

Title

It's in the Syllabus!

Introduction

No empirical study is needed to determine, "It's in the syllabus!" is the most frustrating exclamation a professor may say to their students. To address this frustration, the present study empirically answers: (1) A question every professor wants to know the answer to: "How many of my students REALLY read the syllabus?" And (2) a question every professor may NOT want to know the answer to: "Does it matter whether my students REALLY read the syllabus?"

Methods

This study is based on 97 sections of online General Psychology (2,040 students) and 46 sections of online Human Sexuality (922 students) at Northwest Vista College in San Antonio Texas from the spring of 2007 through the fall of 2023.

The syllabi in these 143 sections of psychology courses were "standard" syllabi one would expect to find in typical college courses. The syllabi describe (in about 3,000 words) the course's instructor, reading materials, content, objectives, calendar, grading, extra credit, attendance policy, integrity policy, disability statement, and information about the college's psychology club.

Within the integrity policy, the following statement was included, "Wow! You are still reading this syllabus? Impressive. Message me the words "red-with blue and PURPLE polka dots" by ***date that is three days after the start of the semester*** and you will get two bonus points for simply reading the syllabus! Shh, by the way, do not share this with others, if they do not read the syllabus, then too bad so sad, it will be our own little secret."

Syllabi had their own exclusive online "Discussion" and were readily available to students throughout the duration of the courses. Additionally, the first week of the courses served as an orientation in which only content relative to the courses' formats was covered—including expectations students should have of the courses and their instructor; and expectations the courses and instructor has of the students. One of these expectations was to read the syllabus. Each of the following statements was shared with students during the first week of the courses:

"Read the syllabus. Really read it! There are some surprises within it... (And yes, because of these surprises, I will really know whether you read it.)"

"You'll find the syllabus within the Discussions titled "Here is Your Syllabus." If you do not understand everything within the syllabus, then you will not do well in this course—so please do not just skim over it."

"Print a copy of the syllabus and keep it with you when you are in this course—it has ALL the information you need to know about how to perform WELL in this course."

The gradebooks in these 143 sections of psychology courses provided: (1) whether the students were female or male, (2) whether the students had messaged "red-with blue and PURPLE polka dots" to the instructor (i.e., the operational definition of whether a student REALLY read the syllabus), and (3) the students' final course grades.

Results

Overall, the 2,962 students' grade point average (GPA)—on a scale from 0 to 4, in the two online psychology courses, was 2.39 (SD = 1.57). Their grade distribution (GD) was 36% A's, 19% B's, 15% C's, 7% D's, and 23% F's. Seventy-eight percent of the students were female and 22% were male. Forty-eight percent of the students read the syllabus.

Of the 1,430 students who read the syllabus, their GPA was 2.69 (SD = 1.47) and their GD was 43% A's, 20% B's, 15% C's, 6% D's, and 16% F's. Eighty-one percent of these students were female and 19% were male. Whereas, of the 1,532 students who did not read the syllabus, their GPA was 2.12 (SD = 1.61) and their GD was 29% A's, 19% B's, 16% C's, 7% D's, and 29% F's. Seventy-five percent of these students were female and 25% were male. A two-sample for variances F-Test found the students' GPA (2.69) who read the syllabus to be significantly higher than the students' GPA (2.12) who had not read the syllabus ($p = .0004$). Additionally, female students were more likely to have read the syllabus than male students.

Forty-nine percent of the 2,040 students taking general psychology read the syllabus—of these 996 students who read the syllabus, their GPA was 2.79 (SD = 1.44) and their GD was 46% A's, 21% B's, 14% C's, 5% D's, and 15% F's. Eighty percent of these students were female and 20% were male. Whereas, of the 1,044 students who did not read the syllabus, their GPA was 2.19 (SD = 1.59) and their GD was 30% A's, 20% B's, 15% C's, 7% D's, and 27% F's. Seventy-four percent of these students were female and 26% were male. A two-sample for variances F-Test found the students' GPA (2.79) who read the general psychology syllabus to be significantly higher than the students' GPA (2.19) who had not read the syllabus ($p = .0005$). Additionally, female students were more likely to have read the general psychology syllabus than male students.

Forty-seven percent of the 922 students taking human sexuality read the syllabus—of these 434 students who read the syllabus, their GPA was 2.43 (SD = 1.52) and their GD was 36% A's, 19% B's, 18% C's, 8% D's, and 20% F's. Eighty-three percent of these students were female and 17% were male. Whereas, of the 488 students who did not read the syllabus, their GPA was 1.98 (SD = 1.62) and their GD was 28% A's, 15% B's, 17% C's, 8% D's, and 32% F's. Seventy-seven percent of these students were female and 23% were male. A two-sample for variances F-Test found the students' GPA (2.43) who read the human sexuality syllabus may be significantly higher than the students' GPA (1.98) who had not read the syllabus ($p = .08$). Additionally, female students were more likely to have read the human sexuality syllabus than male students.

Discussion

This study found (1) less than half (48%) of college students read their courses' syllabi and (2) students who read their courses' syllabi are significantly more successful (GPA = 2.69) in their courses than students who do not read their courses' syllabi (GPA = 2.12). Also, female students are more likely to read their courses' syllabi than male students.

These results show this is much more than a tongue-in-cheek study. Indeed, reading the syllabus accounts for more than half of a letter grade and about a 14% increase in the chances of gaining an A in a college course.

Previous research searching for the percentage of students reading the syllabus have yielded as few as 0%—for example, from the viral news story about Professor Kenyon Wilson at the University of

Tennessee, who put the statement, “free to the first who claims; locker one hundred forty-seven; combination fifteen, twenty-five, thirty-five,” within a syllabus for his performing arts seminar class; and found no one to claim what was free within the locker—a \$50 bill. Other research has yielded favorable results for this percentage, Professors Sharon Calhoun and Angela Becker of Indiana University found 98% of their students “used” the syllabus, but the students did not necessarily “read” the syllabus as the professor “expected” them or “wanted” them to.

Unlike previous research, the present study examined students’ behaviors over 16 years in 143 sections of courses—not just a single semester or course section. Thus, logic dictates the present study’s findings about the percentage of students reading the syllabus may be more accurate than previous studies.

Lastly, it should be noted, some educators argue the syllabus is pedagogically antiquated (i.e., it’s too long; it’s too much about the professor; it’s too much about policies) and the current generation of students “should not” be required to read the syllabus in the manner that “bad” professors expect them to be reading it (Weaver, 2022). Hence, for a professor to even pose the question to students, “did you read the syllabus?” Or expect their students to have thoroughly read the syllabus is creating a “barrier to teaching and learning.”

Although this anti-syllabus ideology exists, the fact remains, the preponderance of college courses has syllabi and the present study’s results demonstrate mastering the skill of reading and understanding course syllabi is a skill that pays significant dividends for student success.

References

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