

**Constructing the Course Syllabus:
Faculty and Student Perceptions of Important Syllabus Components**

Linda S. Garavalia

University of Missouri - Kansas City

John H. Hummel, Larry P. Wiley, and William G. Huitt

Valdosta State University

Citation: Garavalia, L., Hummel, J., Wiley, L., & Huitt, W. (2000). Constructing the course syllabus: Faculty and student perceptions of important syllabus components. *Journal of Excellence in College Teaching*, 10(1), 5-22. Available online at <http://www.edpsycinteractive.org/papers/cons-course-syll.pdf>

Student and faculty responses to a survey on the perceived importance of syllabus components were examined. Initial responses from seventy-two faculty members and 83 undergraduates in a pilot study led to revisions in the survey instrument. Descriptive analyses from this initial investigation indicated disparate perceptions between faculty and students. For both the pilot study and the primary study, faculty members were surveyed via electronic mail using the university's faculty list server. Course instructors administered the surveys to students. In the primary study, 242 undergraduates and 74 faculty members responded to a 39-item survey. The Welch t-test was used to compare faculty and student perceptions; significant differences were revealed. Individual item differences and educational implications are discussed.

The syllabus is a written communication between the course instructor and students, colleagues, and administrators. Regarded by many as a formal contract between the course instructor and students, the syllabus may be binding in student (or faculty) appeal proceedings (e.g., Matejka & Kurke, 1994). Faculty members also view the syllabus as a teaching tool (Smith & Razzouki, 1993). In addition, the syllabus facilitates decisions regarding accreditation of educational institutions and programs, programs of study for individual students, and courses to be included in degree programs.

Course syllabi range from half-page listings of the course title, text, and instructor's name to detailed guides and study manuals. Ideally, it may include the instructor's plan for the course, a statement of the course's general purpose, the instructor's orientation to the content, suggestions for students on how to strategically approach the course content, and course goals (Markie, 1994). The primary purpose of the present study was exploratory: to determine essential syllabus components considered important by both faculty and students and to identify areas where the two audiences differ in their perceptions.

Only one related databased study was identified in a comprehensive review of the literature. Becker and Calhoun (1999) surveyed undergraduates enrolled in introductory psychology to determine which syllabus items are most attended to by students. In pre- and post-semester administrations of the survey, 853 and 509 students respectively responded to a 29-item listing of syllabus components to which ratings of 1 (no attention at all) to 7 (a great deal of attention) were assigned. The results of the study indicated that students did not attend equally to all syllabus components. Among the most attended to components were exam dates, due dates of assignments, reading material or chapters covered by each exam, and grading procedures and policies. The components least attended to included titles and authors of textbooks and readings, withdrawal dates, course information (title, section number, etc.), and the academic dishonesty policy. These findings indicate that faculty should highlight or call attention to important syllabus components to which students may not readily attend.

Although empirical studies are scarce, several authors address the guiding question of the present study. As a framework for identifying essential components, Matejka and Kurke (1994) identify four primary functions of syllabi: (a) providing a *cognitive map*, (b) establishing a *contract* between the instructor and student, (c) acting as a *device for communication*, and (d) conveying the *instructor's plan*

for the course. To meet these purposes, Davis (1993) recommends including (a) basic course information, such as year and term, course number, room assignment, meeting time; (b) instructor's name, office location and hours, and contact information; and (c) formal prerequisites for the course from the college catalog, as well as informal ones set by the instructor or department. More specifically, Davis (1993) suggests that, in the syllabus, the instructor should:

1. explain the rationale for the sequence of topics,
2. define the format for class presentations and activities,
3. specify the materials students need for the class,
4. describe all student assignments and requirements,
5. explain how work will be graded and its weight,
6. explain student responsibilities and the reason(s) for course policies,
7. describe how students with special needs may arrange to receive appropriate accommodations,
8. specify the course calendar including specific opportunities that permit student feedback and other important dates,
9. describe the time commitments successful students are likely to make,
10. list additional sources students can use to supplement required sources, and
11. provide a section where students write in names and phone numbers of others in the class.

Because the syllabus also represents a contractual (although not necessarily legally binding) agreement, course instructors may consider ending the syllabus with a tear-off section that students sign and turn in (e.g., "I _____ have completely read this syllabus and understand and agree to the course requirements." [Matejka & Kurke, 1994, p. 115]).

While many of the above suggested syllabus components are obvious, Rubin (as cited in Diamond, 1989) found that, in practice, many syllabi lack one or more of these recommended components. Diamond (1989) suggests that faculty and students would be better served if course instructors developed "manuals" (a type of very comprehensive syllabus) for students rather than continuing to rely on standard syllabi which frequently are skeletal outlines. This approach is consistent with recommendations by other educators, such as Davis (1993) who suggests including handouts; summaries of readings and lecture materials (to permit students to attend more to presentations with less time expended taking notes); and samples of tests, answer keys, and student assignments. In contrast, Becker and Calhoun (1999) suggest that students might attend more to a concise, focused syllabus than to one that contains lengthy, possibly irrelevant (in the students' opinion) information.

We suspect that many college professors only think about syllabi in a few situations, such as when (a) developing a new course, (b) updating a syllabus for a new term, and/or (c) preparing for a visit from an accrediting group or administrative unit. We propose that course syllabi deserve more frequent quality reviews by instructors and their peers for several reasons. First, syllabi usually represent the initial contact between the instructor and students. Second, each course syllabus is a public, permanent product that reflects on the faculty member, department, and institution. Third, syllabi are a type of contract outlining expectations for performance and responsibilities for both the instructor and students. Finally, the syllabus is a valuable communication device utilized by colleagues, administrators, and students. For the present study, a survey was designed to measure faculty and student perceptions of essential components of college course syllabi. After a pilot study, the survey was modified slightly and administered to faculty and a new sample of students.

Pilot Study Method

Participants

Five hundred and thirty-six faculty and 83 students at a mid-size, regional university in the southeast were asked to voluntarily participate in the pilot study. No incentives were provided to either group for participation. Seventy-two faculty members and 83 students in four undergraduate psychology classes agreed to participate. Three of the four classes were educational psychology courses; the fourth class was an introductory psychology course.

Procedures

The survey was administered to faculty members via electronic mail through a faculty list server comprised of 536 subscribers. This list server is used on a regular basis by university administrators and faculty members to communicate with all individuals in the university with a faculty employment classification. The first mailing generated forty-nine responses. One month later, 23 additional members responded to a second mailing. Three course instructors volunteered to administer the survey to students in their classes. Students completed a paper and pencil version of the electronic survey during regular class meetings in the sixth week of an eight-week term.

Instrumentation. Ten general categories of syllabus components were identified in a review of the literature. Two to six items were developed per category to measure each category's perceived importance for inclusion in a course syllabus. The survey consisted of 31 items reflecting specific components for each general category (see Table 1). Respondents rated the importance of each item on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (Not Very Important) to 5 (Very Important.). Cronbach's alpha was .66 for the faculty responses to the survey and .83 for the students' responses.

Results

A descriptive analysis of the data revealed disparate perceptions between faculty and students on several items. The mean item rating for the survey was 4.5 for students and 3.7 for faculty. In general, students rated more items as important than faculty.

Students ($M = 4.1$) and faculty ($M = 4.0$) gave similar overall ratings of importance to five items under the general category "Course Descriptions" with the exception of "course title" where faculty ($M = 4.9$) rated it as more important than students ($M = 3.8$). For the category "Instructor Data," the mean rating was higher for students ($M = 4.4$) than for faculty ($M = 3.8$). The only notable difference is the rating for "instructor's home phone number"; students' mean rating for this item was 3.6, while the faculty mean rating was 1.9--the lowest rating of all the items.

For the general category "Papers/Projects," students' ($M = 4.7$) mean ratings for the items were higher than faculty ($M = 3.2$). This difference was the greatest among the ten categories. In response to the two items in the general category "Withdrawal Policy," students' ($M = 4.3$) mean ratings of the items were higher than faculty ratings ($M = 3.1$). This difference was the second greatest among the ten categories. Also, faculty rated this category as the least important of the categories.

For the general category "Goals and Objectives," the results indicated a slight difference between student ($M = 4.3$) and faculty ($M = 3.8$) mean ratings of the items. Students' ($M = 4.2$) mean ratings were higher than faculty ($M = 3.2$) for the general category "Activities and Participation." The difference was very small between student ($M = 4.8$) and faculty ($M = 4.5$) mean ratings on the two items for grading policy; however, both were relatively high. It was the highest rating given by faculty and a tie for the highest rating given by students--tied with exams.

Table 1. Preliminary study: Faculty and student ratings of desirable syllabus components

Category	Item	Rated item as important *
Course Description	Course Title	F

	Catalog Description	N
	Instructor's Description	F
	Chapters & Topics Covered	B
	Format of Class	B
Goals/Objectives	General Goals	F
	Specific Expectations	N
Activities & Participation	Requirements for Participation	N
	Daily Activities	N
Instructor Data	Instructor's Name	F
	Title	N
	Office Number	B
	Department Phone Number	B
	Desk (Ext.) Phone	S
	Home Phone	N
	Office Hours	B
Exams	Exam Format	S
	Exam Primary Content	S
	Exam Dates	S
Papers/Projects	Paper Length	S
	Paper Format	S
	Paper Examples	S
Field Experience	Time Required	B
	Log Format	S
Attendance Policy	Absences Allowed	B
	Penalty for Violations	B
	Exceptions	N
Withdrawal Policy	Grade Assignment Policy	B
	Exceptions	B
Grading Policy	Weights	B
	Letter-grade Value	B

* S = Students; F = Faculty; B = Both students and faculty; N = Neither students nor faculty

Primary Study

The findings from the pilot study indicated that faculty and students differ in their perceptions of important syllabus components. Suggestions from faculty and colleagues outside the university lead us to revise the instrument slightly, expand the diversity of the samples for both faculty and students, and gather more specific information on the background of survey respondents. For the primary study, faculty rank and affiliation were obtained. Also, the majority of students in the pilot study were education majors; the follow-up study consisted of a more diverse student sample. Revisions to the instrument included obtaining demographic information from faculty and students and adding four items describing the nature and function of the syllabus.

Method

Participants

Two hundred and eighty-nine students enrolled in 8 sections of introductory psychology were surveyed. Of the 289 students who completed the survey, only 242 surveys were used in the data analyses because the student failed to sign the accompanying consent form and/or respond to one or more items. Sixty-four percent of the students were female. This percentage is in alignment with the proportion of females in the student body (62%). Fifty-five percent were freshmen and 45% were continuing students. By major, 25% were arts and sciences, 17% business, 33% education, 3% fine arts, 4% nursing with the remainder declaring undecided or "other" for major. The ethnicity of the sample closely corresponded to that of the institution. Sixteen percent were African-American, 80% were Caucasian, and 5% were Native-American, Asian, or Other.

Seventy-four faculty members participated in the study. Of those, 49% were female which is somewhat disproportionate with the percentage of female (39%) faculty members at the university. The distribution for rank more closely corresponds to the university distribution - 7% were instructors, 40% assistant professor, 27% associate professor, and 26% full professor. For college affiliation, 34% were in the College of Arts and Sciences, 7% in Business Administration, 50% in Education, 5% in Fine Arts, 3% in Nursing, and 1% in other fields.

Participation was voluntary for both faculty and students. No incentives were provided for participation in the study.

Procedures

During the first week of class in the spring semester, 5 full-time faculty members teaching introductory psychology administered the surveys to their classes (8 separate sections). Students completed the survey prior to review of the course syllabus. After students completed the survey, course instructors collected the surveys and returned them to the researchers.

For faculty, the survey was conveyed via electronic mail through a faculty list server comprised of 536 subscribers. Over a six-week period, the survey was e-mailed on three separate occasions, generating responses from a total of 74 faculty members. The SAS statistical package was used to analyze the data using t-tests for unequal variances.

Instrumentation. The revised 38-item survey included 29 of the items in the original survey. Of those 29 items, six were collapsed into three items to reduce redundancy. The collapsed items were "statement of required outside work (e.g., field experience)" in place of "Field experience: a) time requirements and b) journal/log format"; "statement of course withdrawal policy" in place of "Withdrawal policy: a) grade assignment prior to midterm and b) exceptions"; and "general goals/objectives for each topic covered in the course" in place of "Objectives: a) general goals/outcomes and b) specific expectations for exams and other assessments." Two of the original items were deleted: "office number (including building)" and "primary source of exam's content." Five items were added: "instructor's email address," "The syllabus should contain a listing or schedule of topics that are covered in the course," "Nothing in the syllabus should be changed once the semester begins," "The syllabus should be adjusted periodically throughout the semester," and "The syllabus should provide a guide for students and faculty to help keep discussions and assignments in line with the stated objectives of the course."

Respondents rated the importance of each item on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (Not Important) to 3 (no opinion) to 5 (Very Important). Cronbach's alpha was .92 for the combined responses of students and faculty.

Results

Means, standard deviations, and *t* statistics for each item are reported in Table 2. As in the pilot study, important differences in student and faculty perceptions emerged in the analyses of the data. The mean scores for each group were compared for the total instrument as well as for individual items. T-tests

for unequal variances and unequal design were used to compare group means (Glass & Hopkins, 1996, p.295)

In order to examine general differences between faculty and student perceptions, the 38 items in the survey were summed for each respondent, mean scores were computed for each group, and the mean scores for the two groups were compared. The Welch t-test for unequal sample sizes and heterogeneous variances was used in order to accommodate the difference in sample size between the two groups. For the students, the mean was 150.36 with a standard deviation of 14.04; for faculty, the mean was 132.76 with a standard deviation of 15.25. Welch's t-test yielded $t(109) = 18.79, p < .001$.

The data were further analyzed by computing the difference between the mean response per item for students and faculty. Table 2 contains a listing of the survey items rank ordered by degree of difference in perceptions. Faculty and students differed significantly in their perceptions on 15 of the 39 items. An alpha of .001 was used to determine significance because of the number of comparisons being made (Glass & Hopkins, 1996). Examples of items (syllabus components) with differing perceptions between faculty and students included "examples of completed projects and papers," "instructor's home phone number," "basic format of examinations," "length of required projects/papers," "statement of course withdrawal policy," "listing of day-to-day class activities," and "dates of examinations." Faculty and students coincided the most in their perceptions for the following items: "instructor's email address," "grading scale for final course grade," "The syllabus should be adjusted periodically throughout the semester," and "The syllabus should contain a listing or schedule of topics that are covered in the course."

Both faculty and students indicated that most components/characteristics listed in the survey were important to include in the course syllabus. Only one item fell below the neutral position (rating of 3) for both groups -- "Nothing in the syllabus should be changed once the semester begins" -- indicating that students and faculty prefer a somewhat flexible syllabus. Faculty and students were in disagreement over only four of the components included in the survey, with faculty indicating that the components were not important. These items were "examples of projects/papers," "instructor's home phone number," "listing of day-to-day class activities," and "instructor's title/rank."

In contrast to the pilot study, faculty and students changed their rating from unimportant to important for "requirements for participation," and "catalog (verbatim) description." Faculty changed their responses to important for "desk phone number," "dates of examinations," "length of required projects/papers," and "basic format of examinations" in the primary study. Students changed their responses to important for "course title," "listing of day-to-day class activities," "instructor's name," "instructor's home phone number," and "instructor's general description of course."

Discussion

As noted earlier, little direction is provided in the literature for new course instructors, fresh from training or newly arrived from the field setting, on the desirable and useful components of college course syllabi. For new faculty, the results of this study provide guidance, informed by input from faculty across a mid-size, comprehensive university as well as students from a range of college majors. In general, faculty and students report preferring a more comprehensive syllabus. Both groups also report that flexibility is important. Syllabi should not be static documents, but should be revised as needed throughout the semester.

Table 2: Primary study: Rank-ordered survey items by degree of difference in perceptions.

Survey item	Faculty		Student		Diff.	<i>t</i>
	M	SD	M	SD		

27. examples of completed projects/papers	2.08	1.17	3.72	1.19	1.64	-10.51*
13. instructor's home phone number	1.93	1.26	3.56	1.17	1.63	-9.85*
22. basic format of examinations	3.43	1.31	4.72	0.65	1.29	-8.14*
25. length of required projects/papers	3.43	1.36	4.70	0.70	1.27	-7.75*
33. statement of course withdrawal policy	3.01	1.52	4.22	0.98	1.21	-6.44*
39. listing of day-to-day class activities	2.93	1.27	4.14	1.03	1.21	-7.41*
23. dates of examinations	3.88	1.28	4.90	0.47	1.02	-6.70*
26. format of written projects/papers	3.68	1.35	4.65	0.71	0.97	-5.97*
15. instructor's title/rank	2.72	1.34	3.67	1.16	0.95	-5.55*
35. specific goals/objectives for each topic	3.32	1.42	4.25	0.97	0.93	-5.24*
32. statement of exceptions to attendance policy	3.78	1.52	4.69	0.69	0.91	-4.98*
21. basic format of class meetings	3.74	1.30	4.39	0.94	0.65	-3.98*
11. instructor's desk phone number	4.11	1.39	4.74	0.65	0.63	-3.76*
36. statement of class participation requirements	4.09	1.16	4.65	0.65	0.56	-3.95*
17. course title with prefix & number	4.92	0.40	4.37	0.96	-0.55	7.09*
7. change nothing in syllabus once semester begins	2.39	1.31	2.94	1.26	0.55	-3.16
19. instructor's general description of course	4.05	1.19	4.50	0.76	0.45	-3.04
30. statement of allowable absences	4.35	1.19	4.79	0.72	0.44	-3.04
20. chapters and topics covered in course	4.32	1.10	4.74	0.67	0.42	-3.05
12. instructor's department phone number	4.28	1.23	4.62	0.81	0.33	-2.18
31. statement of penalties for exceeding allowable absences	4.49	1.05	4.76	0.73	0.27	-2.13
18. catalog (verbatim) description	3.57	1.44	3.81	1.08	0.24	-1.33
16. instructor's office hours	4.64	0.77	4.84	0.54	0.20	-2.17
9. The syllabus should provide a guide for students and faculty to help keep discussions and assignments in line with stated objectives of the course.	4.28	1.14	4.47	0.86	0.19	-1.30
24. statement of required projects/papers	4.74	0.62	4.88	0.48	0.14	-1.80
28. statement of required outside work (e.g., field experience)	4.66	0.67	4.52	0.82	-0.14	1.55
29. statement of attendance policy	4.65	0.90	4.77	0.68	0.12	-1.10
34. general goals/objectives of the course	4.64	0.84	4.53	0.85	-0.11	0.95
38. explanation of how the course grade is computed (e.g., weightings of exams, papers, etc.)	4.69	0.83	4.79	0.63	0.10	-0.96
10. instructor's name	4.84	0.57	4.74	0.74	-0.10	1.20
6. The syllabus should contain a listing or schedule of topics covered in the course.	4.59	0.92	4.68	0.84	0.09	-0.69
8. adjusted syllabus periodically during semester	3.01	1.22	3.09	1.23	0.08	-.48
37. grading scale for final course grade	4.82	0.63	4.86	0.50	0.04	-.44
14. instructor's email address	4.66	0.80	4.65	0.77	-0.01	0.13

* $p < .001$

Faculty members may better meet students' needs by including in their syllabi components that students believe to be particularly important. For example, the basic format of exams, length and format of required papers and projects, statement of course withdrawal policy, listing of day-to-day class activities, and specific goals/objectives for each topic were rated considerably more important by students than by faculty. The findings of this study may be used by faculty to view the course from the perspective of the student, realizing the importance of fully explaining materials related to successful performance in the course.

A limitation of the study is the faculty response rate to the survey. Approximately 14% of the faculty from across the university responded to the follow-up survey. Future efforts should consider procedures to encourage faculty participation. In addition, the focus of the university in which the data was collected is teaching; results may be somewhat different for institutions with a research focus. Also, the proportion of female faculty members responding to the survey was greater than their representation in the university population. The sampling technique may need to be altered in future studies to obtain a more representative sample. In addition, the findings of the study may be skewed somewhat because of the large proportion of female responders.

In summary, faculty may benefit from learning the correlation between student grades and perceptions of important syllabus components. Future studies should obtain an indicator of student academic performance to provide this information. To meet the needs of other audiences, future research should also consider the input of another primary stakeholder - institutional administration. Administrators typically are concerned with the requirements of program accreditation organizations, such as NCATE or SACS. These organizations are usually more concerned with how well an individual course meets program goals and requirements, as well as the mission of the academic unit. Information that conveys important information to this group may need to be included in a syllabus even though neither students nor faculty rated it as important for inclusion (e.g., the catalog description of the course).

In conclusion, although it may not be possible to develop an ideal syllabus that meets the needs and concerns of all stakeholders, faculty members to evaluate, and possibly improve, their course syllabi may use the findings of this study.

References

- Becker, A. H., & Calhoon, S. K. (1999). What introductory psychology students attend to on a course syllabus. *Teaching of Psychology*, 26 (1), 6-11.
- Davis, B. G. (1993). *Tools for teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Diamond, R. M. (1989). *Designing and improving courses and curricula in higher education: A systematic approach*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Glass, G., & Hopkins, K. (1996). *Statistical methods in education and psychology (3rd ed.)*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Hawthorne, E. M. (1994). Thoughts on teaching. In B. J. Frye (Ed.), *Teaching in college, a resource for college teachers* (pp.131-150). Cleveland, OH: Info-Tec.
- Markie, P. J. (1994). *A professor's duties: Ethical issues in college teaching*. Lanham: MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Matejka, K., & Kurke, L. B. (1994). Designing a great syllabus. *College Teaching*, 42(3), 115-117.
- Smith, M. F., & Razzouk, N. Y. (1993). Improving classroom communication: The case of the course syllabus. *Journal of Education for Business*, 68, 215-221.

Authors' Note

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Linda S. Garavalia, Division of CEPES, School of Education, University of Missouri - Kansas City, Kansas City, Missouri 64110.