The Student Perspective

We need our syllabi, and we need them now

This study brings into focus how today’s information-driven, on-demand economy has greatly shaped student expectations for the way their professors and administrators—and even institutions—communicate with them about their studies. Students perceive the timely delivery of information as a critical component of their academic success. They want information, and they want it sooner rather than later. With the average cost of a credit hour now estimated to be $594.46, can we really blame them?

A recent survey of college students reveals a heavy emphasis on easy, early access to information pertaining to their studies. While this is likely not a surprise to most, the resounding strength of that preference certainly could be. The most recent data? Nearly 95% of students believe they should be allowed to browse a classes’ syllabus in advance of enrolling within that course, yet only 55% of instructors provide students with a syllabus before the first day of class—long after registration.

The manner in which students would like to access this type of information is also evolving with 91.4% of students indicating they would like to access class syllabi from their mobile device. When cross referenced with school responses, 16% of institutions provide mobile optimized syllabi—there appears to be a gap. Student focus on syllabus access can easily be explained once usage behavior is assessed.

When asked to rank the most important resource on campus for
academic information, students voted at the following rates for each option:

**Class syllabi** 44.2%
**School website** 22.1%
**Academic catalog** 19.2%
**Adviser/Counselor** 14.4%

Class syllabi were seen as the most important resource for academic information at a rate of two-to-one to the next closest tool, the website.

In addition, the usage of syllabi throughout the semester is quite regular; nearly 90% of students access the syllabus multiple times throughout the term, hence a premium put on convenience.

**Frequently throughout** 40%
**Several Times** 46.7%
**Once** 11.4%
**Never** 1.9%

Responses also indicate that at times, access to a class syllabus could be difficult. Surprisingly, more than half of students surveyed said they had a hard time at some point in their academic career obtaining access to a syllabus for a class in which they were enrolled.

**Quality Content & Expectations**
Statistics on the quality of syllabi appear to have better alignment between student expectations and what is actually delivered, but still show potential issues.

When asked about key areas of course content, students said they had received syllabi at the college level that had the following:

- List of assignments for the class: 56.2%
- Grading scale used for the course: 27.6%
- Textbooks or materials needed for the course: 17.1%
- Class policies and procedures: 15.2%
- Instructor contact information and office hours: 14.3%
Of all students surveyed, 70% listed at least one syllabus content item as missing, with 54% of those students reporting multiple key areas of content as missing from their syllabi.

By in large, students are looking for even more information up front to ensure their expectations are aligned with the course objectives. Despite the average college syllabus being over six pages in length, two out of every three students wish that additional detail was provided within course descriptions.

One major theme brought into focus by this study is that today’s information-driven, on-demand economy has greatly shaped student expectations for the way their professors and administrators—and even institutions—communicate with them. Students perceive the timely delivery of information as a critical component of their academic success. They want information, and they want it sooner rather than later.

Stay Tuned
Next month, Simple Syllabus unveils the overview of the most important components of a syllabus (as ranked by students), and where there’s room for improvement.