despite the slightly different emphasis, an overall pattern emerges where language that intentionally fosters student-instructor connection and student empowerment

renders beneficial outcomes. One example of this body of research focuses on syllabi that are termed "learner-centered." Richmond et al. (2016) provided participants with one of two syllabi: learner-centered, which included collaboration, opportunities for revision, and focus on learning outcomes, or teacher-centered, which was policy-oriented, devoid of learning outcomes, and emphasized student independence. Participants who provided the learner-centered syllabus perceived the instructor as having more desirable traits, such as being caring, enthusiastic, creative, and receptive (Richmond et al., 2016). Subsequently, Wheeler et al. (2019) reported that a learner-centered syllabus, compared to a traditional format, led to students rating the syllabus as more useful, the class as containing more useful information, and the instructor as being more willing to help them succeed.

Utilizing the tenets of Self-Determination Theory, Young-Jones et al. (2021) also examined student empowerment by providing participants with either a syllabus characterized by autonomy-supportive language ("Attendance is beneficial for this class") or controlling language ("Attendance is MANDATORY"). The researchers demonstrated that the autonomy-supportive syllabus elicited a greater willingness to take the course but did not elicit higher levels of intrinsic motivation. However, in a similar study, Tamayo et al. (2022) found that participants reported more personal motivation, along with more positive impressions of the instructor and expectations of the class, after exposure to an autonomy-supported syllabus, compared to a syllabus with controlling language.

Another manner in which researchers have examined syllabus tone is through a focus on the 'friendliness' of the language. Harnish and Bridges (2011) manipulated a syllabus to reflect either a friendly tone, using positive and personalized language ("I hope you …"; "I welcome you to…"), or an unfriendly tone, relying on a factual and straightforward presentation of the same information ("If you need to…"; "I expect you to…"). The researchers found that the friendly syllabus elicited perceptions of the female instructor as being more likeable and motivated, in addition to the class being easier. Researchers subsequently supported these outcomes by demonstrating that regardless of instructor gender, a friendly, versus an unfriendly, syllabus tone resulted in participants viewing the instructor more positively and as equally competent (Waggoner Denton & Veloso, 2018). Even a subtle manipulation in the tone of the syllabus can influence student perceptions. For example, adding a short statement at the top of a syllabus, expressing instructor enthusiasm and availability, resulted in participants being more motivated to take a hypothetical class and more willing to seek help in that class (LaPiene et al., 2022).

Gurung and Galardi (2022) continued this vein of research by manipulating the warmth of presented syllabi. The warm syllabus included phrases such as: I'm excited; I understand; I welcome; Feel free to discuss; We're all in this together. The cold syllabus lacked such phrases, utilizing instead: If you need; I expect; Come prepared; If you contact me. A secondary manipulation was the inclusion, or absence, of a statement normalizing the process of seeking help related to mental health. Both the warm tone and mental health statement increased participants'

willingness to contact the hypothetical instructor for assistance, with the warm tone having the greatest influence (Gurung & Galardi, 2022).
A willingness to communicate with an instructor has many benefits for students. Direct student-teacher contact enables instructors to display characteristics associated with high impact teaching, such as care for students, establishment of rapport and expertise credibility (Xie & Derakshan, 2021). Additionally, students who feel comfortable communicating with their instructors experience greater interest in learning, higher self-efficacy, and more school loyalty (Priadi, 2020; Thornberg et al., 2023; Yildirim, 2021). Alawamleh et al. (2022) found that one reason students preferred face-to-face classes over online classes during COVID-19 was increased opportunity to communicate with professors, which facilitated material mastery and reduced feelings of isolation. Even in online classes, students' willingness to communicate with their instructors improves students' classroom well-being (Xiao et al., 2023).

Meaningfully to instructors, while syllabus language can change students' perceptions of the instructor and willingness to communicate with them, it does not appear to predict recollection or perceptions of the syllabus itself (Nusbaum et al., 2021). In other words, the explicit information about class structure seems to maintain across syllabus modifications. However, those same modifications have the power to drive perceptions of many other aspects of the classroom, including perceptions students have of the instructor and themselves.

The previous studies clearly documented consistent and beneficial outcomes related to intentionally worded syllabi for college students in general. However, their emphasis was primarily on the content of the syllabus rather than attributes of the student perceiver. Such an examination may be helpful as researchers have demonstrated that college student characteristics impact perceptions of instructors and courses. For example, students from lower SES backgrounds are more likely to report feelings of not belonging in their college classrooms (Stephens et al., 2014). Female students are more likely to perceive gender bias from instructors in STEM fields, which can lower their motivation and engagement (Walton et al., 2015). Students from minority groups are more likely to report feeling isolated or marginalized in their college classrooms (Pascarella et al., 2004) and to report perceptions of discrimination by instructors (Solórzano et al., 2000). There is also some limited evidence that mental health status may impact college students' perceptions of instructors. For example, Schussler et al. (2021) found that college students with higher anxiety were more likely to perceive instructors as unsupportive.

The relationship between student mental health and instructor perceptions merits closer examination, as college campuses are seeing a rise in students experiencing and seeking help for mental health concerns (Siegel et al., 2022). Even without a specific accompanying diagnosis, the majority of current young adults enter college with past trauma exposure (Cusack et al., 2019), creating a responsibility for higher education instructors to operate more intentionally with trauma-informed strategies (Hunter, 2022; Wells, 2023). With this context in mind, we examined student and

syllabus characteristics in conjunction, exploring whether trauma exposure predicted intensified positive outcomes related to warm syllabi.

In line with previous research, we expected to find a main effect for the tone of the syllabus, with participants reporting a more positive perception of the instructor, more willingness to talk with the instructor, and more self-efficacy in the warm, versus cold, condition. However, the focus of our study was on potential interactions between syllabus tone and student-trauma levels. There is evidence that individuals with a history of trauma are higher in interpersonal sensitivity and thus are more attuned to cues related to social acceptance or rejection (Slanbekova et al., 2019). They also seem to place a greater value on receiving social support and warmth from others (Cloitre et al., 2009). This emphasized value may be because warm interpersonal interactions help to build a sense of safety and trust, which is particularly important for those with a history of trauma who may struggle with feelings of alienation and distrust (Cloitre et al., 2011).

We also examined the impact of stress on student responses to syllabus tone, to potentially differentiate stress effects from trauma effects. Experiencing stress as a college student is a natural and expected experience, often tied to academic pressures or other common challenges inherent to college life such as financial concerns and social relationships (Barbayannis et al., 2022; Misra et al., 2000). In contrast, trauma involves events that are intensely threatening or overwhelming, such as physical or sexual assault, a serious accident, or a devastating loss (Karam et al., 2014). Trauma is associated with serious and lasting detrimental mental health outcomes including anxiety and depression (Breslau et al., 2014). It can alter perceptions of safety (Janoff-Bulman, 1992), making trauma survivors more sensitive to interpersonal cues (Slanbekova et al., 2019). For this reason, we expected students with stress to benefit from, but have less extreme reactions to, warmth of syllabi, compared to those with relatively high prior trauma exposure.

We hypothesized that compared to the other conditions, participants in the warm syllabus condition with high levels of trauma would: (1) perceive the instructor as having the most positive attributes, (2) report the highest levels of self-efficacy, and (3) report the greatest willingness to communicate with the instructor. We also hypothesized that compared to the other conditions, participants in the cold syllabus condition with high levels of trauma would perceive the instructor as having the most negative attributes.

We expected stress, being more commonplace, to serve a different function than trauma. We expected students with stress to benefit from, but have less extreme reactions to, warmth of syllabi, compared to those with relatively high prior trauma exposure. Thus, we hypothesized only a main effect for the warm syllabus, compared to the cold syllabus condition, regardless of stress level. We hypothesized that participants in the warm syllabus condition would: (1) perceive the instructor as having more positive attributes, (2) perceive the instructor as having fewer negative attributes, (3) report higher levels of self-efficacy, and (4) report a greater willingness to communicate with the instructor.

Method

Participants

The participants were 102 currently enrolled college students. Prior to data analysis, eight participants were dropped from the study because of at least one incorrect answer on our manipulation check items. Thus, our sample consisted of 94 participants with a mean age of 19.76 (*SD* = 2.47). Sixty students were women, 25 were men, eight reported other identities, and one chose not to respond. Fifty-nine participants were Caucasian, 23 were Black American, eight were Hispanic, three were Asian, and one reported "other." Sixty-two participants identified as heterosexual, ten as homosexual, 12 as bisexual, and ten as other sexual identities.

We randomly assigned participants to one of two experimental conditions and then further categorized participants based on their trauma and stress scores. We had four conditions related to trauma: warm syllabus with low trauma (*n* = 22), warm syllabus with high trauma (n = 24), cold syllabus with low trauma (*n* = 24), cold syllabus with high trauma (*n* = 24). We had four conditions related to stress: warm syllabus with low stress (*n* = 23), warm syllabus with high stress (*n* = 23), cold syllabus with low stress (*n* = 23), cold syllabus with high stress (*n* = 25).

This study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board. Participants were recruited through college classrooms and offered extra credit for participation in the study. Participation was voluntary.

Materials

We randomly assigned participants to one of two experimental conditions where they were given a syllabus from a hypothetical class taught by "Dr. J. Smith." In one condition, we provided participants with a "warm" syllabus. In the second condition, we provided participants with a "cold" syllabus. The syllabi were modified from Gurung and Galardi (2022). One modification was to shorten the syllabi slightly, for example, by combining course descriptions and course goals. This modification was based on Lightner and Benander (2018), who found a student preference for syllabus brevity. A second modification was to delete the statement normalizing mental health help, which was a manipulation in the original Gurung and Galardi (2022) study and not replicated here.

We instructed participants to put away all media and other materials that they may have brought with them to the testing situation. We then gave the verbal instructions: "Please read the following syllabus carefully. We will be asking you questions about how much you remember about the information you have read. You will have four minutes to read the syllabus. You can look it over as many times as you like during that time period. You will have the full four minutes to read the syllabus before we continue."

After the four-minute period, we distributed the survey. Participants first encountered two multiple-choice items that served as manipulation checks. One

item asked what type of class was being described on the syllabus, with four response options (Introductory Psychology, Introductory Biology, Developmental Psychology, Developmental Biology). The second item, taken directly from Gurung and Galardi (2022), asked participants to identify the analogy used in the syllabus to describe the instructor's role in the course. The answer choices were a biker going for a ride, a chef serving a meal, and a bee pollinating flowers. Participants had to answer both items correctly (e.g., Introductory Psychology; chef serving a meal) in order to be included in the data sample.

The survey then had the instructions: "After reading the syllabus and getting a sense for what the faculty member is like, how likely are you to reach out to them in each of the following cases?" Participants were presented with eight situations. Five were taken from Gurung and Galardi (2022): with a class assignment; when feeling low; having a personal issue, such as argument with a friend or family member; a medical issue, such as strep throat; to get information about a campus resource, such as the counseling center. We added three additional situations common in the classroom: to discuss help needed in the classroom other than a class assignment; having life issues that caused you to miss class; with concerns about another student's behavior in class. Participants indicated their likelihood of reaching out to the instructor on a 5-point scale where 1 represented "extremely unlikely" and 5 represented "extremely likely." We obtained a reliability of .88, and the higher the mean score, the more willing the participant was to communicate with the professor.

We instructed participants to evaluate their perceptions of the instructor "based off of the course syllabus." They were presented with 18 attributes, reflecting a combination of items used by Gurung and Galardi (2022) and items commonly identified as describing effective teachers (e.g., Clement & Rencewigg, 2020; Ida, 2017; Ruzgar, 2021). Eleven attributes were positive and five were negative (see Appendix A for the full list). We added one additional positive item, warm, and one additional negative item, cold, to directly assess the effectiveness of our "warm" and "cold" experimental conditions. This addition resulted in 12 positive items and six negative items. Participants responded to each item on a 5-point scale where 1 represented "strongly disagree" and 5 represented "strongly agree." We aggregated the responses to obtain a score for positive attributes and a score for negative attributes. We obtained a reliability alpha of .93 for the positive attributes and .89 for the negative attributes.

On the survey, we asked participants, "Based off of the course syllabus how do you feel about your ability to do well in the class?" Participants then completed the eight-item New General Self-Efficacy Scale (Chen et al., 2001). We modified this scale to refer specifically to the classroom described in the syllabus. For example, the original scale item was, "Even when things are tough, I can perform quite well." Our modified item read, "Even when things are tough, I would be able to perform quite well in this class." Responses were made on a 5-point scale where 1 represented "strongly disagree" and 5 represented "strongly agree." A higher score indicated a greater perception of self-efficacy. Published reliabilities for this scale range from .85 to .88 (Chen et al., 2001), and we obtained a reliability of .92.

We then asked participants to complete the 21-item University Stress Scale (Stallman & Hurst, 2016). This scale assesses the degree to which students have experienced a set of stressful life events in the past month. Examples include failing an important class, experiencing a serious illness or injury, or losing someone close to them. Responses were made on a 4-point scale where 1 represented "not at all" and 4 represented "constantly." A higher score indicated a greater degree of stress over the past month. The published reliability is .82 (Stallman & Hurst, 2016), and we obtained a reliability of .86.

Next, we asked participants to complete the 19-item Trauma and Life Events Checklist (Carr et al., 2018). This scale quantifies the extent to which individuals experienced traumatic events at some point in their past. Events include exposure to war, bullying or harassment at school, and witnessing physical violence in their home. Participants had the opportunity to add an additional traumatic event, creating a total of 20 items on this scale. The original response options were a dichotomous "yes" or "no." Carr et al. (2018) reported an internal reliability for this checklist as equal to or over .70, although respondents were not expected to have experienced every event on the list. We modified the response options to capture a more nuanced degree of exposure to each traumatic event. Thus, participants indicated the frequency with which they encountered each event on a 5-point scale where 1 represented "never" and 5 represented "happened to me very often." We calculated a mean score, with a higher number indicating a greater exposure to trauma for that participant. We obtained a reliability of .87.

Last, participants responded to commonly used demographic questions that assessed age, gender, race, and sexual orientation.

Procedure

The full procedures can be seen in Appendix B. We recruited current college students who completed the experimental study in a group setting. After reading the informed consent, participants were given four minutes to read a randomly assigned syllabus. Participants then completed the survey materials and stapled the syllabus they had read to the survey.

Results

The mean for the Trauma and Life Events Checklist (Carr et al., 2018) was 2.0 (*SD* = .47), with a range of 1.24 to 3.38. We identified a natural split in the data at a mean of 2.20 with approximately half of the participants scoring above to populate the high trauma condition (n = 48) and half of the participants scoring below to populate the low trauma condition (n = 46). The overall mean for the University Stress Scale (Stallman & Hurst, 2016) was 2.20 (*SD* = .66), with a range of 1.0 to 4.05. We identified a natural split in the data at a mean of 1.90 with approximately half of the participants scoring above to populate the high stress condition (n = 48) and participants scoring below to populate the low stress condition (n = 46).

The mean for perceived negative attributes of the instructor was 2.47 (*SD* = .83), with a range of 1.17 to 4.83. The mean for the New General Self-Efficacy Scale (Chen et al., 2001) was 3.82 (*SD* = .67), with a range of 2.13 to 5.0. The mean for perceived positive attributes of the instructor was 3.73 (*SD* = .77), with a range of 1.67 to 5.0. The mean for participants' willingness to communicate with the instructor was 3.24 (*SD* = .90), with a range of 1.13 to 4.88.

Trauma

See Table 1 for means and standard deviations. A 2(condition: warm vs. cold) X 2(trauma: low vs. high) MANOVA revealed a significant interaction for positive attributes of the instructor, $F(1, 94) = 7.05$, $p = .009$, $\eta^2 = .07$. Participants high in trauma gave the highest positive attribution scores to the warm syllabus instructor and the lowest positive attribution scores to the cold syllabus instructor. There was a similar pattern and significant interaction for perceptions of negative attributes of the professor, $F(1, 94) = 4.03$, $p = .05$, $\eta^2 = .04$. Participants high in trauma gave the highest negative attribution scores to the cold syllabus instructor and the lowest negative attribution scores to the warm syllabus instructor. These represent small effects.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations Across Warm/Cold Syllabus Conditions and Low/High Trauma Conditions.

	Warm Syllabus		Cold Syllabus	
	Low Trauma	High Trauma	Low Trauma	High Trauma
Positive Attributes*	4.04 (.48)	4.26 (.43)	3.56 (.75)	3.09 (.77)
Negative Attributes**	2.06 (.52)	1.87 (.61)	2.78 (.78)	3.12 (.71)
Self-Efficacy	4.11 (.56)	4.11 (.60)	3.64 (.58)	3.45 (.73)
Willingness to Communicate	3.53 (.66)	3.93 (.58)	2.82 (.89)	2.72 (.85)

* $p < .01$
** $p < .05$

There was no interaction for trauma (low/high) and condition (warm/cold) regarding students' perception of classroom self-efficacy [$F(1, 94) = .58$, $p = .45$, *ns*] and no main effect for participants' level of trauma on their perceived self-efficacy [$F(1, 94) = .57$, $p = .45$, *ns*].

We also found no significant interaction between trauma (low/high) and condition (warm/cold) related to participants' overall willingness to communicate with the instructor, $F(1, 94) = 2.54$, $p = .11$, *ns*. We found no main effect for level of trauma, $F(1, 94) = .92$, $p = .34$, *ns*.

Stress

See Table 2 for means and standard deviations. A 2 (condition: warm vs. cold) X 2 (stress: low vs. high) MANOVA did not produce any significant interactions related to professor positive attributes [$F(1, 94) = 1.30$, $p = .73$, *ns*], negative attributes [$F(1, 94) = 1.32$, $p = .96$, *ns*], or students' self-efficacy [$F(1, 94) = 2.96$, $p = .09$, *ns*]. We also found no main effects for stress related to professor positive attributes [$F(1, 94) = .12$, $p = .26$, *ns*], negative attributes [$F(1, 94) = .00$, $p = .25$, *ns*], or students' self-efficacy [$F(1, 94) = .35$, $p = .55$, *ns*].

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations Across Warm/Cold Syllabus Conditions and Low/High Stress Conditions.

	Warm Syllabus		Cold Syllabus	
	Low Stress	High Stress	Low Stress	High Stress
Positive Attributes	4.06 (.45)	4.26 (.47)	3.38 (.83)	3.28 (.76)
Negative Attributes	2.05 (.54)	1.88 (.61)	2.87 (.72)	3.02 (.80)
Self-Efficacy	4.04 (.52)	4.18 (.59)	3.70 (.61)	3.41 (.70)
Willingness to Communicate*	3.45 (.67)	4.03 (.47)	2.97 (.95)	2.60 (.74)

* $p < .01$

We found a significant interaction for participants' willingness to communicate with the instructor, $F(1, 94) = 10.05$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .10$, representing a medium effect. Participants high in stress were most willing to communicate with the warm syllabus instructor and least willing to communicate with the cold syllabus instructor.

Warm/Cold Condition Main Effects

We found large main effects related to the syllabus condition on all variables examined. Compared to students who viewed the cold syllabus, students who viewed the warm syllabus perceived the instructor to have more positive attributes [$F(1, 94) = 37.68$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .30$], the instructor to have fewer negative attributes [$F(1, 94) = 49.14$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .35$], and themselves to have higher self-efficacy in the class [$F(1, 94) = 20.18$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .18$]. Participants who encountered the warm syllabus were significantly more willing to communicate with the course instructor, $F(1, 94) = 37.40$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .29$.

Discussion

Students who viewed the warm, versus cold, syllabus perceived the instructor more positively. These flattering perceptions match previous research demonstrating the

power of syllabus warmth and associated increases in communication, motivation, and retention (Harnish & Bridges, 2011; Richmond et al., 2016; Tamayo et al., 2022; Waggoner et al., 2018). The benefits of this first impression may be long-lasting, as Laws et al. (2010) found that the impressions that students form on the first day of the semester tend to be similar to their perceptions at the end of the semester.

Trauma

Supporting our hypothesis, our data further suggests that individuals with a history of trauma might be even more receptive to an instructor who conveys warmth and approachability through the course syllabus. Participants with higher trauma in the cold syllabus condition reported the most negative professor traits, and participants with higher trauma in the warm syllabus condition reported the most positive professor traits. Prior research suggests that those with (versus without) a history of trauma place a greater value on receiving social support and warmth from others (Cloitre et al., 2011). High levels of warmth may serve as a mechanism to help overcome the social discomfort and interpersonal wariness that characterize traumatized individuals (Fredman et al., 2017; Slanbekova et al., 2019) and build a sense of safety and trust, thereby reducing their anxiety (Cloitre et al., 2011). Wells (2023) found that undergraduate students, even those without trauma backgrounds, perceived trauma-informed classroom practices as important to them. To support these values, teachers can incorporate supportive words into the syllabus such as welcome, understand, and please. Unfortunately, many syllabi emphasize course expectations rather than attending to students' social and emotional expectations (Gin et al., 2021).

Although past trauma impacted participants' perceptions of the professor, it did not influence their perceived self-efficacy in the classroom. This outcome contradicted our hypothesis. In fact, all participants reported high levels of self-efficacy, with those in the warm, versus cold, condition being even more certain of their future success. One possible explanation relates to the anticipatory nature of the measure. We asked participants to imagine their future success in a hypothetical classroom. It is not uncommon for students to hold self-enhancing beliefs characterized by unrealistic optimism, especially when making predictions about the future (Ruthig et al., 2022; Shepperd et al., 1996; Weinstein, 1980). Even given students' possible overestimation of their abilities, a warm-toned syllabus increased feelings of self-efficacy. Higher student self-efficacy predicts increased academic performance, learning, and resilience (Gurung et al., 2023; Pei & O'Brien, 2023; Reichel et al., 2023). It is worth noting that a warm syllabus increases self-efficacy even without requiring a specific reference to students' efficacy in the class; thus, instructors can achieve multiple benefits by simply being thoughtful about tone.

We also hypothesized that the warm syllabus would result in high trauma participants reporting a greater willingness to communicate with the instructor. The interaction effect did not reach significance, although the data did show the predicted trend. Overall, our participants viewed the instructor as a generally supportive person, with high trauma students reporting the most positive instructor

perceptions; this outcome may also explain why high trauma did not decrease students' willingness to communicate with the instructor. Communication with instructors offers multiple benefits to students, including higher learning motivation, self-efficacy, and material mastery (Alawamleh et al., 2022; Priadi, 2020; Yildirim, 2021).

In a similar study, Gurung and Galardi (2022) found that warm syllabi that included statements normalizing the use of mental health resources increased students' willingness to discuss personal needs with the instructor. This outcome offers useful insight, as instructors may best serve students by not only incorporating warm language but also providing information about trauma-relevant resources.

Stress

In contrast to our trauma data and supporting our hypothesis, participants' stress levels did not interact with the syllabus condition to predict their perceptions of the professor or their perceived self-efficacy. The warm syllabus elicited more positive perceptions on the instructor and higher levels of self-efficacy, regardless of stress level. Stress is a common element of college students' experience and, thus, may not be a salient enough variable to have impacted perceptions to the extent that trauma did. A significantly impactful factor, such as past trauma, may be required to override much of the generalized responsiveness to the warm-toned syllabus.

Contradicting our expectations, we found that stress interacted with syllabus condition to influence participants' expressed willingness to communicate with the instructor. Participants in the high stress condition with the warm syllabus were most willing to communicate. This finding is consistent with previous research demonstrating the power of tone on typical (non-traumatized) college students' intended interactions with hypothetical instructors (Gurung & Galardi, 2022; LaPiene et al., 2022); however, our data suggests that highly stressed students may be even more responsive to the warm tone in regard to their intended communication. One possible explanation of this finding emerges from evidence that students high in stress are also more likely to be high in academic entitlement, including externalized responsibility (Barton & Hirsch, 2015; Fletcher et al., 2020). Perhaps, our participants reflected a tendency for stressed and entitled students to desire communication with their instructors in order get external help with their stress-inducing concerns.

Implications for Practice

It is worth noting that students, either high in stress or trauma, who received a warm syllabus showed relatively strong willingness to communicate with the instructor. This suggests that the tone of the syllabus can play a key role in creating an environment where students feel comfortable reaching out for support. Instructors, in any discipline, can take advantage of this favorable outcome and create syllabus warmth by using phrases that indicate enthusiasm, concern, and availability: I welcome; I'm excited; I understand; Please feel free to; We're a team; I care. Moreover, the intentional development of warm syllabi may be

particularly helpful for online instructors who often have limited face-to-face contact with students.

Knowing that a warm tone increases stressed students' willingness to talk with the professor may have useful application beyond the start of the semester and the syllabus. Instructors can predict stressful points in the semester, such as exams, or activities that can be stressful, such as group work. During those situations, instructors might thoughtfully utilize warm language when communicating with students in person, over e-mail, and in instructions. Furthermore, when providing feedback on assignments, phrasing constructive criticism in a kind and supportive tone may increase students' understanding and acceptance of feedback. These strategies may encourage communication at the very times that students are likely to need support and information.

Limitations and Conclusion

One of the limitations of our data is that we used a median split to categorize participants into low and high trauma and stress groups. We anticipate that we may have seen even stronger effects if we had used upper and lower quadrants to identify students experiencing more extreme levels of stress and trauma. Our findings are also limited in that they focus on the immediate effects of first impressions on student judgments and perceptions. Future researchers may want to investigate whether the first impressions found in this study translate to students' long-term perceptions, motivation, anxiety levels, or performance. Recall that Tamayo et al. (2022) found that positive impressions of an instructor, elicited by an autonomy-centered syllabus, also corresponded to higher levels of personal motivation. Researchers could explore whether such a relation exists for college students arriving with a trauma background. Additionally, future researchers may want to investigate more specifically what type of situations (e.g., academic versus personal) increase students' willingness to communicate with a professor.

In sum and matching previous research, viewing a warm-tone, versus cold-tone, syllabus resulted in college students perceiving a hypothetical instructor more positively, expressing more self-efficacy, and expressing more desire to communicate with the instructor. We expanded this existing knowledge by including student characteristics in the examination of syllabus perceptions. Results revealed that in the high trauma condition, a warm-syllabus improved perceptions of the instructor, and in the high stress condition, a warm-syllabus increased students' willingness to communicate with the instructor. These findings highlight the value of considering student characteristics to enhance our understanding of the effects of syllabus tone on student outcomes. Today's students tend to have high levels of stress and trauma, and trauma-informed practices are increasingly recognized as valuable in higher education (Cusack et al., 2019; Henshaw, 2022). The syllabus can be a valuable tool in the creation of a positive and supportive learning environment.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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Appendix A

Positive and Negative Attributes of the Hypothetical Instructor

Positive Attributes: approachable/personable, effective communicator, able to create a safe classroom environment, encouraging to students, enthusiastic about teaching and topic, professional, wants students to succeed, helpful, respectful, understanding, sensitive to diversity, warm

Negative Attributes: demanding/strict, emotionally distant, untrustworthy, characterized by a negative attitude toward students, not concerned about being a good teacher, cold

Appendix B

Procedures for Data Collection

We recruited college student participants through college classrooms via instructor and e-mail announcements. The study was conducted in group settings with each participant sitting at an individual desk. Participants were provided with an informed consent and after all participants had read the consent form, they were given the opportunity to leave if they did not choose to participate. Participants were given a randomly assigned syllabus and these verbal instructions: "You will have four minutes to look over the syllabus. Please look it over carefully as we will be asking you questions about the information on the syllabus and your opinions about the syllabus." After four minutes, we distributed the survey and allowed unlimited time for completion. When participants completed the survey, they stapled the syllabus they had read to the survey. In this way, we were able to accurately categorize the experimental condition of each participant. Completed surveys were placed by participants in a large envelope to maximize anonymity.