Syllabus Length and Use of Images: An Empirical Investigation of Student Perceptions

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Although the syllabus is one of the most widely used documents in higher education, research investigating the effectiveness of this tool is minimal. The current study investigates student perception of the course and professor based on the syllabus. A total of 149 students were randomly assigned to one of six syllabus conditions focusing on syllabus length (i.e., short, medium, and long) and the inclusion of images. Participants completed questionnaires and participated in a focus group regarding their perceptions of the course and the professor. Results revealed that students reviewing the medium or long syllabi, as compared to the short syllabus, had a more positive impression of the course and professor. No significant differences were found for images versus no images. The majority of students (i.e., 66.6%) indicated a preference for a long syllabus with all assignment details versus a shorter syllabus with assignment details being provided later in the semester. The implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords: syllabus, student perception, length, images, college
viewed the friendly version perceived the faculty member to be more approachable and more motivated to teach. Thus, these studies emphasize how minor changes on an important document can make a positive impact on student perception and actions.

One important element of a syllabus that faculty often consider is syllabus length. Before technology was so accessible, faculty typically kept their syllabi to 1 or 2 pages because of printing costs and environmental concerns. Given the widespread use of mobile technology, it may no longer be important for syllabi to be short. To our knowledge, there are only two studies that have investigated syllabus length. Saville, Zinn, Brown, and Marchuk (2010) investigated the relationship between syllabus length and detail and students’ perceptions of the teacher. In their study, 97 students reviewed either a brief version of the syllabus (2 pages) or a more detailed version (6 pages). Both syllabi included the same core information, but the longer syllabus provided additional details. For example, instead of just indicating there would be an exam, the structure of the exam was described in the detailed version. On all teacher characteristics, the students perceived the professor of the detailed syllabus more positively, were more likely to recommend the course, and were more interested in taking additional courses with the same professor. Jenkins, Bugeja, and Barber (2014) also investigated the relationship between syllabus detail and perceived effectiveness of the instructor. In this study, 126 undergraduates reviewed one of three different syllabi: a 2-page syllabus, a 3-page syllabus that included a list of course expectations and policies, or a 3-page syllabus that included additional information on the content and topics that would be addressed in the course. Students who reviewed the syllabus that included policies and course expectations perceived the instructor to be more competent than students who reviewed the other two syllabi.

These findings indicate that students appreciate a longer, more detailed syllabus, especially when additional information on course expectations and policies are provided. However, the long syllabus in Jenkins et al. (2014) study was only 3 pages, and the syllabus in the Saville and colleagues (2010) study was only 6 pages. Many faculty use syllabi that are much longer. In fact, in the guidelines for developing exemplary syllabi that is published on the Society for the Teaching of Psychology Project Syllabus website, Slattery and Carlson (n.d.) suggest faculty “err on the side of inclusion rather than exclusion” (p. 2). The inclusion of grading rubrics and other assignment details can significantly increase the length of the syllabus. While the length of the peer-reviewed syllabi that have been deemed as exemplars on the Project Syllabus website vary, many examples are over 10 pages and some are closer to 20 pages in length. Another reason why syllabi may also be longer is due to the inclusion of images and graphics. The power of images has been well documented (Goswami, 2008; Mayer, 2009; McBride & Dosher, 2002). With regards to the syllabus, Nilson (2007) has suggested using graphics such as flowcharts and concept maps to clearly communicate course information. Many of the exemplars posted on the Project Syllabus website include images and graphics. For example, photographs related to the course content or of the textbook cover and graphs and charts are often included.

The primary purpose of this study was to further investigate syllabus length, especially the student perception of a much longer syllabus (15 pages). A secondary purpose was to explore the impact of images on the student perception of the course and instructor. The hypotheses were as follows:

**Hypothesis 1:** Students would perceive the course and instructor more positively when presented with a longer syllabus (15 pages) as compared to a medium syllabus (9 pages) or short syllabus (6 pages).

**Hypothesis 2:** Students would prefer a syllabus that includes all the assignment details rather than a syllabus that provides only the basic information with assignment details provided later in the semester.

**Hypothesis 3:** Students reviewing syllabi with images, charts, and graphs would view the course and instructor more positively.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants consisted of 149 (65 males and 84 females) community college students re-
recruited from classes offered in the Department of History and Social Sciences at a large Northeastern community college. Participants were between the ages of 17 and 51 years ($M = 21.2$, $SD = 4.7$). Students were of a diverse background consisting of White (39.6%), Hispanic (26.5%), Asian (10.7%), and African American (10.1%) students. The remaining 11.5% of participants were another race/ethnicity or more than one race/ethnicity. Students completed an average of 23.4 credits ($SD = 4.7$, range = 3–84 credits) and had an average grade point average (GPA) of 3.14 ($SD = .55$, range = 2.00–4.00). Ethical approval was obtained from our Institutional Review Board and the study protocol adhered to all American Psychological Association ethical guidelines.

Materials

Six syllabi were developed by the first author (C. H.). It should be noted that the syllabi were adapted from a version that was peer-reviewed by the Project Syllabus team and posted as an exemplar on the Society for the Teaching of Psychology website. The syllabi were for a life span development psychology course, and all versions incorporated content and design best practices. Syllabi varied based on length (short, medium, and long) and the inclusion of images. The short syllabi had 6 pages, the medium syllabi had 9 pages, and the long syllabi had 15 pages. The syllabi were as follows: short syllabi with and without images, medium syllabi with and without images, and long syllabi with and without images. The short length included the following information: overview of the course (description, learning outcomes, and topics to be covered), instructor contact information, textbooks and other resources needed, policies, general assignment information, and a course outline. This information required 6 pages. The medium syllabi (9 pages) differed from the short syllabi in that it offered details about the assignments for the course, study tips, and campus resource information (i.e., tutoring, librarian support, and counseling services). The long syllabi (15 pages) differed from the medium syllabi in that it offered more detailed information about the assignments including grading rubrics. A gender neutral name, Dr. Smith, was used on all of the syllabi. All of the syllabi with images conditions included photographs of three stages of life, a photograph of the textbook cover, and a pie chart of the grading system. The medium and long syllabi with images also included SmartArt highlighting what students need to do before, during, and after class. The six syllabi were organized using randomization software before being distributed to students.

We developed a 15-item syllabus perception questionnaire based on questionnaires from other syllabus studies (Buchert, Laws, Apperson, & Bregman, 2008; Harnish & Bridges, 2011). Twelve items on the questionnaire were on a 5-point Likert scale. Briefly, students were asked to rate their impressions of the course and the instructor, their expectations about the professor (i.e., supportive, caring, and helpful), and their motivation to take the course. Higher scores indicated more positive perceptions of the instructor and the course. We also included the following three open-ended questions inquiring about their initial impressions on the syllabus and their overall thoughts about the syllabus: (a) “What one word best describes this syllabus?” (b) “What one word best describes your reaction to this syllabus?” (c) “Please share any other thoughts and reactions to the syllabus.”

Procedure

Faculty teaching in the history and social sciences department were asked to encourage their students to participate in a syllabus perceptions study. It was suggested that participation in this study be offered as one of the extra credit options for their course and faculty referring their students agreed to do so. During the final weeks of the Spring 2015 semester, community college students were invited to participate in the study. Students were informed that there were two parts of the study (survey and focus group) and that participation would take approximately 1 hr to complete. There were seven sessions held for the study: three sessions took place after introductory psychology classes (taught by C. G.-Q.) and four sessions took place at various times throughout the week outside of class time (held by C. H.). Sessions

1 For those interested in samples of the syllabi, please go to http://www.drchristineharrington.org/

2 Students were also offered extra credit for their participation. Approximately 80% of students stayed for the study session held by C. G.-Q.
followed the same procedure with researchers first reviewing the consent form and general purpose of the study. After informed-consent forms were signed, students were then randomly distributed the syllabi based on how they were arranged in the classroom. After students reviewed the syllabus, they then completed the syllabus perceptions questionnaire. Once all students had time to complete the questionnaire, the researchers began the second half of the session consisting of a focus group about course syllabi. Students were asked to respond to the following questions: (a) “What makes a syllabus effective?” (b) “What makes a syllabus motivational?” (c) “Would you prefer a short syllabus with details to follow or a long syllabus with assignment details included?” All students had the opportunity to express their opinion in the focus group and their responses were recorded on an overhead screen. Students were then provided with documentation of participation to provide to their professor for the purposes of earning extra credit.

Results

All analyses were conducted through SPSS (version 16.0). Before any analyses were conducted, individual items were checked for univariate normality with skewness $\leq 2$ and kurtosis $\leq 7$. Data were normally distributed for all variables in the analyses. Chi-square and one-way ANOVA analyses were conducted to determine if randomization of the syllabi were successful. Analyses revealed successful randomization in that groups did not differ in demographic (i.e., gender, age, race; $p > .05$) or academic variables (i.e., GPA, credits completed; $p > .10$).

Quantitative Analyses

We conducted several 3 (Syllabus Length: short, medium, long) $\times$ 2 (Images: images and no images) ANOVAs on each of the 12 quantitative items of the syllabus perception questionnaire. The analyses revealed that there were no significant differences among syllabi with images versus no images (see Table 1). However, six of the items were significantly different across the groups for syllabus length. Post hoc analyses (i.e., Tukey’s honest significant difference) were conducted to see which syllabus/syllabi were significantly different than the others (see Table 2).

Overall impressions of the course varied among the participants depending on syllabus length, $F(2, 145) = 3.04, p = .05$. More specifically, those with a medium syllabus ($M = 4.28, SD = .78$) had a greater overall impression of their instructor than those with a short syllabus ($M = 3.90, SD = .83; p = .048$). There were no significant group differences for a long syllabus ($p > .05$). Syllabus length also played a role in students’ overall impressions of the instructor, $F(2, 145) = 5.50, p = .005$. Those with a medium syllabus ($M = 4.08, SD = .85$) had a greater overall impression of the course than those with a short syllabus ($M = 3.52, SD = .85; p = .003$). There were no significant group differences for a long syllabus ($p > .05$).

Syllabus length played a role in how much the student felt the instructor cared about them, $F(2, 145) = 5.64, p = .004$. Those with medium ($M = 4.06, SD = .77; p = .027$) and long ($M = 4.14, SD = .86; p = .006$) syllabi expected the instructor to be more caring than those with a short syllabus ($M = 3.63, SD = .82$). Differences also emerged in the helpfulness of the instructor, $F(2, 145) = 7.26, p = .001$. Students with medium ($M = 4.42, SD = .64; p = .004$) or long ($M = 4.42, SD = .70; p = .004$) syllabi

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inclusion of images</th>
<th>No images</th>
<th>Images</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impressions of course</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impressions of professor</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive professor</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring professor</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helpful professor</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willingness to seek help</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation in course</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interested in course</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear course expectations</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course difficulty</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course effort</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade in course</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>.65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $N = 149$. Higher scores indicate positive perceptions of professor and course. No significant differences were identified.
expected the instructor to be more helpful than those with a short syllabus ($M = 3.92, SD = .90$).

There were also differences in syllabus length in students’ willingness to seek help from their instructor, $F(2, 145) = 3.37, p = .04$. Those with a medium ($M = 4.38, SD = .60; p = .035$) syllabus were more willing to seek help from their instructor than those with a short syllabus ($M = 3.96, SD = .99; p = .035$). There were no significant group differences for a long syllabus ($ps > .05$). Finally, there were significant differences in students’ motivation depending on syllabus length, $F(2, 145) = 6.20, p = .003$. Those with a medium ($M = 4.10, SD = .84; p = .002$) or long ($M = 3.92, SD = .70; p = .056$) syllabi were more motivated to take the course compared to those with a short syllabus ($M = 3.52, SD = .95$).

Demographic (i.e., age and gender) and academic variables (GPA and course credits) were examined as moderators that may play a role in the effect of syllabus length on students’ perceptions of the syllabus. More specifically, separate factorial ANOVAs were conducted for each moderator. Significant and trend findings were further examined using simple main effects analysis (i.e., separate one-way ANOVAs for each level of the moderator). Course credits\(^3\) emerged as a moderator (see Table 3), of how much the student felt the instructor cared about them, $F(3, 143) = 2.61, p = .054$, and the helpfulness of the instructor, $F(3, 143) = 2.84, p = .040$. Simple main effects analyses were conducted to examine these findings. There were no significant findings for students with fewer than 24 credits in the impact of syllabus length on the instructor caring about them or the helpfulness of the instructor ($ps > .10$). However, significant findings did emerge for students with more than 24 credits in the impact of syllabus length on the instructor caring about them, $F(2, 52) = 6.42, p = .003$, and the helpfulness of the instructor, $F(2, 145) = 6.20, p = .003$. More specifically, for students with more than 24 credits who had a medium ($p = .002–.008$) or long ($p = .011–.018$) syllabus, they found the instructor to be more caring and more helpful than those with a short syllabus.

### Qualitative Analyses

**Open-ended questions.** The responses for the open-ended questions were examined for trends. Students were asked, in one word, to describe their initial reaction to the syllabus. Students were also asked to offer any other thoughts and reactions to the syllabus (not limited to one word). We separated those responses to the syllabus into positive and negative descriptors. There were more positive one-word descriptors (85%) compared to negative one-word descriptors (15%). The number of positive and negative one-word descriptors was similarly distributed among syllabi length. Students viewing syllabi with images did indicate more positive words (89.4%) as compared to students viewing syllabi without images (76.5%). The following positive words were most frequently used by students (frequency indicated in parentheses): organized (30), informative (23), clear (20), detailed (16), helpful (11), impressed (11), interesting (10), understandable (10), thorough (9), descriptive (5), and useful (5). The most frequently used negative one-word response to the syllabus was overwhelmed (11). Other neg-

\(^{3}\)Course credit was split into two groups: fewer than 24 credits ($n = 94$) and more than 24 credits ($n = 55$).
Table 3
Moderator Analyses for the Impact of Course Credits on the Differences in Syllabus Length (Short, Medium, Long) in Syllabus Perceptions Questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Syllabus length</th>
<th>Short</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Long</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fewer than 24 credits</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring professor</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>3.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helpful professor</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>4.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 24 credits</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring professor</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>4.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helpful professor</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>4.81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Short syllabus = 6 pages; Medium syllabus = 9 pages; Long syllabus = 15 pages. Higher scores indicate positive perceptions of professor and course. Fewer than 24 credits, n = 94. More than 24 credits, n = 55.

Active words included nervous (3); boring, disinterested, and tense (all 2); and bombarded, demanding, disappointed, exhausting, inefficient, intimidated, monotone, and overload (all 1).

Some of the positive direct quotes from the students included the following: “I love classes with detailed syllabus, there are never any surprises and I know exactly what I’m supposed to do at all times.” “It is a great syllabus—it shows exactly what is needed and what is expected and describes everything you need to know.” “I like how much detail there is in the syllabus; it gives you a complete outline of the course. You have a clear idea of what is expected of you.” “When I first glanced at the syllabus I was very intimidated. When I read through it, it started to become clear and I was able to understand what was expected of me.” An example of a negative direct student quote is as follows: “I felt as though it was very specific. Most students will not read it. It’s almost like going to a restaurant with a menu that has 15 pages. You really don’t know what to get.”

Focus group. When asked about their preferences for a syllabus, more students preferred a longer syllabus with assignment details (66.6%) versus a short syllabus with details to follow (33.4%). Students also discussed what makes a syllabus effective. Trends in responses during the focus group sessions were examined. All seven focus groups identified grading information, course outline, and professor contact information as important elements. Policy information, books and online materials needed, and specific due dates was identified by six of the seven focus groups. Visual appeal (color, images, graphic art) and course description was identified by five of the focus groups. Four focus groups identified clear and organized information and assignment details as being important.

There was also a discussion about what makes a syllabus motivational. Students most frequently mentioned tone, positive language, availability and extra credit, with six of the seven focus groups identifying these factors. Other responses included organization, images or graphics, interesting assignments and tasks, information about the professor, and options for assignments.

Discussion

Students perceived all versions of the syllabi positively. As noted in the results, 85% of students used a positive word to describe the syllabus. The average scores for the impression of the course and the instructor were also high across the different syllabus conditions, ranging from 3.9 to 4.3 for the course and 3.5 to 4.1 for the instructor (on a 5-point Likert scale with 5 being the highest score). Thus, this study provides some evidence that including all of the elements suggested by Slattery and Carlson (n. d.) and the Project Syllabus team, Society for the Teaching of Psychology, does result in positive student impressions of the course and professor.

Previous research has suggested that students perceive faculty associated with longer syllabi more positively than faculty using shorter syllabi (Saville et al., 2010) and appreciate the inclusion of policy information (Jenkins et al., 2014). The current study provides additional evidence that students prefer a longer syllabus, with two thirds of the students in this study indicating they preferred a longer syllabus. Furthermore, students reviewing a 9- or 15-page syllabus, as compared to a 6-page syllabus, expected the professor to be more caring and helpful and were more motivated to take the
course. This finding was also true for students who had 24 or more credits. It is difficult to know why students with 24 or more credits had more favorable impressions of the professor and with a medium or long syllabus and higher levels of motivation to take the course. Given this finding, it may be worthwhile for future researchers to look at how student perceptions of syllabi may vary based on their experiences as a college student. Providing details about the assignments and including helpful study tips and campus resources may increase student motivation and contribute to a more positive perception of the professor. Given that previous research has demonstrated the impact of teacher characteristics on student motivation (Patrick, Hisley, & Kempler, 2000) and intent to persist in college (Wheless et al., 2011), these additions to the syllabus may have the potential for a significant, long-lasting positive impact for students. There may also be benefits for the faculty. Laws, Apperson, Buchert, and Bregman (2010) illustrated the power of initial impressions in their study, finding that student impressions of faculty on the first day of the semester predicted student evaluations at the end of the term.

While it seems clear that adding details about assignments is important, it is still unclear whether grading rubrics need to be included in the syllabus. Students who reviewed the medium syllabus (9 pages) that included assignment details, study tips, and campus resources had a more positive overall impression of the course and professor than students reviewing a 6- or 15-page syllabus. This suggests that the inclusion of the grading rubrics in the syllabus, which were included in the 15-page version, may not be necessary. However, it should be noted that during the focus group, 66.6% of the students indicated that they would prefer a syllabus that included all of the assignment information in one document rather than receiving assignment details later on in the semester. Perhaps an important mediating variable is how the syllabus is reviewed or used during class. When professors explain the rationale for including the rubrics and the value of having all of the essential course information in one document, students may appreciate the value of this comprehensive resource. On the other hand, if the document is simply provided without explanation, students may not find it helpful and may even perceive it to be overwhelming, a word chosen by 11 students in this study to describe the syllabus. The impact of including grading rubrics in the syllabus is an area that warrants future research.

Students who reviewed the medium (9 pages) syllabus reported a higher willingness to seek help. Previous research has demonstrated how including additional supportive information in a syllabus may increase the likelihood of a student seeking support when needed. For example, Perrine et al. (1995) found that students reviewing a syllabus with six additional words—"Please come and talk to me"—indicated higher levels of willingness to seek help compared to students who reviewed the exact same syllabus without those six words. The current study suggests that including assignment information, study tips, and campus resource information may also increase help-seeking behavior. Strategies that increase the likelihood of students seeking assistance when needed are important because research has found that seeking help can improve student performance (Raskind, Goldberg, Higgin, & Herman, 1999; Strage et al., 2002). Meanwhile, students reviewing the long syllabus were not more likely to seek help, even though this syllabus also included the assignment information, study tips, and campus resource information. Perhaps students did not see the need for help-seeking because the assignment expectations and grading rubrics provided a comprehensive understanding of the expectations. While it is important for students to seek help when needed, it can also be quite time consuming for faculty to respond to numerous student questions about course expectations. It is possible that providing a comprehensive syllabus could reduce the number of questions posed by students about assignment and course expectations. Thus, it is possible that although creating a longer syllabus is a more time consuming task at the beginning of the semester, it may save faculty time later on in the semester. Perhaps future research could investigate the impact of a longer, more detailed syllabus on student questions and e-mails throughout the semester.

No significant differences were found between the images versus no images syllabus conditions; however, the value of images in learning has been well documented (Goswami, 2008; Mayer, 2009; McBride & Dosher, 2002),
and the use of graphics in the syllabus has been suggested (Nilson, 2007). Because all versions of the syllabus were well organized and used white space, large bold headings, and tables, it is possible that the use of images and graphs did not add much value. It may be that the overall organization is the most important variable. However, it is important to note that visual appeal including color, images, and graphic art was identified as an important element of the syllabus by five out of the seven focus groups and students viewing the syllabi with images did use more positive word descriptors (89.4%) than those who viewed syllabi without images (76.5%). Perhaps the use of images and graphs in the syllabus may have more of an impact on recall and learning. Because some research has shown that students do not recall syllabus content at high levels (Smith & Razzouk, 1993) and numerous experimental research studies have demonstrated that images increase learning of course content (Mayer, 2009), an investigation of whether images in the syllabus help students attend to and recall important information about the class is warranted.

As for what students believe is important in a syllabus, the following components were identified by the majority of the focus groups: grading information, course outline, professor contact information, policy information, books and online materials needed, specific due dates, visual appeal (color, images, graphic art), course description, clear and organized information, and assignment details. Many of these components (i.e., course description, instructor information, and assignment and exam information) have been previously identified as important by students and faculty (Garavalia, Hummel, Wiley, & Huitt, 1999). In addition, the student-generated ideas about what is important is also consistent with what professionals in the field recommend (Grunert O’Brien, Millis, & Cohen, 2008).

While the results of this study do extend previous research and add to the literature on this important topic, it is necessary to recognize the limitations of this study. First, this was not a random sample. Caution therefore needs to be used when generalizing these findings to the community college population at large or to other populations such as students in 4-year college/university settings. Another limitation is that this study looked at the syllabus in isolation and not in the context of an actual course. Future studies could seek to understand how the syllabus is perceived in actual courses rather than as standalone documents. The way in which a faculty member reviews or uses the syllabus in a course may significantly alter student perceptions and subsequent actions. Finally, this study relied on student perceptions rather than actual student behaviors. It is unclear if students who indicate that they would seek help would actually do so when the time came.

In conclusion, this study provides some evidence that including assignment details, study tips, and campus resource information can positively influence student perceptions of the course and professor. It also seems to contribute to student motivation and willingness to seek help. Some areas for future research include the impact of images or graphics in the syllabus, whether including grading rubrics in the syllabus or later on in the semester leads to the best outcomes, whether syllabus perceptions vary by student experiences and by course content or discipline, and how the syllabus may impact actual student behaviors and academic performance.

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