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

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The authors examined student and faculty members' responses to a survey on the perceived importance of syllabus components. Initial responses from 72 faculty members and 83 undergraduates in a pilot study led to revisions in the survey instrument. Descriptive analyses from this initial investigation indicated differing perceptions of the importance of syllabus components 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 listserv; course instructors administered the surveys to students. In the primary study, 242 undergraduates and 74 faculty members responded to a 39-item survey. Using the Welch t-test revealed significant differences in faculty and student responses. The authors discuss these differences and their educational implications.

The course syllabus is a written communication between the course instructor and students, colleagues, and administrators. Regarded by many as a formal contract between the instructor and students, the syllabus may be binding in student (or faculty) appeal proceedings (Altman, 1999; Matejka & Kurke, 1994). Faculty members also may 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.

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Course syllabi range from half-page listings of the course title, text, and instructor's name to detailed course guides and study manuals. Ideally, a syllabus 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 approach the course content strategically, and course goals (Markie, 1994). Altman (1999) proposes that the syllabus is a guide for faculty and students, but that it can achieve that goal only if sufficient information is provided.

The primary purpose of this study was to explore which syllabus components are considered important by both faculty members and students and to identify areas where the two audiences differ in their perceptions.

We identified only one related study in a comprehensive review of the literature. Becker and Calhoon (1999) surveyed undergraduates enrolled in an introductory psychology course 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 by assigning ratings for the amount of attention they paid to the various components from 1 (no at*tention at all*) to 7 (a great deal of attention). 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, course withdrawal dates, course information (title, section number), and the academic dishonesty policy. These findings indicate that faculty need to highlight or call attention to important syllabus components such as these to which students may not readily attend.

Although empirical studies of syllabus components are scarce, several authors address the guiding purpose of this 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 achieve these purposes, Davis (1993) recommends including (a) basic course information, such as year and term, course number, room assignment, and 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, he suggests 11 items that the instructor should include in the syllabus (see Table 1).

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Table 1 Recommended Components of Course Syllabi (Davis, 1993)					
1.	Rationale for the sequence of topics				
2.	Format for class presentations and activities				
3.	Materials students need for the class				
4.	All student assignments and requirements				
5.	How work will be graded and its weight				
6.	Student responsibilities and the reason(s) for course policies				
7.	How students with special needs may arrange to receive appropriate accommodations				
8.	The course calendar, including specific opportunities for student feedback and other important dates				
9.	Time commitments that successful students are likely to make				
10.	Additional sources students can use to supplement required sources				
11.	A section where students may write in the names and phone numbers of other students 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—for example, "I, ______, have completely read this syllabus and understand and agree to the course requirements" (Matejka & Kurke, 1994, p. 115). Using this strategy may serve to heighten students' awareness of the importance of the information in the syllabus.

Although many of the syllabus components suggested above may seem standard or obvious to many instructors, Rubin (as cited in Diamond, 1989) found that, in practice, course syllabi frequently lack one or more of these components. Diamond (1989) suggests that rather than continuing to rely on standard syllabi, which often are little more than skeletal course outlines, faculty would better serve students' needs by developing course *manuals*, a type of very comprehensive syllabus. This approach is consistent with recommendations by other educators such as Davis (1993), who suggests including in syllabi handouts; summaries of readings and lecture materials to permit students to attend more carefully to presentations with less time expended taking notes; and samples of tests, answer keys, and student assignments. In contrast, Becker and Calhoon (1999) suggest that students may attend more closely to a concise, focused syllabus than to one containing lengthy information that may be ignored.

We suspect that many college professors think about their syllabi only in a few situations, such as when developing a new course, updating a syllabus for a new term, and / or 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, the syllabus usually represents 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, a syllabus is a type of contract outlining expectations for performance and responsibilities for both the instructor and students. Finally, the syllabus is a valuable communication device. For this study, we designed a survey to measure faculty and student perceptions of what components of college course syllabi are essential. After a pilot study, we modified the survey instrument slightly and administered it to faculty members and a new sample of students.

Pilot Study

Method

Participants

Five hundred and thirty-six faculty and 83 students at Valdosta State University, a Southeastern midsized, regional institution, were asked to participate voluntarily in the pilot study during the 1998 summer term. No incentives were provided to either group for participation; students could choose not to participate without penalty. Seventy-two faculty members (approximately 25%) and all 83 students in four undergraduate psychology courses agreed to participate. Three of the four courses were educational psychology courses; the fourth was an introductory psychology course.

Procedures

The survey was administered to faculty members via electronic mail through a faculty listserv comprising 536 subscribers. This listserv is used on a regular basis by university administrators and faculty members to communicate with all individuals in the university who hold a faculty employment classification. The first mailing generated 49 responses. One month later, 23 additional faculty 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 survey during regular class meetings in the sixth week of an eightweek term.

Instrumentation. A review of the literature identified 10 general categories of syllabus components. We developed two to six items per category to measure the perceived importance of each category's inclusion in a course syllabus, for a total of 31 items (see Appendix A). Respondents rated the importance of each item on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (*not very important*) to 5 (*very important*). Cronbach's alpha was .66 for the faculty members' responses to the survey and .83 for the students' responses.

Results

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

Students (M = 4.1) and faculty members (M = 4.0) gave similar overall ratings of the importance of five items under the general category "Course Description." The exception in this category was the item "course title," which faculty members (M = 4.9) rated 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 members (M = 3.8). The only notable difference in this category was the rating for the item "home phone"; the students' mean rating for this item was 3.6, whereas the faculty members' mean rating was 1.9—the lowest rating given to any of the items.

For the general category "Papers/Projects," students' (M = 4.7) mean ratings for the items was higher than faculty members' (M = 3.2). This difference was the greatest among the 10 categories. In response to the two items under the general category "Withdrawal Policy," students' (M = 4.3) mean rating of the items was higher than faculty members' rating (M = 3.1). This difference was the second greatest among the 10 categories. Also, faculty members rated this as the least important of the categories.

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For the general category "Goals/Objectives," the results indicated a slight difference between students' (M = 4.3) and faculty members' (M = 3.8) mean ratings of the items. Students' (M = 4.2) mean ratings were higher than faculty members' (M = 3.2) for the general category "Activities & Participation." The difference between students' (M = 4.8) and faculty members' (M = 4.5) mean ratings on the two items under "Grading Policy" was quite small; however, both ratings were relatively high. In fact, this was the highest rating given by faculty members and a tie—with "Exams"—for the highest rating given by students.

Primary Study

The findings from the pilot study indicated that faculty and students differ in their perceptions of important syllabus components. Suggestions from faculty members and colleagues outside the university led us to revise the survey instrument slightly for the primary study by expanding the diversity of the samples for both faculty and students and gathering more specific information on the backgrounds of survey respondents. For instance, we asked for faculty members' rank and affiliation. Also, the majority of students in the pilot study had been education majors; the primary study consisted of a more diverse student sample. All undergraduate degree programs at Valdosta State require Introduction to Psychology; thus, by selecting students from that course, we were able to survey students from across all disciplines. Other revisions we made to the survey instrument included obtaining demographic information from faculty members and students and adding four items describing the nature and function of the syllabus, for a total of 38 items.

Method

Participants

We surveyed 289 students enrolled in eight sections of introductory psychology. Of the 289 students who completed the survey, only 242 surveys were used in the data analyses because the remaining students failed to sign the accompanying consent form and/or respond to one or more items. The percentage of female students (64%) is in alignment with the proportion of females in the student body (62%). The ethnicity of the sample corresponded closely to that of the institution: Eighty percent were Caucasian, 16% were African American, and 5% were Native American, Asian, or Other.

Important Syllabus Components

Seventy-four faculty members (14%) participated in the study. Of those, 49% were female, which is somewhat disproportionate with the percentage of female faculty members (39%) at the university. The distribution for faculty rank corresponded more closely to the university distribution. As in the pilot study, no incentives were provided to faculty or students for participation in the study. See Table 2 for the demographic breakdown of primary study participants.

Procedures

During the first week of class in the spring semester 1999, five fulltime faculty members teaching introductory psychology administered the surveys to their classes (eight separate sections). Students completed the survey prior to reviewing the course syllabus. After students completed the survey, course instructors collected the surveys and returned them to the researchers.

Faculty members completed the survey via electronic mail through a faculty listserv comprising 536 subscribers. The survey was e-mailed to faculty members on three separate occasions over a six-week period, generating a total of 74 responses. The SAS statistical package was used to analyze the data, using *t*-tests for unequal variances.

Instrumentation. The revised 39-item survey included 29 of the items in the original survey. Of those 29 items, six were collapsed into three items to reduce redundancy, as follows:

- Item 28: "Statement of required outside work (e.g., field experience)" replaced "field experience: (a) time requirements and (b) journal/log format."
- Item 33: "Statement of course withdrawal policy" replaced "withdrawal policy: (a) grade assignment prior to midterm and (b) exceptions."
- Item 34: General goals/objectives of the course" replaced "objectives: (a) general goals/outcomes and (b) specific expectations for exams and other assessments."

We deleted two of the original items: "office number (including building)" and "primary source of exam's content."

We added five items:

• Item 14: "instructor's e-mail address."

Table 2 Demographic Data for Primary Study Participants							
Gender	Faculty $(n = 74)$	Students ($n = 242$)					
Male	38 (51%)	87 (36%)					
Female	36 (49%)	155 (64%)					
Affiliation/major							
Arts and Sciences	25 (34%)	61 (25%)					
Education	37 (50%)	80 (33%)					
Business	5 (7%)	41 (17%)					
Fine Arts	4 (5%)	7 (3%)					
Nursing	2 (3%)	10 (4%)					
Other/undecided	1 (1%)	43 (18%)					
Rank/class standing							
	Instructor = $5(7\%)$	Freshman = 132 (55%)					
	Asst. Professor = 30 (40%)	Sophomore = $76(31\%)$					
	Assoc. Professor = 20 (27%)	Junior = $23(10\%)$					
	Professor = 19 (26%)	Senior = $11(4\%)$					

- Item 6: "The syllabus should contain a listing or schedule of topics that are covered in the course."
- Item 7: "Nothing in the syllabus should be changed once the semester begins."
- Item 8: "The syllabus should be adjusted periodically throughout the semester."
- Item 9: "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 five-point Likert scale from 1 (*not important*) to 5 (*very important*), with 3 representing *no*

opinion. Cronbach's alpha for the combined responses of students and faculty was .92.

Results

Means, standard deviations, and *t* statistics for each item are reported in Appendix B. As in the pilot study, important differences between students' and faculty members' perceptions of syllabus components emerged in the analyses of the data. We compared the mean scores of each group for the total instrument as well as for individual items, using *t*-tests for unequal variances and unequal design to compare group means (Glass & Hopkins, 1996, p. 295).

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

We further analyzed the data by computing the difference between the mean response per item for students and faculty members. Because of the number of comparisons being made, we used an alpha of .001 to determine significance (Glass & Hopkins, 1996). Appendix B lists the survey items rank ordered by degree of difference in faculty members' and students' perceptions.

Both faculty members 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 (a rating of 3) for both groups—item 7, "Nothing in the syllabus should be changed once the semester begins"—indicating that students and faculty members prefer a somewhat flexible syllabus.

Appendix B shows that faculty members and students differed significantly in their perceptions on 15 of the 39 items. Examples of syllabus components whose importance was perceived differently by faculty members and students included item 27, "examples of completed projects/papers"; item 13, "instructor's home phone number"; item 22, "basic format of examinations"; item 25, "length of required projects/ papers"; item 33, "statement of course withdrawal policy"; item 39, "listing of day-to-day class activities"; and item 23, "dates of examinations." Faculty members and students corresponded most closely in their perceptions of the importance of the following items: item 14, "instructor's e-mail address"; item 37, "grading scale for final course grade"; item 8, "The syllabus should be adjusted periodically throughout the semester"; and item 6, "The syllabus should contain a listing or schedule of topics that are covered in the course."

Faculty members and students disagreed on only four of the components included in the survey: item 27, "examples of completed projects/ papers"; item 13, "instructor's home phone number"; item 39, "listing of day-to-day class activities"; and item 15, "instructor's title/rank." Faculty members indicated that these components are *not important*, whereas students' ratings ranged from *neutral* to *important*.

In contrast to the pilot study, in the primary study both faculty members' and students' ratings changed from *unimportant* to *important* for item 36, "statement of class participation requirements"; and item 18, "catalog (verbatim) description." Faculty members' responses changed from *unimportant* to *important* for item 11, "instructor's desk phone number"; item 23, "dates of examinations"; item 25, "length of required projects/papers"; and item 22, "basic format of examinations." Students' responses changed from *unimportant* to *important* for item 17, "course title with prefix & number"; item 39, "listing of day-to-day class activities"; item 10, "instructor's name"; item 13, "instructor's home phone number"; and item 19, "instructor's general description of course."

Discussion

As noted earlier, few empirical studies are available for new course instructors, fresh from training or newly arrived from the field setting, on the desirable and useful components of college course syllabi. The results of this study provide some of this needed guidance, informed by input from faculty members across a midsize, comprehensive university as well as students from a range of college majors. In general, faculty members 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. Although syllabi are not legally binding documents, a "good faith" agreement is implied in that syllabi should not be changed in a way that is punitive to students.

The study revealed that 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 as considerably more important by students than by faculty members. Faculty members may use the findings of this study to view the syllabus from the perspective of the student, realizing the importance of fully explaining components necessary for successful performance in the course.

A limitation of the study is the low (approximately 14%) response rate of faculty members to the survey. Future efforts should consider procedures to encourage faculty members' participation. In addition, the focus at Valdosta State is teaching; results may be somewhat different for institutions with more of 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. The findings of the study may be skewed somewhat because of the uneven proportion of male and female respondents.

Faculty members may benefit from learning the correlation between students' grades and their perceptions of important syllabus components. Thus, future studies should incorporate data on students' academic performance. Future research also should consider the input of another primary educational stakeholder—institutional administrators. Administrators typically are involved with the requirements of program accreditation organizations. These organizations usually are concerned with how well an individual course meets program goals and requirements, as well as the mission of the academic unit. Documents that convey important information to this group, such as the catalog description of the course, may need to be included in a syllabus, even though neither students nor faculty members rated them as important.

Many sources recommend that faculty regularly reflect upon and evaluate their own course syllabi. Richlin and Manning (1995) provide a user-friendly rating chart that focuses on three different sets of information conveyed in a syllabus: objectives and orientation, policies and requirements, and organization of the course. In addition, Grunert (1997) advocates involving students in all aspects of the learning process, including development of the syllabus. Faculty interested in improving the quality of their syllabi should obtain feedback from a variety of sources including students, other faculty members and administrators, and personal reflection.

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

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Appendix A

Pilot Study: Faculty and Student Ratings of Desirable Syllabus Components

Category	Item	Faculty Mean*	Student Mean*
Course Description	Course title	4.84	4.23
	Catalog description	2.98	3.46
	Instructor's description	3.64	4.38
	Chapter & topics covered	4.06	4.92
	Format of class	4.16	4.85
Course Goals/ Objectives	General goals	3.88	4.15
	Specific expectations	3.42	4.38
Activities & Participation	Requirements for participation	3.56	4.15
	Daily activities	2.56	4.15
Instructor Data	Instructor's name	4.68	4.54
	Title	2.79	4.31
	Office number	4.81	4.92
	Department phone number	4.56	4.92
	Desk (ext.) phone	3.61	4.54
	Home phone	1.98	4.08
	Office hours	4.83	5.00
Exams	Exam format	3.21	4.69
	Exam primary content	2.96	4.85
	Exam dates	3.71	4.85

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Category	Item	Faculty Mean*	Student Mean*
Papers/Projects	Paper length	3.43	5.00
	Paper format	3.83	5.00
	Paper examples	2.37	4.62
Field Experience	Time required	4.47	5.00
	Journal/log format	3.63	5.00
Attendance Policy	Absences allowed	3.98	4.92
	Penalty for violations	4.16	4.85
	Exceptions	3.58	4.62
Withdrawal Policy	Grade assignment policy	3.38	4.77
	Exceptions	3.58	4.62
Grading Policy	Weights	4.76	5.00
	Letter-grade value	4.36	4.69

Appendix A (continued)

*Mean rating based on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (*not very important*) to 5 (*very important*)

Appendix B

Primary Study: Rank-Ordered Survey Items by Degree of Difference in Perceptions

Survey Item		Faculty		Student		Difference	t
		<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>		
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	-3.76*
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*

Appendix B (continued)

Survey Item		Faculty		Student		Difference	t
7.	Nothing in the syllabus should be changed once the semester begins.	<u>M</u> 2.39	<u>SD</u> 1.31	<u>M</u> 2.94	<u>SD</u> 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 the 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

Important Syllabus Components

Survey Item		Faculty		Student		Difference	t
		<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>		
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 that are covered in the course.	4.59	0.92	4.68	0.84	0.09	69
8.	The syllabus should be adjusted periodically throughout the 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 e-mail address	4.66	0.80	4.65	0.77	-0.01	0.13

*p < .001

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