

60-Second SoTL

Episode 65 – Students’ Experiences with the Syllabus

Featured Article

Pliego, Diego, and Abby Kaplan. 2025. "Community College Students’ Experiences with the Syllabus: A Qualitative Study." *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 19 (2): Article 10. <https://doi.org/10.20429/ijstl.2025.190210>

Transcript

(Music)

0:09

Jessie L. Moore:

What if most syllabus “best practices” are built on limited evidence or studies with inauthentic contexts for how students experience these course documents? What would students tell us about the syllabi they’re actually encountering in their courses? That’s the focus of this week’s 60-second SoTL from Elon University’s Center for Engaged Learning. I’m Jessie Moore.

(Music)

0:35

In “*Community College Students’ Experiences with the Syllabus: A Qualitative Study*,” Diego Pliego and Abby Kaplan question the seemingly robust evidence base behind syllabus advice. Their open-access article appears in the *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*.

Pliego and Kaplan note that many popular guidelines mostly cite opinion pieces, rely on artificial lab studies with hypothetical syllabi, or use surveys with limited response options that reflect instructors’ categories more than students’ perspectives.

1:08

To offer a more grounded view, the researchers conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with 59 students at Salt Lake Community College, asking them to walk through a real syllabus from a current class while sharing their screen. The interviewers were not students’ instructors, and questions focused on what students actually read, skip, and return to over time. They also asked students about navigation and formatting preferences.

The researchers used Dedoose to analyze transcripts of the interviews and used three rounds of coding to identify sections of the syllabi that students referenced and emerging themes about students’ interactions with the documents.

1:50

While only a fraction of students read the entire syllabus, they emerge as savvy syllabus users. Most read at least some of the syllabus—especially the grading policies, attendance policy, calendar, and assignment expectations that shape the day-to-day realities of the course. They are far less likely to read general college policies, learning outcomes, prerequisite information, or sections they believe they already know, and many explicitly cite length as a reason for not reading the whole document. Yet every section was helpful to at least some students.

Interestingly, some students who hadn't read the entire syllabus had experienced in-class orientations—via the learning management system—to portions of the syllabus and didn't realize that the LMS pages provided only an abbreviated introduction, not the actual syllabus.

2:43

Piiego and Kaplan recommend that instructors and institutions prioritize clear, concise information on schedules, workload, and grading, and critically re-examine how much mandated boilerplate truly belongs in the syllabus versus other channels. They also encourage future research that tests whether specific design choices actually improve student outcomes.

To learn more about this study, visit our show notes for a link to the open access article.

3:12

(Music)

3:18

Jessie L. Moore:

Join us for our next episode of 60-second SoTL from Elon University's Center for Engaged Learning for another snapshot of recent scholarship of teaching and learning. Learn more about the Center at www.CenterForEngagedLearning.org.

(Music)