

# **A NATIONAL SURVEY ON THE PERCEIVED IMPORTANCE OF SYLLABI COMPONENTS: DIFFERENCES AND AGREEMENTS BETWEEN STUDENTS AND INSTRUCTORS IN THE PRINCIPLES OF ACCOUNTING COURSE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Faculty often spend a great deal of time preparing their course syllabi. What goes into the syllabus is often dictated by requirements of their respective universities and by various accrediting agencies. In addition, the faculty may want to relay information that they think is most important to their students' success and wish to stress this information in the course syllabi.*

*However, the information that the faculty feels most important may not be the same as what students feel most important. To make the syllabi more useful to students, faculty members need to know what information the students most want. This study identifies 28 items required or found on most course syllabi and asks both faculty and students to rate their importance on a 7 point Likert scale. A Welch ANOVA was used to test whether significant differences exist as to faculty and student perceptions.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The syllabus is a course contract between a faculty member and the students and contains a great deal of information. What a faculty member includes in the syllabus is often dictated by their respective university or accrediting body. When preparing their syllabus or when reviewing it with the students on the opening day of class, a faculty member may highlight and put more emphasis on the things the faculty member feels the students need to be successful in the course and may, therefore, cover these topics in more detail.

Alternatively, students may consider certain items to be more important than the faculty member thought. If so, then the faculty member should be aware of the students' perceptions and place greater importance on the items in the printed syllabus and class introduction.

A survey was conducted in the Principles of Accounting course at 31 academic institutions to compare faculty and student perceptions as to the relative importance of various

items typically found on course syllabi. When having their students complete the survey, the faculty member also completed a separate survey asking the same information. A seven-point Likert scale was used to ask the students 'how much attention they paid' and the faculty member 'how much attention they thought the student paid' to 28 items found on a typical course syllabus, with '1' being 'No Attention at All' to '7' being 'great deal of attention.' A Welch ANOVA was used to test whether the perceptions of the faculty members were significantly different from the perception of the students. Of the 28 items surveyed, 16 were found to be significantly different between the two groups.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years there have been several calls for improvement in higher education (Seldon 1990). Specific encouragement to improve university accounting education practices has been provided by the Accounting Education Change Commission (AECC), the American Accounting Association (AAA), the major accounting firms, and many others (AAA, 1996; AECC, 1993; Albrecht & Sack, 2000; Kerr & Smith, 2003). Even though accounting is a discipline devoted to the presentation and communication of decision-making information, there has been little research on improving the course syllabus in accounting classes (Marcis et al., 2005).

Doolittle and Lusk (2007) assert that course syllabi serve several purposes. Although the basic premise of this research is that the content of the course syllabi varies greatly, most syllabi do reflect the design of the course, the selection of appropriate material, the pedagogical methods and assessment devices that will be used, and some guidance to the students on how to successfully complete the course. Thus, the importance of the content within the class syllabus makes this research relevant. In addition, Jervis and Hartley (2005) suggest that faculty may use syllabi from other schools to aid in developing a course, and several AAA sections support syllabi exchange websites. Parkes and Harris (2002) believe that a syllabus serves as a contract, provides permanent documentation for the course, and provides information useful for student learning. Therefore, the content of the class syllabus is important to resolve disputes between the instructor, to assist in maintaining accreditation of curriculum programs, and in serving students as valued customers (Matejka and Kurke, 1994; Shelley, 2005; Halbesleben et al., 2003). In view of the many different purposes that a syllabus serves, one should not be surprised that the syllabus has grown from a one-page document to a course guide of several pages (Garavalia et al., 1999; Parkes et al, 2003).

A review of the literature indicates that many different opinions exist on the components that make up an "ideal" syllabus and the effectiveness of the typical class syllabus. Smith and Razzouk (1993) found that undergraduate marketing students displayed an inability to recall basic course information from their class syllabus. Becker and Calhoun (1999) surveyed undergraduate psychology students regarding the importance that 29 items that typically appear in a course syllabus. Their results indicated that the students more highly valued information

regarding grading policies, exam and assignment due dates, and reading material covered by an exam or quiz than information such as the academic dishonesty policy, course withdrawal dates, the titles of the required textbooks/readings, or basic course information such as the course number and title. Becker and Calhoun also found that opinions on course components varied between traditional and non-traditional students. Garavalia et al. (1999) surveyed 74 faculty members from various disciplines in addition to surveying undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory psychology course. Their survey found that faculty and students differed in the amount of importance that they assigned to 15 syllabi items, out of the 39 syllabi items contained in the survey. Keller et al. (2006) found that introductory accounting students at different types of universities have differing opinions on the importance of various syllabi components. Keller et al. (2008) extended prior research and found that the amount of importance given to syllabus components varies by student demographic factors. Doolittle and Lusk (2007) studied syllabi created by faculty and their results indicate that both gender and the type of academic institution affect the information included in the course syllabus. Parkes et al. (2003) found that syllabi exhibit differences when considering the academic discipline of the course and the whether the course was at the undergraduate or graduate level. Furthermore, their study found that some instructors do not include information in their syllabus that is important to assessment.

Although some faculty may not accept the viewpoint of students as customers, they may still find student opinions are important for several pragmatic reasons (Zell, 2001). First, students may use the syllabus to decide if they should continue their enrollment in the class. For example, a student may decide his/her schedule is overloaded if the syllabus communicates that several time-consuming projects are required for the class. The student can withdraw from the class and take the course in a later semester, presumably when the student has more time available. Additionally, professors who have enrollment-sensitive classes may need to know the most important syllabus factors in the prospective student's decision. Second, an instructor may find it prudent to know the critical components of a course syllabus from a student's perspective, given the relative weight of student evaluations in tenure, promotion, and pay raise decisions. Course evaluation forms often ask the student to respond to questions about the syllabus (e.g., "The instructor provided a syllabus that clearly stated the course requirements"). Thus, an instructor's evaluation scores could be negatively affected if the material considered most important to the student is not included in their syllabus. Finally, as the course syllabus grows in length, the students may struggle with information overload. In other words, the increasing length of course syllabi may impede the student from discerning the information he/she really needs to process, particularly if the size of the syllabus discourages the student from reading the entire document.

In any case, Altman (1999) suggests that syllabus goals can only be achieved if the syllabus provides sufficient information. Yet, sufficient information may not be the only problem facing the instructor's syllabus. One would expect students to read and remember only information they deem important. Even though an instructor may believe that all of the

information in the syllabus is of great importance, it does not necessarily follow that the students will attach the same weight to that information. Therefore, this study examines where accounting students and faculty disagree on the importance of syllabus components, so that faculty can identify areas of information that may need to be emphasized by different methods or practices to create effective communication.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Accounting faculty at 50 colleges and universities were contacted and asked to participate in a study pertaining to the course syllabus. The contacted faculty members were asked to administer a survey questionnaire to students enrolled in an introductory accounting course. Some faculty stated they were interested in the research concept but were not teaching an introductory course in the spring term. Other faculty stated that institutional policies or other reasons made them unable/unwilling to participate in this study. Faculty at 31 institutions in 19 states agreed to administer the survey questionnaire to students enrolled in the Principles of Accounting course. Faculty who agreed to have their classes participate in the study were mailed a package that contained a specified number of student survey questionnaires and a pre-paid, pre-addressed envelope in which to return the completed student questionnaires. Each faculty participant was asked to distribute the student questionnaires to willing volunteers. The students answered the survey questions after their class session.

The instructions at the top of the survey were: "The Syllabus for a course is an 'agreement' between the instructor and the students in a course. We are researching what factors students feel are important to include in a Syllabus." The survey instrument contained two sections. The first section contained 28 items that frequently appear on a course syllabus. A number of the survey items used in the current study were also used in the study by Becker and Calhoun (1999). A seven-point Likert scale was assigned to the student responses (where "1" = "no attention at all" to "7" = "great deal of attention"). Each item in this section had a corresponding reference to a course syllabus component (e.g., "attendance policy," "examination and quiz dates," "late assignment policy," "course goals and objectives," and "required prerequisite coursework to enroll in the course").

The second section of the survey requested demographic data from the individual student respondent. Specific questions pertained to the respondent's gender, age, year in school, primary field of study, and grade point average. Each faculty member who agreed to distribute the surveys to undergraduates received a separate envelope with five copies of a faculty version of the survey and five self-addressed, pre-paid envelopes. The faculty member was asked to complete one of the faculty surveys and to distribute the other four faculty surveys to colleagues (with the enclosed envelopes). Specific questions inquired if the institution was either private or state-assisted, if the school of business was accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate

Schools of Business-International (AACSB), the state in which the college/university was located, and the approximate “full-time equivalent” (FTE) size of the student body.

## RESULTS

Table 1 summarizes institutional characteristics (Panel A) and demographic data (Panel B) based on student responses to the survey. The total number of students responding to the survey was 1,726. Students at state-assisted institutions accounted for 71.4 percent (1,233 of 1,726) of the respondents, although only 61.3 percent (19 of 31) of the colleges and universities that administered the survey were public institutions. Approximately 39 percent (672 of 1,726) of the student respondents were at institutions accredited by the AACSB. Using full-time equivalent (FTE) enrollment as a proxy for the size of the institution, the data reveals that almost half of the student group were from institutions that had student enrollment at less than 5,000 FTE. Panel B of Table 1 indicates that the number of male and female respondents were approximately equal. Most students were in their second (44.8 percent) or third (31.6 percent) year of collegiate studies. Although the most frequent majors reported by the students were within the business disciplines, with Management being cited the most frequently (18.4 percent of the students), at least 15 academic majors were represented by the respondents. Based on averages, the typical respondent was slightly over the age of 21, had a 3.0 GPA, and was taking slightly more than 14 credit hours of classes in the semester of the survey.

<b>CHARACTERISTIC</b>	<b>STUDENTS</b>	
	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Public (state-assisted)	1,233	71.4
Private	493	28.6
AACSB	672	38.9
Non-AACSB	1,054	61.1
Less than 1,000 FTE	19	1.1
1,000 – 4,999 FTE	834	48.3
5,000 – 9,999 FTE	551	31.9
More than 10,000 FTE	322	18.6



<b>Table 1 - Panel B</b>		
<b>DEMOGRAPHIC DATA OF STUDENTS</b>		
<b>CHARACTERISTIC</b>	<b>NUMBER</b>	<b>PERCENT</b>
Male	864	50.0
Female	847	49.1
Not Reported	15	0.9
First Year	169	9.8
Second Year	774	44.8
Third Year	546	31.6
Fourth Year	174	10.1
Fifth (or More) Year	31	1.8
Not Reported	32	1.9
Accounting	287	16.6
Economics	45	2.6
Finance	144	8.3
General Business	269	15.6
Information Systems	189	11.0
Management	318	18.4
Marketing	250	14.5
Other Business	45	2.6
Sciences	20	1.2
Humanities and Social Sciences	58	3.4
Journalism	8	0.5
Mathematics & Comp. Science	15	0.9
Education	3	0.2
Fine Arts	7	0.4
Other Major	25	1.4
Undecided/Undeclared	15	0.9
Not Reported	28	1.6
<b>Age (in years)</b>	1,677	21.63
Credit Hours Current Semester	1,691	14.29
Cumulative G.P.A.	1,508	3.00

Table 2 summarizes institutional characteristics (Panel A) and demographic data (Panel B) based on faculty responses to the survey. Of the 56 faculty members responding to the survey, 51.8 percent were at AACSB institutions. Similar to the student group, almost 68 percent (38 of 56) were teaching at public colleges and universities and exactly half of the

Instructors were working at institutions with student enrollment at less than 5,000 FTE. Panel B of Table 2 reveals that slightly more males than females responded to the survey. Most of the respondents had obtained a doctorate degree, although 30.4 percent of the instructors report having acquired an MBA as their highest degree of education. The number of MBA respondents is not a surprising result, given that many accounting programs only require a master's degree to be qualified to teach the accounting principles courses. Also, the data

indicates an almost equal spread across the academic ranks, and a variety of experience levels accumulated by the faculty respondents.

CHARACTERISTIC	FACULTY	
	Number	Percent
Public (state-assisted)	38	67.9
Private	18	32.1
AACSB	29	51.8
Non-AACSB	27	48.2
Less than 1,000 FTE	5	8.9
1,000 – 4,999 FTE	23	41.1
5,000 – 9,999 FTE	15	26.8
More than 10,000 FTE	13	23.2

CHARACTERISTIC	NUMBER	PERCENT
Male	29	51.8
Female	26	46.4
Not reported	1	1.8
Ph.D.	21	37.5
D.B.A.	5	8.9
Ed.D	3	5.3
M.B.A.	17	30.4
Other	10	17.9
Instructor	12	21.4
Assistant Professor	14	25.0
Associate Professor	16	28.6
Full Professor	14	25.0
0 – 5 years of experience	11	19.6
6 – 10 years of experience	8	14.3
11 – 15 years of experience	6	10.7
16 – 20 years of experience	14	25.0
21 – 25 years of experience	9	16.1
26 – 30 years of experience	3	5.4
31 – 35 years of experience	2	3.6
Not reported	3	5.4

Table 3 reports means, the absolute difference between the means of the two groups, and the *F* statistics for each of the 28 survey items. The survey items (i.e., syllabi components) are listed in order from the largest difference in means to the smallest amount difference between means.

Item Number	Item	Means		Absolute Diff. between Means	F ratio	Prob > F
		Faculty	Student			
16	Whether extra credit can be earned	3.46429	5.71221	2.24790	57.1627	0.0001
15	Title and authors of textbooks and readings	6.42857	4.74985	1.67872	148.509	0.0001
9	Type of examinations and quizzes (for example, multiple choice, essay)	4.62500	5.98084	1.35580	29.4383	0.0001
20	Dates and time of special events that must be attended outside of class	4.36364	5.68972	1.32610	15.5757	0.0002
28	Available support services (for example, tutoring, computerized study guides)	3.98182	5.27155	1.28970	23.9663	0.0001
22	Where to obtain materials for class (for example, texts, readings, lab materials)	3.98182	5.06166	1.07980	12.4490	0.0008
27	Drop/withdrawal dates	4.00000	5.05076	1.05080	10.3110	0.0022
3	Course information (for example, course number and title, section number, credit hours)	5.98214	4.99188	0.99026	22.7218	0.0001
19	Required prerequisite coursework necessary to enroll in the course	5.96429	4.97488	0.98940	22.7874	0.0001
21	Amount of work (for example, amount of reading, number and length of other assignments)	4.48148	5.32249	0.84100	8.8115	0.0044
26	Academic dishonesty policy	5.50000	4.69074	0.80926	8.5196	0.0050
6	Instructor information (for example, name, title, office location, phone number, e-mail address)	6.71429	6.12580	0.58849	44.2403	0.0001
5	Course format (for example, lecture, discussion, videos, classroom activities)	5.00000	5.57724	0.57724	5.5838	0.0215
23	Course goals and objectives	5.85714	5.29971	0.55743	8.1453	0.0059
18	Late assignment policy	6.17857	5.66240	0.51617	10.4968	0.0019
25	Instructor's office hours	6.57143	6.05814	0.51329	28.2867	0.0001
4	Course description	5.87500	5.43808	0.43692	5.0423	0.0285
2	Days, hours, and location of class meetings	6.08929	5.73754	0.35174	2.6270	0.1104
24	Holidays observed	4.87500	5.21279	0.33779	1.3308	0.2534
7	Grading procedure and policies	6.78571	6.45064	0.33508	26.3515	0.0001
13	Reading material covered by each examination or quiz	5.67857	5.97499	0.29641	2.0594	0.1567



**Table 3**  
**FACULTY/STUDENT SYLLABI COMPONENT PREFERENCES ANALYSIS:**  
**WELCH ANOVA RESULTS, RANKED BY ABSOLUTE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MEANS**

		Means		Absolute Diff.		
12	Examination and quiz dates	5.98214	6.25523	0.27309	2.0513	0.1574
17	Due dates of out-of-class assignments	5.80357	6.06515	0.26158	1.3468	0.2506
14	Schedule of topics to be covered	5.85714	5.62413	0.23302	1.9762	0.1649
8	Attendance policy	6.26786	6.04479	0.22306	2.5417	0.1160
10	Number of examinations and quizzes	6.48214	6.26236	0.21978	3.7061	0.0588
1	Class participation requirements	5.27778	5.45739	0.17961	0.5167	0.4753
11	Kind of assignments (for example, readings, papers, presentations, projects)	6.10714	6.00756	0.09958	0.4226	0.5181

The means for each survey item were created from the responses on a seven-point Likert scale, where both faculty and students indicated their perceived importance (“1” = “no attention at all” to “7” = “great deal of attention”) of a given syllabi component. We computed the mean score for each survey item for each group. The faculty group size varied from 54 to 56 responses, depending on the item. The student group size varied from 1705 to 1726 responses. Ideally, each group would be the same size with a normal distribution. Yet, if each group is larger than 30 subjects, a traditional ANOVA procedure is robust against moderate departures from normality (Lehman et al. 2005). However, Stevens (2002) suggests that if the number of subjects in the largest group is more than 1.5 times than the number in the smaller group, the assumption of equal variances on the responses of the groups may be violated. Therefore, for each syllabi component we compared the mean scores of each group using a Welch ANOVA as a conservative approach. The Welch ANOVA, which will yield the same results as a Welch *t*-test, will accommodate the difference in sample size between the two groups as well as unequal variances (Welch 1951).

Table 3 indicates that instructors and students perceptions on the importance of syllabi components differ significantly ( $p < .001$ ) on 11 of 28 items (or 16 out of 28 components when  $p < .01$ ). Faculty considered the following items more important than students: “Title and authors of textbooks and readings,” “Course information (for example, course number and title, section number, credit hours),” “Required prerequisite coursework necessary to enroll in the course,” “Instructor information (for example, name, title, office location, phone number, e-mail address),” “Instructor’s office hours,” and “Grading procedure and policies.” In contrast, students considered the following syllabi components more important than faculty members: “Whether extra credit can be earned,” “Type of examinations and quizzes (for example, multiple choice, essay),” “Dates and time of special events that must be attended outside of class,” “Available support services (for example, tutoring, computerized study guides),” and “Where to obtain materials for class (for example, texts, readings, lab materials).”

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The content of the course syllabus is important to a number of stakeholders for several different reasons. First, the syllabus documents the course content and policies. Second, the syllabus communicates the instructor's expectations and requirements necessary for a successful learning experience. Third, the syllabus is useful for resolving disputes between instructors and students. Fourth, the course syllabus is closely scrutinized during the accreditation process. Finally, the syllabus may influence the prospective student's decision to enroll into the class. Given all of these important reasons, it is surprising that the syllabus has received so little empirical study. The primary purpose of this study was to determine if students and faculty placed different levels of importance on items typically included in a course syllabus.

The results of this study do indicate that faculty and students differ in their opinion on the importance of several syllabi components. In general, the accounting instructors considered procedural and contact information as more important than the student subjects. Procedural items, such as required prerequisites or grading procedures, were rated higher in importance by faculty than students. Likewise, contact information such as the instructor's office hours or the instructor's name and phone number received higher scores by faculty. In addition, basic information such as the course title, course number, or the title and authors of required textbooks were perceived to be more important by the accounting instructors.

In contrast, students appear to place more emphasis than faculty in factors that may affect their grades or items that involve out-of-class activities. For example, students were more interested in whether extra credit assignments were available or the type of examinations/quizzes used in the course. Some instructors believe that extra credit shouldn't be necessary, and others insist that they will offer extra credit only if special circumstances warrant the additional assignment. Thus, they may feel that information on extra credit assignments shouldn't be in the syllabus and presented on the first day of class. Also, some faculty may feel that if a student really learns the material, the format of the exam should not affect the student's score significantly. Therefore, they may place less importance on communicating the types of exams and quizzes they will use in the course. Concern for their grades may have caused students to rate available support services (e.g., tutoring) higher than faculty members. While instructors may think that special events outside of normal class times should be a normal part of the university experience, students may be scoring this item higher than faculty because they will have to adjust the schedules of their other activities (e.g., work) to attend the event. Finally, faculty may assume that obtaining course materials should be a simple matter for students, but students may have a greater appreciation for the convenience provided by information in the syllabus that would help them to locate and obtain the materials.

This study focused on comparing faculty ratings to students' ratings on the importance of particular syllabi items in the hope of developing further insights that improve communication and course administration. The results of the study reveal the amount of importance that students

assign to different syllabus components significantly differs from faculty perceptions of the same components. This study extends previous research on syllabus components because no other study has been conducted on syllabus components that compared accounting instructors and students enrolled in an accounting principles course. The only study conducted in a business field tested the recall of syllabus elements and by upper-level marketing students.

However, this study does not specifically address how an instructor should incorporate these findings into their syllabus. Becker and Calhoun (1999) suggest alternative strategies may be used to communicate syllabus information. An instructor who wishes to satisfy student interests can use the results from this study to place the student's highest-rated components on the first page of the syllabus or to give the information a prominent display using word processing features (e.g., boldface type, different font sizes, etc.). An alternative strategy is to use the results to determine where student interest is lower, but the instructor believes the information is highly important. Then, the instructor may attempt to overcome the lack of interest by making those syllabus items more prominent. A variant of this approach would be to create special handouts of the items the instructor considers the most important, or conversely, if the instructor feels their syllabus creates information overload, to eliminate unnecessary information and to use separate handouts for topics of lesser importance.

A limitation of this study is survey response bias, which is inherent in all survey research. However, the large sample size should overcome most objections to this limitation. Furthermore, the study's institutional response rate is 62 percent, as 31 of 50 schools agreed to participate in this study. Further research might look for other factors that influence syllabi components. For example, how much influence do accreditation agencies exert upon the syllabus? A longitudinal study investigating changes in syllabi components over time may be of interest to educators and administrators. Finally, a study comparing business students with differing majors or personality types and their preferences on syllabi components could yield interesting results. In conclusion, we hope that faculty members may use the findings of this study to reassess their syllabi and perhaps include, emphasize, or provide more complete explanations of those items that are of the greatest concern to their students.

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