



# Encouraging Student Sense of Belonging Through Instructor Face Support

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**Abstract:** Research has established important links between student sense of belonging in the classroom and levels of academic engagement, motivation, and persistence (e.g., Jang et al., 2016; Reeve, 2012) yet more work is needed to identify specific teacher communication tactics and strategies that can foster sense of belonging and increased engagement. Using a conceptual framework centered on organizational identification, we surveyed 172 undergraduates and found that instructor interpersonal skills—specifically face support during student feedback—significantly correlated with increased class identification and sense of belonging. These results hold important implications for promoting student engagement, motivation, and persistence, particularly for underrepresented students.

## Instructor Face Support as a Facilitator of Student Sense of Belonging

Research in teaching and learning has increasingly examined the ecological aspects of student learning and success. Building on major theoretical insights into human motivation and learning, such as Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs, Dewey's (1958) experiential learning, and Bandura's (1973, 1977, 1986) social

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learning theory, this area of research highlights how student learning is influenced by many interrelated social and contextual factors of the teaching environment that can inspire, facilitate, or hinder the learning process. One recent thread in this area of research focuses on students' sense of belonging and how it impacts their academic experience and achievement. Generally used to describe the relationship of an individual to a group, "sense of belonging" more specifically indicates a particular quality of that relationship, such that a feeling of positivity, value, and attachment forms, and importantly, is perceived to be mutual by the student (St-Amand et al., 2017, p. 109). Over the last 30 years, sense of belonging has increasingly been used to bridge our understanding of why students may thrive in some settings but struggle in others.

Toward that end, this line of inquiry has established important links between students' sense of belonging in the classroom and their levels of academic engagement, motivation, and persistence. For example, Johnson et al. (2007) demonstrated strong connections between sense of belonging, social support in the classroom, and students' willingness to engage in activities and express their ideas and feelings. Furrer and Skinner (2003) found similar results in their longitudinal study, concluding that "feelings of belonging may have an energetic function, awakening enthusiasm, interest, and willingness to participate in academic activities" (p. 158). Researchers who study student motivation have also made important links to students' sense of belonging. In a series of studies, Goodenow (1993a, 1993b; Goodenow & Grady, 1993) found that sense of belonging at school and in the classroom consistently correlated with students' high value placed on academics and high expectations for success, particularly when inspired by teacher support. Goodenow's findings were corroborated by Freeman et al. (2007) when they studied college freshmen and found that students who felt a strong sense of class belonging also measured high in self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation.

More recently, sense of belonging has also developed into a key construct in research on university retention and student persistence, particularly for the role it plays in community-building. Vincent Tinto's (1975) influential essay *Dropout from Higher Education* inspired threads of research examining student involvement in both the social and academic dimensions of the college experience, as he argued that each are important factors in retention. Tinto's later research (1993, 1998) went on to stress the importance of building communities on campus and in the classroom to combat attrition and foster student persistence. Building on Tinto's work, Osterman (2000) conducted an integrative review, highlighting sense of belonging as an "extremely important concept" toward building connected communities, with "far reaching impact on human motivation and behavior" (p. 359). These foundational essays have inspired conceptual models of university retention (e.g., Davis et al., 2019; Hoffman et al., 2003; Reason, 2009) that are built upon students' sense of belonging in social, academic, and other extracurricular contexts, emphasizing their interrelatedness. Together, these research directions connecting student sense of belonging to engagement, motivation, and persistence establish it as a central concept in how we currently understand student achievement and success.

Despite these strides in recognizing the importance of students' sense of belonging, more work remains to better understand how it can be fostered in various school settings and classrooms. For one, research has not yet established whether sense of belonging is equally important or functions differently for adult or college-aged students than for K–12 students. Much of the literature thus far focuses on K–12 classrooms (e.g., Allen & Bowles, 2012; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Goodenow, 1993a, 1993b; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Osterman, 2010; St-Amand et al., 2017; Wentzel, 1998), whereas adult or college-aged classrooms are organized differently; often with less supervision, less structure, and more student

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autonomy and diversity. These differences may change the role or quality of students' sense of belonging, and more research is needed to explore sense of belonging at the college level, in various types of classrooms. Second, the above point also implicates another, more important need: we currently lack a clear understanding of what particular actions that administrators and teachers can take to establish and foster a strong sense of student belonging in the classroom, particularly at the college level. Thus far, scholarship offering specific strategies is relatively scant, and primarily focuses on K–12 teachers. A prominent source here is Osterman (2010), who reviews prior studies on sense of belonging with an aim toward identifying and synthesizing best practices for teachers. She concludes that a strong sense of belonging among students tends to result from constructive classroom management, particularly when handling “problem” students, and stresses the need for teachers' attentiveness and interpersonal skills. Similarly, St-Amand et al. (2017) offer six recommendations for teachers, again focusing on K–12, which largely echoes Osterman (2010). They too highlight the need for teachers' interpersonal skills but also suggest school-level practices, such as team-building activities and social-competence curriculum for students. While these guidelines certainly provide a useful starting point for K–12 teachers and administrators, they are not clearly or easily translatable to the college level. Thus, further exploration and research on specific strategies for college-level instructors is an important need moving forward.

The current essay responds to this need by providing study findings that establish a new promising tack for understanding and facilitating a sense of belonging among college students. Specifically, we extend the prior K–12 emphasis on teachers' interpersonal skills into the college classroom by examining students' perceptions of instructors' verbal feedback and its impact on their sense of belonging in the class. The novelty of our approach is that we draw on a theoretical framework in organizational communication that provides a conceptualization of sense of belonging as an organizational phenomenon that can be facilitated by communication practices. We anticipate that instructors who provide verbal feedback to students in a way that affirms and respects their standing in the class will also succeed in building stronger class identification among all students. To examine instructors' verbal feedback, we employ Erving Goffman's (1967) face theory and Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) concept of politeness to measure instructors' ability to fulfill students' social identity needs toward confirming their group belonging in the classroom. Using this conceptual framework linking organizational class identification and instructor face support, we test these potential links by designing a study surveying 172 students enrolled in university public speaking classes, to measure and correlate their assessment of the instructor's use of face support with their own level of identification to the class. By doing so, we aim to establish the usefulness of this conceptual approach while also providing instructors clear guidelines on how to foster student belonging by increasing their identification with the class.

In the next section, we review prior literature that (a) establishes the precedent and value of a theoretical framework in organizational communication that can conceptually link instructor communication practices with students' belonging in the classroom; (b) defines and explores organizational identification as a key concept; and (c) articulates politeness theory and face support by establishing how they provide important links between personal, social, and organizational identity. Finally, we conclude our conceptual framework by providing a study hypothesis that, when tested, can confirm a link between instructor face support and class identification.

## Conceptual Framework

Studying classrooms from an organizational perspective is not without precedent, and it holds some distinct advantages toward integrating the various ways that prior research has proven student sense

of belonging to be important. Osterman (2000) argues that taking an organizational perspective on teaching can make visible the relationship between student behavior and organizational context (p. 325). Moreover, research has also emphasized organizations as prominent settings in which social identity is developed and negotiated, particularly insofar as many social group identifications are available within organizations (Silva & Sias, 2010). Aligning with these recognitions, a pedagogical research program has developed that conceives the classroom-as-organization (CAO), stressing that students, as experiential learners, are inevitably involved in the “interaction of intentional, cultural, behavioral, and social aspects of managing an organization” (McDonald et al., 2011, p. 67). This perspective is especially useful when studying classrooms because it highlights the dynamic and participatory nature of classroom culture. While the instructor is certainly an academic authority in the college classroom (Grasha, 1994), students also contribute to the meanings that emerge from the class (Kasworm, 2003), particularly during classroom discussions (Rudsberg et al., 2017). During such discussions, students can influence each other with connotative meanings of course material, perceptions about each other’s work and ideas, or stances toward the instructor’s teaching practices. Key to our approach is that, since classroom meanings are negotiated concomitant with social meanings, organizational communication theory offers a means of modeling how they are mutually constituted through classroom communication. For this study, the structurational model of organizational identification (C. R. Scott et al., 1998) provides a framework for examining how student identification and, by extension, sense of belonging in the classroom, are influenced by their perception of the instructor’s ability to provide feedback during class discussions of their work.

## **Structurational Model of Identification**

C. R. Scott et al. (1998) built on Anthony Giddens’s (1979, 1984) structuration theory to provide a model that links together communication and classroom sense of belonging through a process of identification. A hallmark of structuration theory is its central focus on “duality of structure,” which views the structural or relatively durable aspects of society or organizations as not merely the antecedents of personal action and agency, but also as reliant on (or constituted by) the practices, behaviors, and communication of individuals. In this way, Giddens (1984) argues, organizational structure and individuals’ agency are mutually constitutive. For example, traditional classroom structure provides a general framework of rules and practices for the first day of class, which students will tend to assume are applicable and thus follow. But thereafter, the rules, practices, and routines for each class may evolve somewhat differently, depending on the interplay of numerous factors, such as the instructor’s teaching style, the course material, curriculum design, the students’ level of interest, among other factors. And further, to the degree that an innovative class may influence students’ notions of the “ideal” classroom, their later behavior and communication may spread to gradually change broad conceptions of classroom tradition. This example demonstrates that, while organizational or societal structures inform how students experience the university classroom, those very structures are also in flux, as they are in turn negotiated through practices and interactions in the class.

One such class attribute that can be negotiated through communication is the strength of belonging that students experience in the class. C. R. Scott et al. (1998) draw on Giddens’s duality of structure to provide a means of conceptualizing how students’ sense of belonging in the classroom can be understood as a type of organizational identification that facilitates a strong sense of identity in the class. They do so by viewing organizational identification as a duality of structure connecting members’ interactions with their sense of organizational belonging or attachment. Important to their argument is that we all develop multiple organizational identities, one for each of the organizations in which we have membership. In

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this view, identity “represents a type of knowledge about our self that helps to produce and to reproduce behaviors in specific social situations” (C. R. Scott et al., 1998, p. 303). In any given situation, even in the classroom, students can have multiple organizational identities that become relevant and that may influence their interactions; for instance, that of a student/learner, a fraternity/sorority member, an athlete, a church member, a worker at a business in town, and so forth. Furthermore, given that we have multiple simultaneous organizational identities, C. R. Scott et al. (1998) assert that we become attached to each identity in varying strengths. For example, a student may have a strong sense of identity as an athlete, they may prefer to be viewed in that way in the classroom and thus would interact primarily through that particular identity, potentially even at the expense of a student or academic identity. The differing strengths of identity attachment can be understood as a function of the process of identification (C. R. Scott et al., 1998, p. 304). In this conception, identification is a demonstration, through an accumulation of communicative acts, of a sense of connectedness with a person or group. “Often made in social interaction, identification in a structural sense represents the type of behavior produced by and producing identity” (C. R. Scott et al., 1998, p. 304). Consequently, identity and identification form a duality of structure, because although identification constitutes an evolving identity, our sense of identity alternately influences the likelihood of identification with people or culture in different contexts. In this way, a student’s sense of belonging in the classroom can be understood in terms of their attachment to, or strength of, their identity as a student in the class. And importantly, this attachment to their class organizational identity evolves through time, depending on the nature of the classroom interactions, which accumulatively influence their level of identification.

Recent work in structuration theory has examined not only the duality of structure in identification/identity development processes, but also highlights the duality of structure between member identity construction and organizational structures and features. These studies center communication as the mechanism through which both member identities and organizational attributes, such as member roles, power, norms/routines, and culture are negotiated and re/produced, a process described as “reflexive self-structuring” (McPhee et al., 2014, p. 82). For example, C. R. Scott and Myers (2010) developed a structural model of organizational socialization that diagrams how member identities are constituted through complex processes involving interactive re/negotiation of existing organizational norms and rules, role expectations, and power relations, all of which may change as a result of member role incongruence and friction. In other words, organizational members inevitably must develop identities around existing rules and resources but may reflexively alter them in the process. This type of identity/structure negotiation was demonstrated in Larson and Pepper’s (2011) study of a geographically dispersed high-tech company in which members dis-identified with required technology systems and developed identities around the unintended (e.g., non-sanctioned) use of the technology. In so doing, workers weakened their organizational identity attachment, but in turn, also altered the norms surrounding the technology. Similarly, McNamee (2011) explored processes of identity development and attachment in faith-based organizations, finding that fostering strong member identities required them to compartmentalize or bracket business affairs away from faith-centered processes and conversations, thus deliberately reinforcing the symbolic significance of faith-based narratives in the organizational culture. Finally, a structuration approach has also been used to study organizational identification processes of university students. Croucher et al. (2009) examined college students’ levels of identification with forensics teams, focusing on the influence of team culture on identification processes. They found that particular aspects of culture, such as teamwork, information flow, and morale, were important targets of students’ identification with the team, but surprisingly, that the influence of these cultural factors varied significantly across team members of different genders and ethnicities. In sum, through these studies,

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we gain a better understanding of how organizational structures provide rules and resources for member identification and identity development, encompassing a duality of structure. But Croucher et al.'s (2009) findings in particular highlight that organization-level structures are not experienced in the same way by all members, with gender and ethnicity playing important mitigating roles in identification processes.

In summary, this structural perspective of communication and organizational identification provides the groundwork for our view of the college classroom. Most centrally, it situates students as having an organizational class identity that may vary in strength and that is continually evolving throughout the semester. Furthermore, it provides the mechanism for understanding how those identities emerge over time: the duality of structure between student identification processes and classroom-level features, both of which are constituted through class interactions. With this structural approach to examining classroom identification established, we turn our sights to a particular type of classroom interaction that is likely to influence the process of class identification: instructor feedback and the use of face support.

### **Face Support as Negotiating Grounds for Class Identification**

Given that classroom interactions are the means through which class identification may occur, it follows that the nature of those interactions should be examined to better understand how to facilitate this process. One way that classroom interactions can be examined is through face support and politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987; Goffman, 1967; Lim & Bowers, 1991). Goffman (1967) uses the term “face” to refer to an individual’s desired self-image—an image they hope to present and maintain through their interactions with others. Politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1978) suggests that all interactions contain negotiations of face needs being either met or denied among participants of the interaction. The concept of “face support” represents the strategies that participants use in those negotiations of face needs and, in particular, as a response to others’ face needs.

Face needs have been conceptualized under two primary desires. First, positive face refers to individuals’ needs to feel included, appreciated, and approved of by members of a social group. Second, negative face refers to the individual’s need for his/her autonomy and abilities to be respected. On a more specific level, Lim and Bowers (1991) conceptualized face needs into three primary groups: the desire to be included (solidarity or fellowship face), the desire for one’s abilities to be respected (approbation or competence face), and the desire for one’s autonomy to be affirmed (tact or autonomy face). Within classroom interactions, these face needs may or may not be met; meeting them requires instructors to utilize interpersonal skills.

Within the classroom, particularly important interactions occur between student and instructor. Given the instructor’s legitimate power status in the class, it follows that an instructor’s ability to offer face support holds important implications for the fulfillment of face needs amongst students. This heightened importance of instructor-student interactions is especially true for verbal evaluations with the class as an audience. The instructor’s failure to meet one student’s face needs in front of the entire class may challenge and alter socially-negotiated student identities.

We expect that meeting the specific face needs of solidarity, approbation, and tact is an important factor for providing interactions that foster classroom identification. We further expect that a particularly important opportunity for face support occurs during verbal feedback of student work, with the entire class as an audience. Hence, in this study we surveyed students about the perceived face support they receive from their instructors during verbal feedback for speeches delivered to the class.

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## Examining the Impact of Perceptions of Facework on Class Identification

In summary, this study examines how communication in the college classroom between student and instructor affects student identification with the class. Structuration theory holds that identities are socially constructed through interaction and provides the reason why an instructor's ability to provide appropriate face support to students is important in terms of inviting stronger student identities. We chose to examine face support as a specific communicative act instructors employ because it provides an opportunity for the instructor to affirm or deny student identity within the classroom. Specifically, we examine how student identification (as demonstrated by perception of belonging and a strong degree of attachment with the class) is affected as solidarity, tact, and approbation face needs (Lim & Bowers, 1991) are addressed during the evaluation of public speeches. To verify our expectation that instructor face support predicts stronger class identification, we test the following hypothesis:

**H1:** Instructors' use of politeness strategies characterized by student assessments of (a) solidarity/inclusiveness, (b) tact/autonomy, and (c) approbation/competence face support during speech verbal feedback sessions will be positively associated with measures of students' class identification.

## Method

### Participants

For this study, we surveyed a convenience sample of 176 undergraduate students in public speaking classes at a medium-sized university in the Northwestern United States. They were selected specifically because they were enrolled in a public speaking course and therefore received verbal feedback from their instructor in front of the class. Our response rate was 98% ( $n = 176$ ); only 4 out of 180 students in the 10 public speaking classes we surveyed chose not to participate in this study. We had to discard a total of four questionnaires due to response sets or incompleteness, which brought our total usable data down to 172 questionnaires.

All of our participants were undergraduate students. A slight majority (53.5%,  $n = 92$ ) of our participants identified as male, and 46.5% ( $n = 80$ ) identified as female. The mean age of our participants was 20.23 years ( $SD = 3.98$ ), the mode was 19, and age range was 32 years (our oldest student was 50 years old while our youngest participant was 18 years of age). In terms of ethnicity, 85.5% ( $n = 147$ ) of our participants were Caucasian, 4.7% ( $n = 8$ ) were Asian, and 1.7% ( $n = 3$ ) were Native American. There were 6.4% percent ( $n = 11$ ) categorized as "other" and 1.7% ( $n = 3$ ) gave no response. The class standing of our participants broke down as follows: 45.9% ( $n = 79$ ) of students were freshmen, 33.7% ( $n = 58$ ) were sophomores, 11.6% ( $n = 20$ ) were juniors, and 8.7% ( $n = 15$ ) were seniors. Participants included a broad array of major areas of study.

### Procedure

We recruited students by attending their public speaking classes at a prearranged date and time. The negotiated dates corresponded to a point in time during the semester when the second speech assignment—the informative speech—had just concluded; therefore ensuring that all classes had ample time for not only verbal feedback to be given by the instructor for two assigned speeches, but also for the class to have developed its own style of interaction and opportunities for class identification. Participating

students were provided a consent form and a questionnaire. To ensure they felt free to respond without consequence, we visited classrooms during the last 25 minutes of class and had the course instructor leave the classroom before distributing the questionnaires. To encourage participation, course instructors agreed to provide an incentive in the form of five extra credit points toward participants' course grade. The three-part questionnaires encompassed 39 questions and were completed by all participants within 20 minutes. As students returned questionnaires to the surveyor, they recorded their names on a sign-out sheet separate from the questionnaires, for the purpose of ensuring the award of extra credit points. This extra credit sheet, and the names on it, were never linked to individual surveys, to ensure anonymity of student survey responses.

## Measures

***Politeness and face support.*** We used the Instructional Face Support Scale (Kerssen-Griep et al., 2003) to measure the degree to which students perceived their instructor used tact, approbation, and solidarity face support during speech feedback. Students were instructed to indicate the degree to which 15 statements reflect their instructor's behavior during oral feedback of speeches. This was a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much). Six items were reverse-coded. Five items (e.g., The instructor "leaves you without a choice about how to respond to the evaluation") in this scale indicated instructor fulfillment of student autonomy (tact) face needs (Kerssen-Griep et al., 2003, p. 381). Five items (e.g., The instructor "lets you know that s/he thinks highly of you") indicated instructor fulfillment of student competence (approbation) face needs. Finally, five items (e.g., The instructor "seems attentive to you as an individual") indicated instructor fulfillment of student fellowship (solidarity) face needs. Collectively, these items demonstrated face validity in concert with Lim and Bowers's (1991) conceptualization of three types of face support needs. Consistent with Kerssen-Griep et al. (2003), we found the reliabilities for the three face support types to be acceptable (tact  $\alpha = .73$ , approbation  $\alpha = .70$ , and solidarity  $\alpha = .74$ ).

***Class Identification.*** To measure identification as sense of belonging and attachment to the class, we used Cheney's (1982) Organizational Identification Questionnaire (OIQ). While this scale was initially developed to measure organizational identification in the workplace, it has been used on numerous occasions to measure identification of groups in various contexts, including graduate students (Bullis & Bach, 1989), small workgroups (Barker & Tompkins, 1994), professional memberships (Russo, 1998), and government workers (C. R. Scott et al., 1999). In many of these studies, reduced-item versions were utilized. To make this scale appropriate for measurement of undergraduate class identification, we removed items from the original 25-item scale pertaining only to a workplace organization. For example, one removed item included, "I would probably continue working for \_\_\_\_\_ even if I did not need the money" (Cheney, 1982). We also made slight changes to the wording of some questions to make them appropriate for classroom identification. For example, we changed the original ninth question in the OIQ which stated: "I talk up \_\_\_\_\_ to my friends as a great company to work for" to "I talk up this public speaking class as a great class to take." After the removal of questions that could not be adapted to the classroom context, we were left with 15 out of 25 items from the original OIQ.

The reliability and validity of the OIQ has been questioned in previous research (Miller et al., 2000). Miller et al.'s primary concern was that the OIQ instrument was not unidimensional, but rather measured various aspects of affective commitment to the organization. To test the validity of the OIQ for this study, we followed Schrodtt (2002) and Croucher et al. (2009) to complete a confirmation factor analysis (CFA) in order to test the factor structure, internal consistency, and unidimensionality of the measure (see Table 1). The CFA revealed that 14 of the 15 items loaded on organizational identification at .60 or



higher, with only one item factor loading slightly lower at .52. This item was retained because the scale as a whole, including this item, passed the internal reliability tests. Inter-item reliability tests for the scale were acceptable ( $\alpha = .868$ ).

**TABLE 1**  
**Organizational Identification Questionnaire (OIQ) Items and Factor Loading**

	Items	Factor Loading
1.	In general, students in this class are working toward the same goals.	.67
2.	I'm happy to be in this class.	.84
3.	Our public speaking class is different than other public speaking classes.	.78
4.	I'm glad to be in this public speaking class rather than a different public speaking class.	.85
5.	I talk up this public speaking class to my friends as a good class to be in.	.88
6.	I'm willing to put in an effort for this class above and beyond what is normally expected.	.90
7.	I have good feelings about coming to this class.	.87
8.	I feel that the people in this class care about me.	.79
9.	I have a lot in common with the people in this class.	.71
10.	I tell others about projects I am working on for this class.	.52
11.	I find that my values are similar to the values of the rest of this class.	.75
12.	I feel very little loyalty to this class (R).	.60
13.	I would describe this class as a large "family" in which most students feel a sense of belonging.	.60
14.	I find it easy to identify myself with this class.	.70
15.	I really care about how well this class goes.	.78

## Results

Our hypothesis predicted that students who perceive their face needs being met by instructors during verbal evaluation of speeches will have higher levels of class identification. To test this, we ran Pearson Correlations (Table 1) analyzing the relationship between the dependent variable (class identification) and the independent variables (tact face support, approbation face support, and solidarity face support). The hypothesis was supported, as all forms of face support correlated significantly with class identification:

**TABLE 2**  
**Correlations Among Types of Face Support and Class Identification**

	1	2	3	4
1. Class Identification	—			
2. Tact Face Support	.447**	—		
3. Approbation Face Support	.381**	.581**	—	
4. Solidarity Face Support	.603**	.669**	.620**	—

Notes: N = 172; \*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

The matrix also revealed significant correlations between solidarity face support and both of the other types of face support: tact (.70,  $p < .01$ ) and approbation (.62,  $p < .01$ ), as well as a significant correlation between tact face support and approbation face support (.58,  $p < .01$ ).

To measure the relative influence of each independent variable, we also performed a Least Squares Multivariate Linear Regression with Class Identification being regressed onto the three predictor variables (IVs): Solidarity Face Support, Tact Face Support, and Approbation Face Support. The full model was found to be significant ( $F_{(3,168)} = 32.47$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R = .61$ ). The  $R^2$  for this model was .367, indicating that 36.7 percent of the variance in class identification could be explained by some combination of the three IVs.

Given the apparent heightened significance of solidarity face support, we conducted a reduced model containing only solidarity as the IV predictor of class identification, which resulted in  $R = .60$  with  $R^2 = .360$  indicating that the independent contribution of tact and approbation accounted for only 0.7% of the variance in class identification.

## Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate a significant positive relationship between students' perception of instructor face support during speech feedback and their strength of identification with the class. These results confirm our expectation that instructors who utilize interpersonal skills in providing face support to students during verbal feedback effectively increase the likelihood of those students identifying more strongly with the class. Furthermore, an unanticipated, yet still positive finding was the particularly important role of solidarity face support in this process. Regression analyses showed that solidarity face support alone predicted strong class identification and that the other two types of face support contributed only marginally to this relationship. In this discussion section, we reflect on some important implications of these results, focusing on (a) the basis provided here for emphasizing the role of instructor interpersonal communication skills toward establishing an inviting classroom environment; (b) the heightened significance of solidarity face support in this process and what it may indicate about the instructor's role in the classroom and on campus; and (c) the potential impact of these findings on student persistence and university retention.

## Instructor Interpersonal Skills

A key goal of this study was to address the need for further research identifying ways that instructors and administrators could facilitate the process of student belonging by increasing identification with their classes. This study has provided a partial answer to this research gap by demonstrating that instructor interpersonal skills in the form of face support at key times can account for more than a third (our model suggested 36.7%) of the variance in class identification among students. To be certain, there are likely to be many factors that influence student identification and sense of belonging in the classroom. However, our study findings have taken an important step by verifying the central role that instructors play toward affirming students' belonging in the class through their verbal feedback messages.

This finding emphasizes the multifaceted role that instructors play in the classroom, particularly expressed in the way they respond to student work. Their response must at once balance the task dimension of feedback, specifying the need and means for conceptual improvement, while also recognizing the relational dimension of their message, indicating the value and respect the instructor

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holds for the student (Jussim et al., 1992; Trees et al., 2009). While instructors are commonly hired for their demonstrated expertise in the field, which ensures that they can provide corrective task feedback, they are not always held to account for demonstrating sensitivity toward the relational dimension of that feedback. These study results thus follow Frymier and Houser (2000) by highlighting the need for instructors to recognize these dual dimensions of their feedback and likewise to embrace their role in fostering mutually satisfying classroom relationships.

By emphasizing the relational aspects of teaching, this study contributes to a growing list of findings that illustrate the relational lens through which students perceive and experience effective instruction. While this study established that students are more likely to feel a sense of identification and belonging to the class when they perceive instructors fulfilling their face needs during feedback, other studies have demonstrated that students rely on their perceptions of the instructor for their sense of classroom justice (Chory, 2007), for their levels of intrinsic motivation (Frymier & Houser, 2000; Jussim et al., 1992), and classroom involvement (Kerssen-Griep et al., 2003). Together, these established connections between instructor communication and student outcomes reinforce the need for instructors to not only describe principles of effective communication, but also to embody them in their teaching.

### **The Significance of Solidarity Face Support**

Another important issue raised by these results is the heightened significance of solidarity face support in the process of class identification. In this study, not only did solidarity face support show the highest reliability, but it also had the strongest correlation with class identification. We interpret this as a particularly important finding because it makes clear the high priority that group belonging holds for students in the classroom. For students to develop class identification that welcomes engagement, motivation, and learning, their class status must be affirmed, particularly in times when they receive negative feedback that may threaten or make vulnerable that sense of group belonging. Thus, a foundational aspect of fostering student success in the classroom may be established when instructors affirm students' sense of belongingness, more so than affirming their autonomy or competence. As Kerssen-Griep et al. (2003) suggest, solidarity face support may "motivate by affirming the student's sense of membership in the learning group, thus mitigating the feedback's threat to the student's fellowship face and focusing attention on the student's work rather than his/her person" (p. 373). By affirming a student's status and value in the class, an instructor can help ease the insecurity associated with being rejected as a valid class member, thereby facilitating more content-focused interactions. This finding suggests that a classroom is indeed an organizational context that illustrates Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs model, emphasizing that a student's need for belonging must be fulfilled before they engage toward becoming a valued member of the class.

This potential of solidarity face support to "set the stage" for student sense of belonging with the class also reinforces the value provided by a structural view of organizational identification in the classroom. Though students may have multiple identification targets in the classroom, and thus multiple social identities they may enact, these study results suggest that the interactions constituted between their class performances and the instructor's verbal feedback of them provides a mechanism through which the student becomes more or less attached to their class identity in particular. The usefulness of this insight can be further recognized if we consider its potential for reinterpreting prior research. For example, existing research has established links between the perceived fairness of instructor feedback and its effect on students' sense of classroom justice (Paulsel et al., 2005). According to Paulsel et al., an instructor's critical feedback may be perceived by students as a form of negative *coercive* power instead

of well-intended *expert* power, potentially resulting in a sense of unfairness for the student, which may instill a mistrust of classroom justice. Examined from a structural view of class identification, we may find that if an instructor verbally critiques a student's work without using face support, the instructor effectively invokes or widens a power gap between them, leaving the student with bleak options: either accept a low-status, unattractive class identity offered by the instructor, or reject it and become less identified with the class. In sum, the insight provided by a structural view of identification is in providing a means of examining *specific classroom interactions* for their impact on the process of class identification and, by extension, student sense of belonging.

## Structurational Approach to Student Persistence and Retention

Another important implication of these findings is the extended impact of structural class identification on the overall experience of college students. Consistent with prior research in structuration theory (e.g., Croucher et al., 2009; Larson & Pepper, 2011; C. Scott & Myers, 2010), these results suggest that instructors' interpersonal skill in using face support tactics has a simultaneous duality of impact: first, on strengthening students' classroom identity, as discussed above, but also on the overall structure of the class itself. Moreover, this study helps demonstrate that instructor verbal feedback not only plays a role in the identity construction of the student targeted by the feedback, but it also helps establish class-wide attributes such as communication climate or culture. This implicates instructor communication skill as particularly important for contributing to the sense of belonging that students feel both inside the classroom, and importantly, at the university as a whole. To the degree that students experience a sense of belonging in each of their classes, they are more likely to feel a sense of belonging at the university, which has impacts on their overall persistence.

For example, Reason (2009) provides a model that theorizes the influences on student persistence into three broad areas: (1) precollege experiences; (2) the university's organizational context (e.g., demographics and behavioral climate); and (3) individual student experiences within the peer environment. Reason places classroom experiences as a prominent site for the third area, where students most regularly engage peers in a structured organizational environment and where the *work* of college is primarily administered. In this way, while instructors may not be the only university representative that students encounter, they are commonly the most frequent and consequential; such that classroom experiences contribute prominently to the university's organizational context as well (Reason's second area). Thus, by embracing their role in fostering classroom identification, instructors can, in turn, have a positive impact on the processes of student identification with the university.

These potential connections between sense of belonging, class identification, and student persistence are particularly salient when considering the historically elevated rates of minority students leaving college. Students among marginalized populations may be more apt to question their sense of belonging in the classroom, which may make them more sensitive to instructor feedback (Smith & King, 2004). This possibility may be evidenced by Carter's (2006) report that African American's persistence rates declined after declaring particular majors, indicating that their experience in classes within their major may not have met their needs or expectations. Moreover, scholars have increasingly used sense of belonging to study the experience of minority, marginalized, or non-traditional student groups, including African American women (Booker, 2016), women in STEM disciplines (Master et al., 2015; Master & Meltzoff, 2020; Rattan et al., 2018), working-class students (Soria & Stebleton, 2013), and veterans (Blackwell-Starnes, 2018). It follows to reason that instructor's feedback and use of face support, particularly for

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these marginalized groups, can have a greater impact on minority students' persistence by strengthening their class identification, and by extension, their institutional identification.

In summary, these findings establishing the role of face support in fostering classroom identification are important in at least three ways. First, this study establishes the importance of instructors' communication skills toward increasing sense of belonging for students within the classroom. Second, these findings highlight the particular importance of group solidarity for students in the classroom, and in so doing, they reinforce the usefulness of a structural view of organizational identification toward studying student sense of belonging. Finally, these study results offer a promising approach toward better understanding student persistence, particularly for marginalized or underrepresented students who may be least likely to feel a sense of belonging in the classroom.

## Limitations

Though promising, these study findings have limitations primarily due to our participant sample. First, because we used convenience sampling at a mid-sized Midwestern university, our results are limited in terms of ethnicity. Specifically, 85% of our participants were White. Although this distribution may be representative of the ethnic diversity of students taking public speaking at the current university, more research at other universities is needed to better generalize these results to a more diverse student population. Second, though our results hinted at possible correlations between instructor gender and perceptions of feedback face support, we only had one male instructor among the 10 public speaking classes we surveyed. Consequently, this sample size did not warrant analysis of the role of instructor gender, and these potential effects require further study. Finally, this study is limited by the use of public speaking classes for recruitment of study participants. Though public speaking classes provide a context in which instructor feedback has heightened performative significance, not all classes have such visible displays or occasions of instructor feedback. Though we argue that feedback likely plays a similar role in those classes, the situational use of instructor feedback requires study for their unique effects on class identification.

## Future Research

This study prompts the need for further research in a number of directions. First, replicating this study in a university with greater diversity would enable richer understandings of the effects of identity aspects such as gender and race. As discussed above, this is especially true for examining populations that are historically underrepresented in universities and particular university classes. For instance, further research in a more diverse setting could examine whether instructor feedback impacts social identity groups differently in the same class.

Along these lines, other aspects of the classroom environment could be studied for their impact on class identification. For example, some research has noted the impact of peer group behavior on classroom culture and climate (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1997). Friend groups and the input of neighboring students may play a mitigating role in how students perceive instructor feedback. Connectedly, additional research may be needed to explicate the specific communicative tactics that influence students' interpretation of face support during feedback.

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