

# TRUST ME: FACULTY BEHAVIORS AND THEIR IMPACT ON STUDENT TRUST

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the process of trust development in the classroom and identifies specific faculty behaviors which encourage the development of student trust. University faculty and students were asked to list specific faculty behaviors which they believe might create student trust in faculty members. From these responses, a list of specific faculty behaviors was created; these behaviors were incorporated into a series of semantic differential items which asked student subjects to select one of two hypothetical professors to trust. A pilot study was completed and full data collection produced a final sample size of (n=246). An analysis of the responses concluded that three specific faculty behaviors (being accessible, opening class with a prayer, and providing relevant exam reviews) were strongly associated with students' willingness to trust faculty members. Results of the study extend the current body of organizational trust research, as well as providing guidance for faculty in developing more productive classroom relationships.

## INTRODUCTION

In virtually every type of human interaction, *trust* plays a pivotal role. Diverse academic fields including Biology, Economics, Psychology, and Anthropology have all explored the construct of trust (Fichman, 2003). Arrow (1974) argues that in virtually any situation requiring coordination or cooperation, trust functions much like oil in an engine, lubricating the interaction and facilitating progress. Like many other contexts, the classroom environment is generally more productive when trust exists among the involved parties. Students who trust their respective faculty members are potentially more likely to accept and integrate the information being taught; in the context of Christian education, a trusted faculty member appears far more likely than an distrusted teacher to effectively transfer values and ethical norms during the course of a semester.

This study examines specific professorial behaviors which might engender trust in students. During the exploratory phase of this study, students responding to the question, "What causes you to trust a college professor?" frequently used broad terms identifying characteristics such as *honest*, and *truthful*. While these are important, they also are difficult to intentionally communicate and often go unrecognized or inaccurately interpreted. This study was designed to clarify the meaning of the responses, identifying specific professorial behaviors which lead students to trust teachers, with the ultimate goal of helping professional educators foster trust in their classrooms and increase their teaching effectiveness.

## THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT

### Theoretical Foundation

Building on extensive research in other fields of inquiry, Management researchers have embraced trust as a significant and beneficial construct (Kramer & Tyler, 1996). Shepperd (1995) examined numerous contexts in which trust is a vital ingredient in partnership development and team growth. Hosmer (1995) proposed that trust provides a critical theoretical bridge, linking business ethics and organizational theory research. Across numerous bodies of literature, trust has come to be recognized as a critical element in most human interactions. As Hosmer sums up, “there appears to be widespread agreement on the importance of trust in human conduct.” (1995:380)

Numerous theoretical models of trust formation exist. The present study builds on the work of Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995) who propose that the trust/no-trust decision is based primarily on the truster’s assessment of the potential trustee’s traits, behaviors, and competencies. Mayer and his colleagues postulate that a decision to trust is primarily calculative and rational, with the truster assessing the trustee’s trustworthiness based on perceived traits before making a trust/no-trust decision.

### The Trust Development Process

From the perspective of the Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman model, an individual will follow a three-step sequence before arriving at a trust/no-trust decision. First, the individual observes the target’s behaviors or other visible

traits. Second, consistent with attribution theory (Kelley & Michela, 1980) the individual formulates a perceived understanding of the target's inner characteristics, motivations, and attributes based on the observed behaviors. Finally the individual assesses these perceived attributes and makes a decision to trust or not trust. This trust formation model is straightforward and has been extensively tested; it provides a theoretical basis for the current study, which manipulates trustee behaviors in order to assess their influence on willingness to trust.

One challenge confronted by trust researchers is the hypothetical nature of most survey items, in which respondents are asked whether they would hypothetically trust or not in a specific imaginary situation. For example an individual asked whether he would accept financial advice such as a stock tip from a stranger might quickly respond negatively when in actuality his response might be positive. In order to address this demonstrated weakness of typical "would you trust?" type items, the current survey is structured as a series of forced choices, in which respondents choose between two hypothetical professors and indicate a strength of preference. By structuring the survey items in this way the researchers hope to avoid the biases frequently engendered by simple yes/no trust questions.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

As an exploratory study the present work is concerned with several broad questions. At the most basic level it proposes that the general trust framework

developed by Mayer and colleagues will hold true in the classroom setting, and that specific faculty behaviors will play an important role in students' willingness or unwillingness to trust. This question asked whether specific behaviors will be more strongly associated with trust than others, and if such differences can be measured quantitatively.

*Research Question A: Are specific professorial behaviors associated with a greater willingness to trust on the part of students?*

Question A deals specifically with whether students will respond differently to a variety of teacher behaviors, and how strongly these specific behaviors are related to students' willingness to trust. If Question A produces meaningful results, additional analysis will be required in order to apply the results in a classroom setting. Specifically, further examination will be conducted in order to more clearly specify behaviors which encourage trust, with the goal of providing prescriptive advice to teachers as they plan their classroom activities.

*Research Question B: Which specific professorial behaviors are most strongly associated with students' willingness to trust the professor?*

Conversely some behaviors which faculty believe are important may in fact be found to contribute little to the process of trust development. These items would comprise a second list, items which professors list as being important but which students see as unimportant in the trust formation process.

*Research Question C: Which specific professorial behaviors are believed to be important in trust formation but are actually unimportant in that process?*

## STUDY SIGNIFICANCE

In the context of theory development, this study extends current trust models by examining the precursors of trust in the classroom setting. Specifically, it offers potential insights into the trust formation process, a largely unexamined aspect of extant trust research. In practical terms, this study also offers potential insight into the dynamics of classroom interaction, potentially supporting or dismissing current beliefs about the role teacher behaviors play in engendering student trust. By informing educators regarding behaviors which increase or decrease student trust, this study offers potential assistance to teachers wishing to improve their classroom effectiveness.

## Methodology

### Participants

Two hundred forty-six undergraduate business students enrolled in a private faith-based university participated in this study. The participants ranged in age from 17 to 26 with over half being between 19 and 21. Fifty-eight percent of the participants were female and fifty-six percent were upper classmen. All participants were enrolled in various business courses while eighty percent of the participants were business majors. Ninety-seven percent of the participants were full-time students. Participants were asked to participate in the study by anonymously completing a short survey. Participants were first asked to complete an informed consent form and were told they would be participating in research designed to increase understanding of the collegiate teaching and learning process.

## Survey Instrument

The survey consisted of twenty-items. Each item asked the respondent to choose between two hypothetical professors: Professor A or Professor B. The respondents were told that they enrolled in courses with two professors; both of whom were well-educated and excellent teachers. The students were then given a series of pair-wise comparisons in which they were asked to select the professor they were more likely to trust based on either scenario A or scenario B. For each item, responses were on a 6-point scale: Definitely A, Probably A, Maybe A, Maybe B, Probably B or Definitely B.

Eight different scenarios were described in the survey. The scenarios were:

- Professor (A or B) who returns grades quickly after a test
- Professor (A or B) who gives good reviews of all material on tests
- Professor (A or B) who is almost always on time for class
- Professor (A or B) who invites students over for a meal
- Professor (A or B) who quickly learns students' names
- Professor (A or B) who is available and easy to contact
- Professor (A or B) who opens class with a prayer
- Professor (A or B) who speaks calmly, not harshly to students

## Instrument creation

Students in an undergraduate Marketing course were asked to describe characteristics and behaviors associated with specific organizations and individuals they trust, including college professors. Approximately 84 subjects

were invited to participate, ultimately producing more than 200 raw responses. This raw data was examined by two independent judges who assessed all responses and eliminated duplicates, producing a list of 20-25 distinct responses for further consideration.

A similar assessment was administered to a group of 10 faculty members in the Management Sciences Department at the same university. These faculty members provided approximately 60 responses which exhibited significant duplication; elimination of repeated items yielded a list of 12 distinct behaviors the respondents believed would lead students to trust faculty members. Faculty responses and student responses overlapped in several areas, but were dissimilar in others. For survey creation purposes, the researchers examined the two lists and selected eight distinct scenarios to be examined in the present study, including items unique to each list and items common to both.

After selecting the final eight scenarios, each scenario was then randomly assigned to Professor A or Professor B and each scenario was matched with each of the other seven scenarios one at a time. See Appendix A for a copy of the Informed Consent Form and the Survey Instrument.

### Recoding of Data

The format of the six point scale necessitated that the data be recoded in order to conduct data analysis. Whichever scenario was selected as the scenario in which the professor was more likely to be trusted necessarily resulted in the other scenario *not being selected*. The respondents simply choose one of

the six items. In order to establish a score for each possible scenario, the respondent's responses were recoded as shown in Table 1 such that a score was now available for Professor A and Professor B.

Table 1. Recoded Values for Participant Responses

<b>Participant response</b>	<b>Recoded Value for Professor A</b>	<b>Recoded Value for Professor B</b>
Definitely A (Response option 1)	3	-3
Probably A (Response option 2)	2	-2
Maybe A (Response option 3)	1	-1
Maybe B (Response option 4)	-1	1
Probably B (Response option 5)	-2	2
Definitely B (Response option 6)	-3	3

### Data Analysis

The recoding provided a score for each scenario combination. The first step in data analysis then was to calculate a Total Trust Score which was simply the sum of the recoded values for each scenario for each respondent. The higher the (positive) Total Trust Score, the greater extent to which a particular behavior was associated with the establishment of trust with a professor. Likewise, the lower the Total Trust Score, the lesser extent that a particular behavior was associated with building trust with a professor. Once Total Trust Scores were established for each scenario, it was possible to compare on a one-

by-one basis, which particular behavioral scenarios were the most prevalent as determined by the respondents in establishing trust with professors.

## Results

As shown in Table 2, Total Trust Scores ranged from a low of -1554 for Always On Time for Class to a high of 847 for Easy to Contact.

Table 2. Total Trust Scores

<b>Scenario</b>	Returns Grades Quickly	Gives Good Reviews	Always On Time	Invites Students Over	Learns Students' Names	Easy To Contact	Opens Class With a Prayer	Speaks Calmly
<b>Total Trust Score</b>	-955	753	-1554	128	-12	847	752	41

The Trust Score for each scenario was then compared on a one-to-one basis with each of the other scenarios. Charts 1 – 8 present the results.

Chart 1. Returning Grades Quickly compared to all other Scenarios

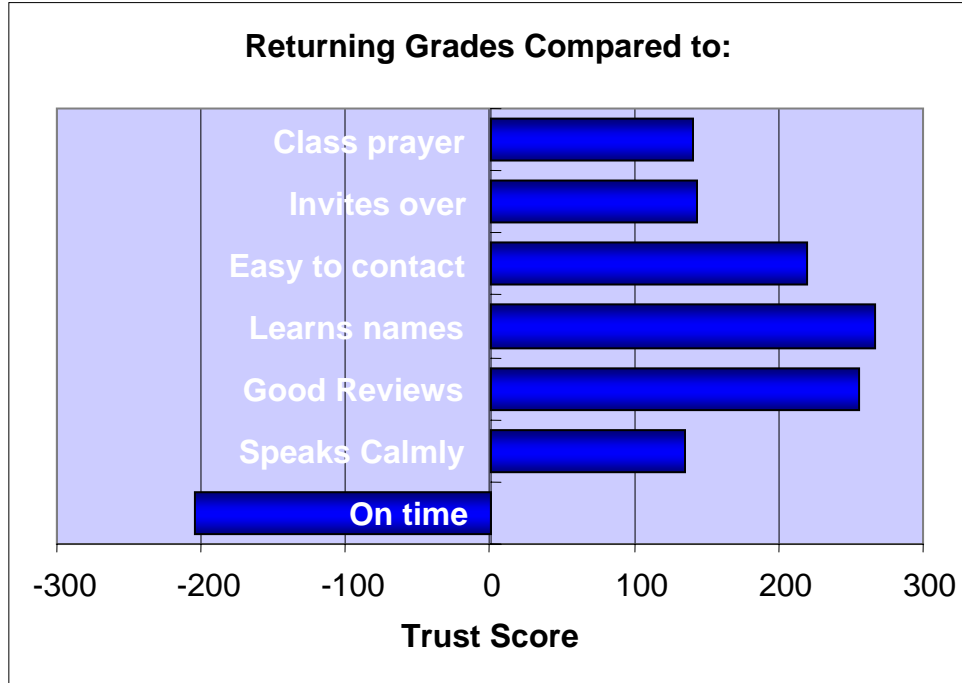


Chart 2. Gives Good Reviews compared to all other Scenarios

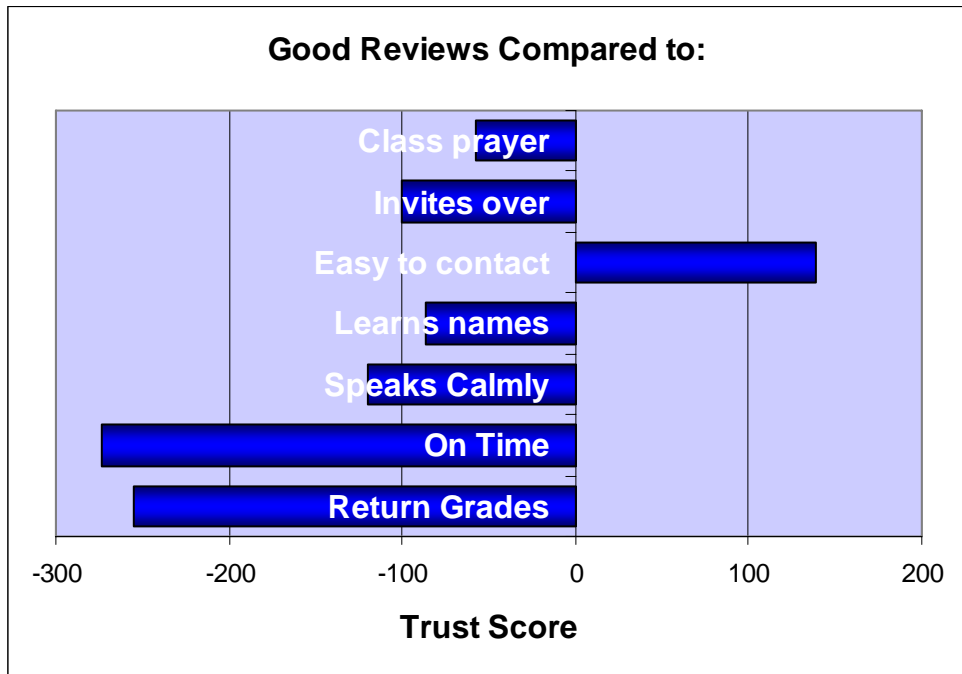


Chart 3. Always On Time compared to all other Scenarios

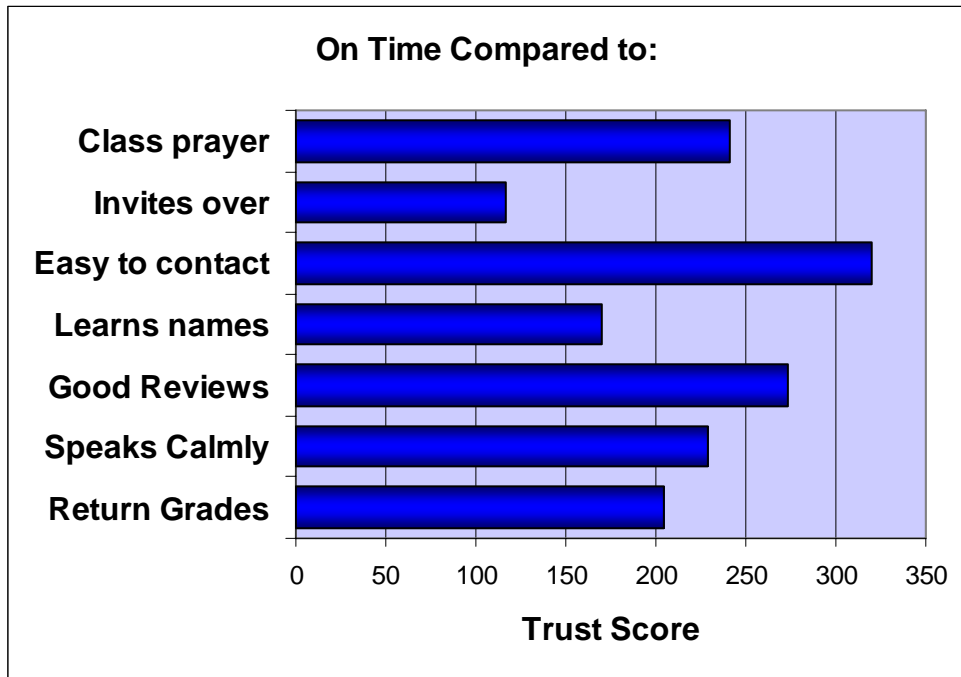


Chart 4. Invites Students Over compared to all other Scenarios

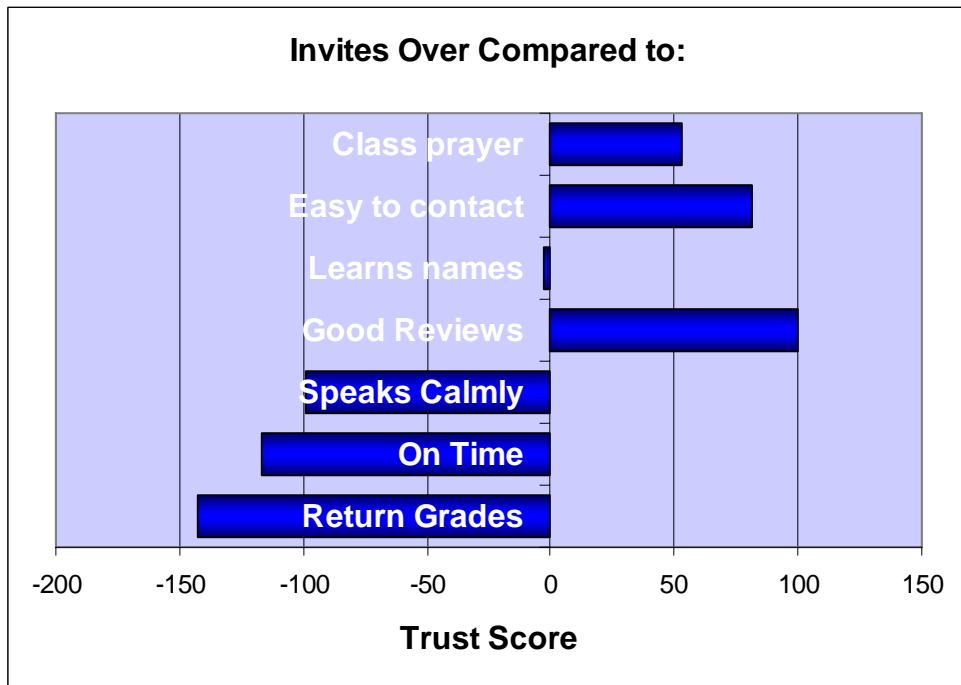


Chart 5. Learns Student's Names compared to all other Scenarios

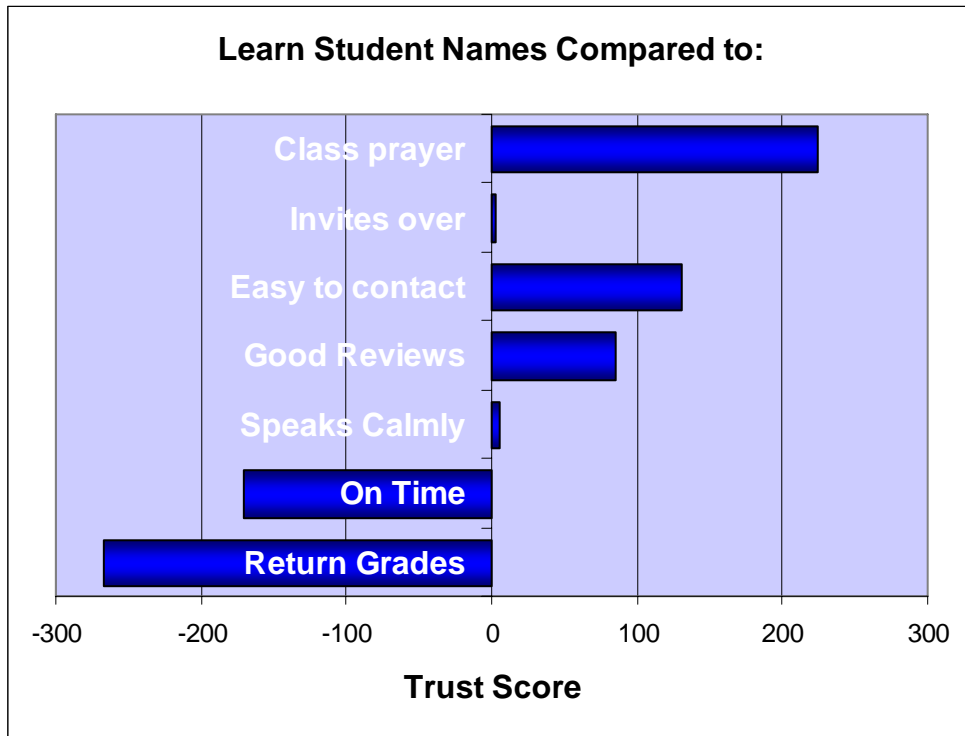


Chart 6. Easy to Contact compared to all other Scenarios

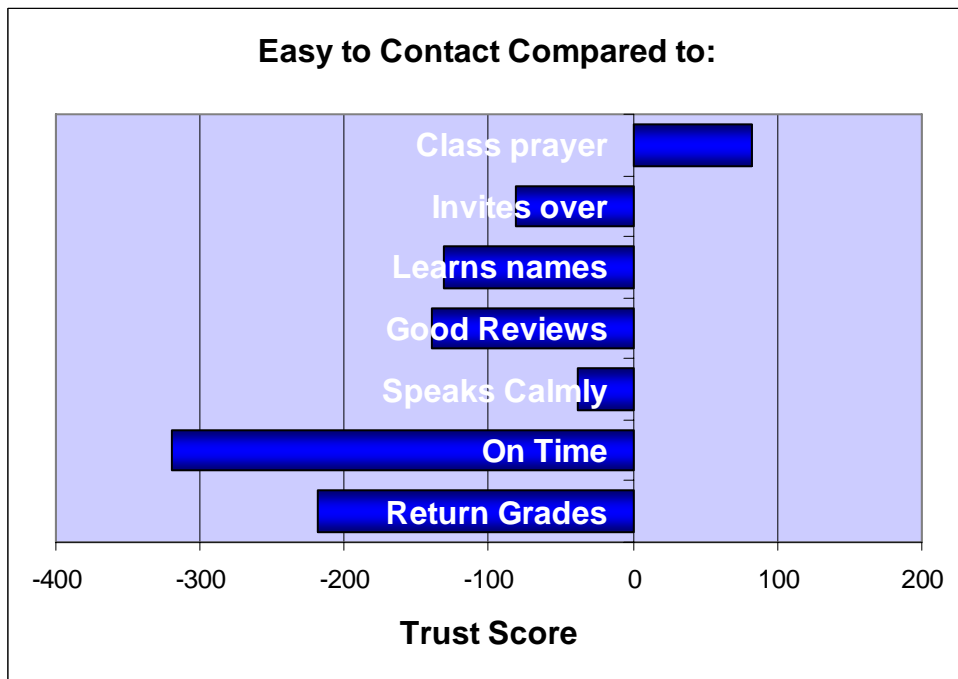


Chart 7. Opens Class with Prayer compared to all other Scenarios

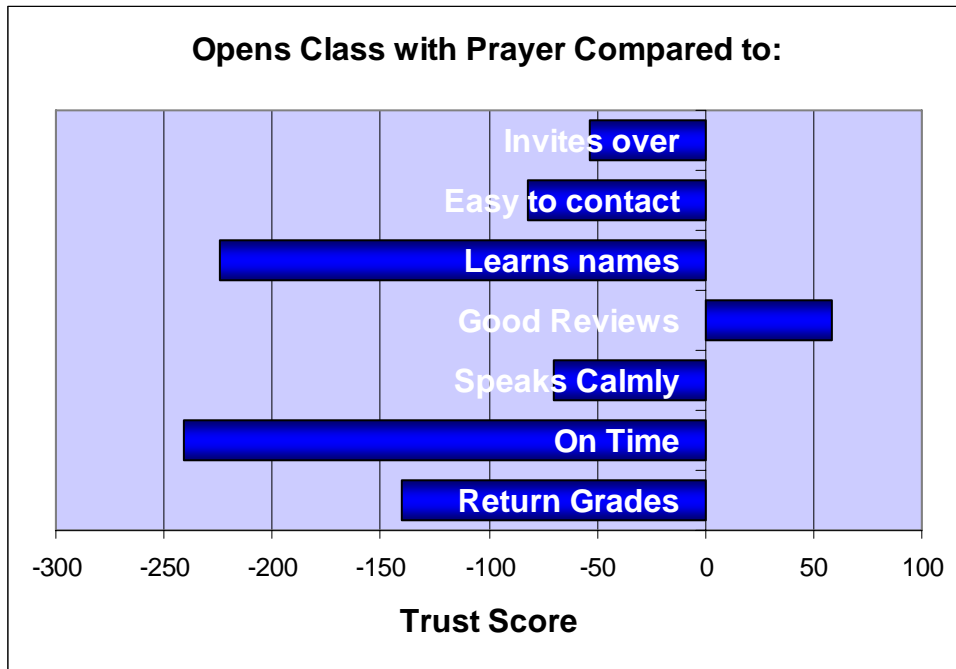
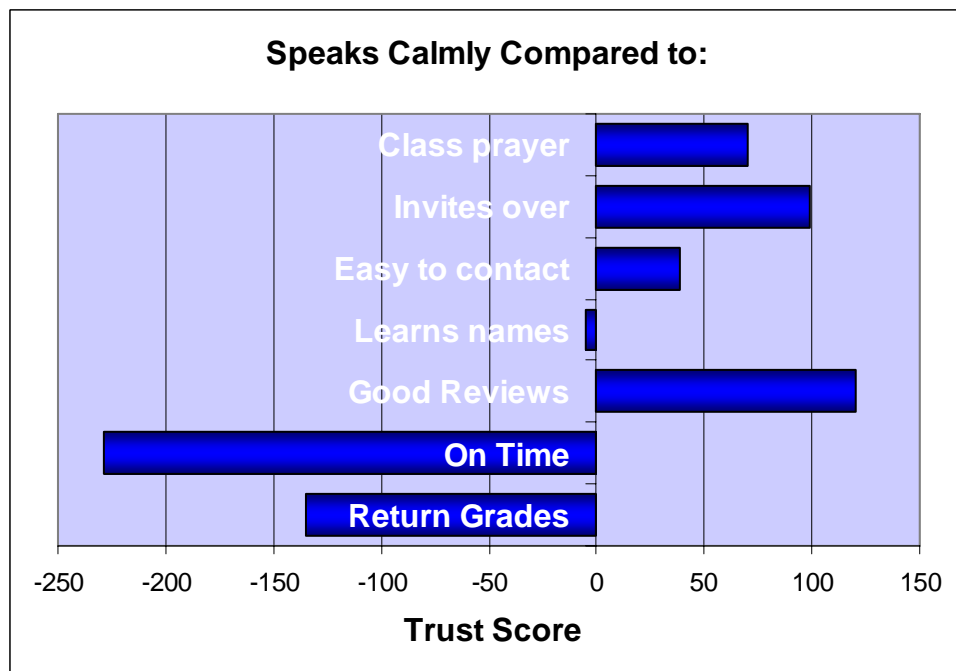


Chart 8. Speaks Calmly as compared to all other Scenarios



In order to correctly apply meaning to these results, we first recognize that negative scores do not indicate distrust. This is partially due to the realization that a negative score for Professor A or B is only the outcome of her/his counterpart receiving a positive score of the same magnitude. Therefore, a negative score indicates no more than that, by comparison, the other professorial behavior was deemed more trustworthy. Thus, the absence of trust does not require the presence of distrust.

## CONCLUSIONS

In drawing conclusions from these results, we acknowledge that findings are preliminary and do not offer depth of understanding. At the same time, we believe evidence has been found of professorial behavior influencing student trust. In fact, the results support that certain professorial behaviors having relatively greater or lesser influence on student willingness to trust. It also appears probable that professorial anecdotal belief in certain behaviors engendering student trust may be misplaced or at least given too much relative weight. In relationship to our specific research questions, the following can be safely concluded.

First, in rank ordering the eight examined behaviors based upon total frequency scores (Table 2), we find that indeed specific professorial behaviors are more strongly associated with student willingness to trust than are other behaviors.

The following is the rank order of behavior from the strongest to the weakest influence on trust:

1. Easy to contact outside class
2. Provides good reviews prior to examination
3. Offer up prayer during class time
4. Invite student to home
5. Learn student names quickly
6. Speaks in a calm voice during class
7. Returns graded assignment promptly
8. Arrives at class on time

This rank ordering provides insight into which behaviors students deem of greatest influence on their trust in professors. As an example, the total frequency scores for the behaviors ranked 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> have only a one point differential. Therefore, the rank order suggest one superior to the other but it is likely they are not significantly different.

Second, the overall results (Table 2) suggest that, when compared against all other scenarios, the professor that is easy to contact outside class (e.g., hold numerous office hours, is accessible by phone at home as well as the office, answers email messages) is most likely to be trusted. Additionally, the professor that is conscientious in preparing students for success on exams (provides good exam reviews) and regularly offers prayer during class are next most likely to be trusted.

Third, timeliness in arriving at class and providing feedback (returning graded assignments) appear to be least influential on student willingness to trust.

Invitation to the professor's home, learning student's names, and speaking with a calm voice had total scores (Table 2) that fell in mid-range and therefore allow less interpretation.

Charts 1 – 8 provide “head to head” comparisons rather than total score results. Therefore, each scenario is directly compared to each of the seven others. While the top three professorial behaviors remain the same, results conflict with the total score data. When directly comparing “easy to contact” (number 1 in total score) to each other scenario, offering a “class prayer” is more strongly identified as engendering trust (Chart 6). Chart 2 indicates that “good reviews” is only bested by “easy to contact” as influencing trust. Finally, Chart 7 indicates that, when directly comparing “class prayer” time to all others, providing “good reviews” is the only one that is stronger in influencing student trust. Therefore, each of the top three outperforms one of the other two.

These mixed results suggest the need for additional research. What we may be able to surmise is the following:

1. Faculty and students are not fully in agreement about trust influencing behaviors.
2. Trust engendering professorial behaviors, as trust engendering, are not equally influential.
3. Among examined behaviors being easy to contact, providing good reviews, and offering class prayer are strongest student trust influencers.

It appears that what we have discovered is that there are professorial behaviors that can engender trust in students, that professorial behaviors unequally influence students likelihood to trust and that it is possible to identify those behaviors that have the greatest probability of fostering student trust.

## IMPLICATIONS and FUTURE RESEARCH

Due to the exploratory nature of the study, any suggestion that we have found prescriptive information is premature. At the same time, we are encouraged that the results suggest the benefit of continuing this research. We believe that additional exploring is necessary to discover other possible trust influencing behaviors not identified here. Once a relatively comprehensive behavior list has been identified, we hope that the professorial behavior and student trust relationships can be better identified and defined. Among possible future research avenues are two available from this same data. First examination based upon demographics such as gender could provide interesting findings. Second, we recognize that total scores do not necessarily reflect the degree of trust influence. For example easy to contact could possibly earned it top overall score through numerous “probably” scores but another behavior actually received more “definitely” scores. Additionally, we anticipate examining professorial behaviors and student distrust. Lower scores in the current study do not reflect engendered distrust but only less influence in engendering trust.

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