

College Students' Perceptions: The Influence of Syllabi Structural Elements on Course Performance

Mary Giles^{ORCID}

Department of Educational Studies, The University of Tennessee at Martin, Martin, USA
Email: mgiles7@utm.edu

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Abstract

Course syllabi have been used in college classrooms for decades. Despite their usage, there is limited data to determine their effectiveness. There is also a lack of clarity in the most appropriate structure and elements needed to influence students' course performance. Professors' course syllabi tend to be the first form of communication to students to share policies, assignments, and other course materials. Syllabi often provide course outlines that include methods to communicate, topics of discussion, and expected outcomes. Some colleges use a unified template, while others allow professors to choose their structure. The purpose of this study was to investigate students, from a West Tennessee University undergraduate course, perceptions of course syllabi structure influence on their course performance. A quantitative method was used during a group approach to distribute questions that allowed the researcher to gain insight of students' perceptions. The findings of this study found that 85% of students viewed syllabi structural elements as essential to course performance, though formatting, organization, and length could be barriers to readability and usefulness.

Keywords

Syllabi, Syllabus, Framework, Structural Elements, Course Performance

1. Introduction

For decades, college professors have used syllabi to share critical components to help students navigate their courses effectively (Hess & Whittington, 2003). The syllabus is often referred or described as the roadmap, handbook, or the guide for the courses (Calhoun & Becker, 2008). Other researchers define syllabi as the de-

fining document for both the students and the instructor (Bowers-Campbell, 2015). The syllabus is often thought as one of the most important symbolic pieces of a college course experience (Matejka & Kurke, 1994). Students are often able to tell the personality of the instructors and their investment to the course through their interactions and reading of the course syllabus (Matejka & Kurke, 1994). The syllabus is the very first impression that the instructor makes with students in a course (Matejka & Kurke, 1994). Thus, it should be transparent and easy to understand.

Professors often provide syllabi to students at the beginning of the course and refer to it throughout the entirety of the course to hold both the student and them accountable (Beatie et al., 1984). The whole intention of the syllabus is to reach the students and make sure that the expectations are tangible (Perrault, 2026). Professors tend to go over the syllabus with the students or have them read the content of it prior to beginning the content in their course (Beatie et al., 1984). The hope is that the students understand the expectations for the course through the lens of the instructor during that initial meeting (Smith & Razzouk, 1993). Students should leave the first day of class with a better understanding of the course and what they will engage in (Smith & Razzouk, 1993). Although providing the syllabus to students during the first class is a widely practiced method, it does not have to be (Bowers-Campbell, 2015).

Some colleges and universities use a unified template while others allow professors to choose their structure (Wikle & Fagin, 2014). Some of the agreed content professors include in a syllabus include professors' contact information, course objectives, assignments, materials, meeting location, resources, and policy expectations. According to Wheeler et al. (2019), syllabi can serve as a tool for learning, which include different information than traditional written syllabi. There is limited research that highlights students' perceptions of course purposes and effectiveness. This research aims to investigate students' perceptions of course syllabi structural elements and their influence on course performance.

Many professors view course syllabi as a framework to help enhance students' success in their courses. They provide students with a roadmap that gives directions and expectations. They are the first official formal written document between the professor and student. Despite the significance and continuous use of syllabi, the structure and format tend to be recycled from professor to professor. Syllabus design appears to be a minor task, though it should serve as a major factor for students' success. Hess and Whittington (2003) shared that syllabi are contracts that include assignments, tests, topics, and forms of integrity as they serve as an explicit public description of courses, provide evidence in grievances and hearings, and determine equivalency when transferring between colleges (Hess & Whittington, 2003). Thus, syllabi should be clear and concise, and easy for students to read and understand. However, some studies have noted that they can be concerning to students, especially when they lack clarity, definition, and uniformity (Hess & Whittington, 2003).

Student motivation and engagement can be enhanced when syllabi include question-driven course description, multi-faceted learning goals, clear and measurable goals, assessment and activity descriptions, an inviting and approachable tone, and a focus on student success (Wheeler et al., 2019). However, there is limited research on the students' perceptions of syllabi as well as timely research. Additionally, there has not been any additional research on the impacts of syllabi for students (Bowers-Campbell, 2015). Most of the research that has been done on syllabi and studies have revolved around the professors' perceptions rather than students, which provides a significant gap of literature that needs to be filled (Bowers-Campbell, 2015).

2. Literature Review

According to Hess and Whittington (2003), there are several key factors that should be included when structuring a course syllabus such as the course objective, contact information, course description, course outline, course requirement, course evaluation, grading scale, textbook, and additional readings. Items such as course descriptions and objectives are included in the syllabus because often students do not read the course descriptions in the university or college's catalog (Albrecht, 2009). Thus, providing the description in the syllabus makes it easily accessible for the student (Albrecht, 2009). Furthermore, the professor includes the objectives in their syllabus to ensure that the students know and understand the expectations of course (Albrecht, 2009). It also allows the instructor to know what principles they should be teaching students.

With different perspectives on the role and purpose of syllabi, many professors think about the requirements for accreditation and the overall course description as aligned with the curriculum. One researcher found that syllabi can enhance students' mastery depending on the structure of the syllabi elements and objectives (Stevens & Gibson, 2017). Moreover, some professors include additional information on the syllabus to offer support to students. Wagner et al. (2023) stated syllabi are important in guiding students, faculty, and administration in understanding the course expectations and how the course aligns within curriculum requirements to maintain accreditation. Nevertheless, some syllabi contain an overwhelming amount of additional information that are not essential to students navigating course content. A traditional syllabus structure includes course goals and objectives, course calendar, course materials, expectations about attendance, grading, and professional behaviors. According to Wagner et al. (2023) study, participants had different views on elements that were required and optional to be considered an effective syllabus. Some of the most inconsistently viewed elements involved biography, teaching philosophy, points for each activity, full policies, mental health resources, advice, assignment rubrics, classroom attendance expectations, and learning outcomes.

In addition to the information mentioned above, there are additional components that universities or colleges may require. Some examples of other compo-

nents that syllabi may require are statements such as the university conduct, student conduct, technology use, and requirements for submitting papers (Albrecht, 2009). One of the most important components of the syllabus is the university's conduct statement. This is often seen in each of the syllabi at any given university or college. The conduct statement usually provides information about how students should act in class, on the campus, and provide an honor statement (Albrecht, 2009). More specifically, information about plagiarism and the reuse of the paper is noted in the conduct statements. Statements referring to technology are often present, which focus on what forms of technology are allowed in the course as well as other technology expectation.

Matejka and Kurke (1994) also see a syllabus in a different light and describe it as having four purposes which include being a contract, communication device, a plan, and a cognitive map. For example, as referring to the contract, it is often thought as a "legal document" that includes components such as the course, location of the course, time of the course, office hours, phone numbers, textbooks or texts for the course, additional readings, instructional methods, course objectives, testing, grading, attendance and participation, and the schedule of class activities (Matejka & Kurke, 1994). Communication is essential within the syllabus too. As previously stated, the syllabus can communicate the expectations, seriousness, and intent of the instructor (Matejka & Kurke, 1994). For the idea of being a plan, Matejka and Kurke (1994) noted that the syllabus is an overall plan of action that include concepts of beliefs, values, attitudes, course strategy, and course goals. Lastly, through cognitive mapping, the syllabus allows for a map for a vision of the course (Matejka & Kurke, 1994).

3. Methodology

In this study, the researcher employed a quantitative research design. A quantitative method was the most appropriate to investigate participants' perspectives on the effectiveness of course syllabus structural elements in enhancing course performance. The researcher administered a 13-question multiple choice questionnaire in Canvas to students enrolled in a fall semester introduction to teaching course. Questions inquired about common elements included in most education professor syllabi, such as length, assignments, due dates, assessments, content relevance, and preference for readability and comfort. Questions were developed based on common themes and challenges students encountered in college courses. Students were able to rate specific elements and identify elements they found most useful in syllabi. Students also received an open-ended question that allowed them to provide additional feedback and/or suggestions relating to course syllabi.

There were two Introduction to Teaching courses offered, but only one course was chosen to conduct the study. A total of twenty-two students were enrolled in the course, but only 15 students gave consent to participate in the study. Students received email noting their participation was voluntary and their decision to participate or not participate did not relate to any aspect of the course. Percentages

for each category was taken from Canvas data for each question and participant response.

3.1. Context

The study was undertaken at a West Tennessee university in an undergraduate course consisting of students from several majors. The course consisted of 16-weeks of instructions that included a brief history of teaching and effective teaching qualities and strategies that positively impact teaching and learning. Most students were freshmen and sophomores, ranging in age from 18 to 22, enrolled in the course. The study targeted students enrolled in one undergraduate course with one instructor. The course instructor serves as the researcher and author of this publication.

3.2. Participants

Participants in the study were enrolled in a teacher education introductory course in a small West Tennessee university. The 3-credit hours met twice a week for 75 minutes. The course was chosen to allow participants from different cultural backgrounds, majors, ages, and classifications to share their perspectives relating to the influence of course syllabi structural elements influence on students' course performance.

Participants' Classifications

Most students in the course were sophomores, while both freshmen and juniors each constituted 15% of the course. There were 8% of participants who were classified as seniors. The chart below displays participants' classification by percentage during the time of the study (Figure 1).

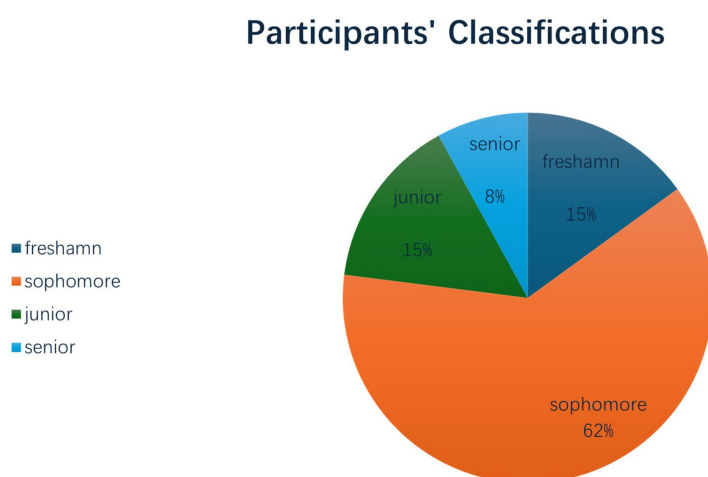


Figure 1. Participants' Classifications.

Participants' Credit Hours Enrolled at the Time of the Study

The chart below provides an idea of the number of classes and course syllabi students encountered during the semester the study was conducted based on their

credit hours enrolled. A participant is considered a full-time student when enrolled in 12 hours or more. Most educational courses on the University of Tennessee at Martin campus are two and three hours. As a result, most of the participants were enrolled in at least three different courses which means they interacted with different course syllabi during the study (Figure 2).

Participants' Enrolled Credit Hours

■ less than 12hrs ■ 12 to 15 hrs ■ more than 15hrs ■

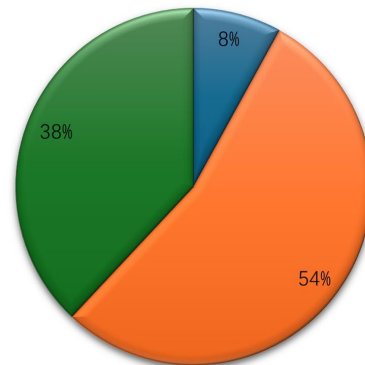


Figure 2. Participants' credit hours enrolled at the time of the study.

4. Results

The finding of this study found that most of the participants across multiple majors enrolled in a fall Introduction to Education course believed course syllabi included the necessary content that enhanced their course performance. The overall data highlighted the idea that the organization and format of syllabi impact students' perceptions about the professors' attitudes and teaching styles. Likewise, syllabi can have a mastery or performance connotation (Wheeler et al., 2019). The key aspects of syllabi affect students' motivation which influence course performance. Because syllabi are usually the first formal document students receive, students tend to use their syllabi to judge their ability to be successful and their professors' characters. As related to Matejka and Kurke's (1994), syllabi serve as contracts, and cognitive map to help guide students' performances in courses.

Additionally, student shared the following as suggestions or comments in the open-ended question. When professors discussed the syllabi with them, they could comprehend the expectations much easier than when they were responsible for reading the content independently. Students also noted that they would usually not refer to the syllabi until they were looking for a specific topic. One participant noted that she would scan the document because of syllabi length but understood the reason why they were so long. One other statement noted that some professors use links in their syllabi to make it shorter or they do not include detailed descriptions for all assignments. Many of the participants left their open-ended questions with the statement, no suggestions. Of the 15 participants, only

four students left additional comments.

From the multiple-choice data, 77% of the participants shared that professors' syllabi were easy to read. A total of 23% participants considered syllabi as somewhat easy to read. In the study, 8% of the participants found professors syllabi did not include key details to help them experience success in their courses. A total of 92% of participants viewed syllabi as essential to their course performance. As related to syllabi readability, 38% of participants identified length as a cause of reading difficulty, while 46% identified format and organization, and 15% stated irrelevant information. On the other hand, 54% of participants believed format and organization make syllabi useful and readable, while 38% believed the content relevance and importance contribute to usefulness and readability. Other elements that were mentioned included grammar, mechanics, relevance, and important information. Surprisingly, none of the participants chose grammar or mechanics as an element that causes reading difficulty. Overall, 85% of participants in this study found course syllabi to be essential to their course performance.

5. Conclusion

The research aimed to provide more data relating to students' perceptions relating to course syllabi structural elements influence on their course performance. This study also sought to help professors navigate from recycling syllabi to developing meaningful documents that serve as a framework, initial form of communication between students and professors, and a tool to increase students' success. The study further clarified which elements act as barriers to comprehension and student success. Participants rated length as a key factor for reading difficulty. [Harrington and Gabert-Quillen \(2015\)](#) acknowledged the idea that professors kept syllabi to 1 to 2 pages when technology was limited and printing was costly. However, professors have now increased their page numbers to provide students with traditional details and other content relating to assignments details, grading rubrics, policies, and additional relevant resources offered on campuses.

Participants noted organization and format have both negative and positive outcomes on course performance. According to [Harrington and Gabert-Quillen \(2015\)](#), professors can make simple changes to the content, language, and tone to make a difference for students. Organization can improve students' ability to read and comprehend professors' expectations while formatting can also cause confusion in expectations and the course objective. However, the format should include professors' course name and number, term and year, credit hours, course description, and location and time of class meeting. Additionally, there should be a statement that acknowledges the syllabus may change and student notified immediately if such changes were to occur.

Most syllabi are complex documents that communicate what faculty values as relate to students learning outcomes and accreditation ([Watts, 2026](#); [Wolf, Czekan-ski, & Dillion, 2014](#)). Based on the collective data, professors should prioritize implementing the appropriate format and organization that share relevant and use-

ful content and resources to ensure syllabi are clear roadmaps for students. Overall, by refining syllabi elements, professors can align their syllabi to student needs and accreditation standards that foster a transparent and supportive learning environment. Just as teaching approaches and students change, syllabi should change to align to students' needs that increase success.

This study aligns to previous research in outlining the key elements needed in syllabi to enhance students' course performance. Students in this study identified length as a factor that can cause reading difficulty. However, researchers have highlighted the increase in length have changed in recent years to acknowledge technology, university, and state policies (Perrault, 2026). Overall, participants found syllabi to be effective in outlining expectations for their courses. Some researchers state it is important that syllabi not only include key elements but be expressed in a manner that solicit a warm and welcoming environment (Perrault, 2026).

6. Recommendations

This study did not investigate upper classman, graduates, or online students' perceptions which could provide more details and insight relating to the importance of structuring syllabi in a specific manner to increase student success. Additionally, a comparison study of students' perceptions of syllabi received by professors with different years of experience and/or tenure status could be beneficial. This study solicited responses using a multiple-choice approach, so an open-ended questionnaire could provide a deeper understanding of the students' preference of organization and formatting. In addition, some questions in this study did not allow students to fully answer or provide clarity to their perceptions relating to syllabi structural elements influence on their course success. Generally, syllabi continuously serve as professors' frameworks to help communicate course requirements, so they are essential documents to help students navigate courses and experience success. Overall, this study was conducted using one course with a specific population of students. There were not any specific areas of academic discussed to align syllabi structure to student academic success. For these reasons, there is a need for further research relating to course syllabi structural elements influence on students' academic success.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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