"It’s in the syllabus!" is a familiar refrain for both students and professors. For professors, experiences with students who often (and repeatedly) ask questions that have already been answered by the course syllabus, causes frustration. For students, it seems that too often professors ignore the reality that course syllabi are Byzantine documents the eschew any sense of design, audience, or engagement for the sake of delivering the bureaucratic minutiae of a class and university.

Syllabi are boring to write and read, and they recede into the periphery of a course rapidly. Course syllabi are simultaneously essential and useless.

In the Fall of 2016, Dr. Guy McHendry (Communication Studies) piloted an online, interactive, syllabus built on the Qualtrics survey platform in COM: 440 Gender Communication. In subsequent semesters, Dr. Kathy Gonzales (Interdisciplinary Studies) joined McHendry in testing this syllabus. Together, McHendry and Gonzales have explored the value of the interactive syllabus in a variety of courses (undergraduate, graduate, face to face, and online).

Data Collection

The interactive syllabus was administered to a total of 200 students. Of this number, 114 were undergraduate students and 86 were graduate students. The students were directed to the online syllabus through a link on the course Welcome page in Blueline. At the end of the syllabus, students were asked to evaluate their experience with the syllabus.

Example Question

Because of the online format, questions dealing with sensitive topics such as ADA accommodations, which can not be asked openly in the classroom, could be included in the interactive syllabus. Also, a few questions lead to follow-up questions based on the students’ response. For example, if a student indicates discomfort with participation they are asked to plan strategies to help them participate.

Data Analysis

As this syllabus was created in BlueQ, we were able to generate reports for each question and then draw conclusions from those reports.

According to the data, having students use an interactive syllabus better prepares faculty and students for their first meeting. Students can describe their interests, goals, and priorities for the course, alert faculty to potential obstacles to their learning, and describe their relative strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, because the syllabus requires interaction, it is difficult for students to skip or ignore important course policies.

Our data demonstrates that specific student populations prefer the use of interactive syllabi. In particular, traditional undergraduate students in a face to face class indicate that this format is preferable to paper versions and self-report that they retained more information and disclosed more about themselves to their faculty member. Based on differences in response rates, it is also evident that to maximize the value of this format it should be a required part of the course and be completed before the first day of class.

Recommendations

Whilst the interactive syllabus has been largely a success, we do caution the hasty adoption of this format for the following reasons: (1) Non-traditional students expressed more difficulty and frustration while using the syllabus; and (2) It is essential that the design offers compatibility with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). We also suggest that faculty still provide a traditional paper syllabus to which students can refer later in the semester.