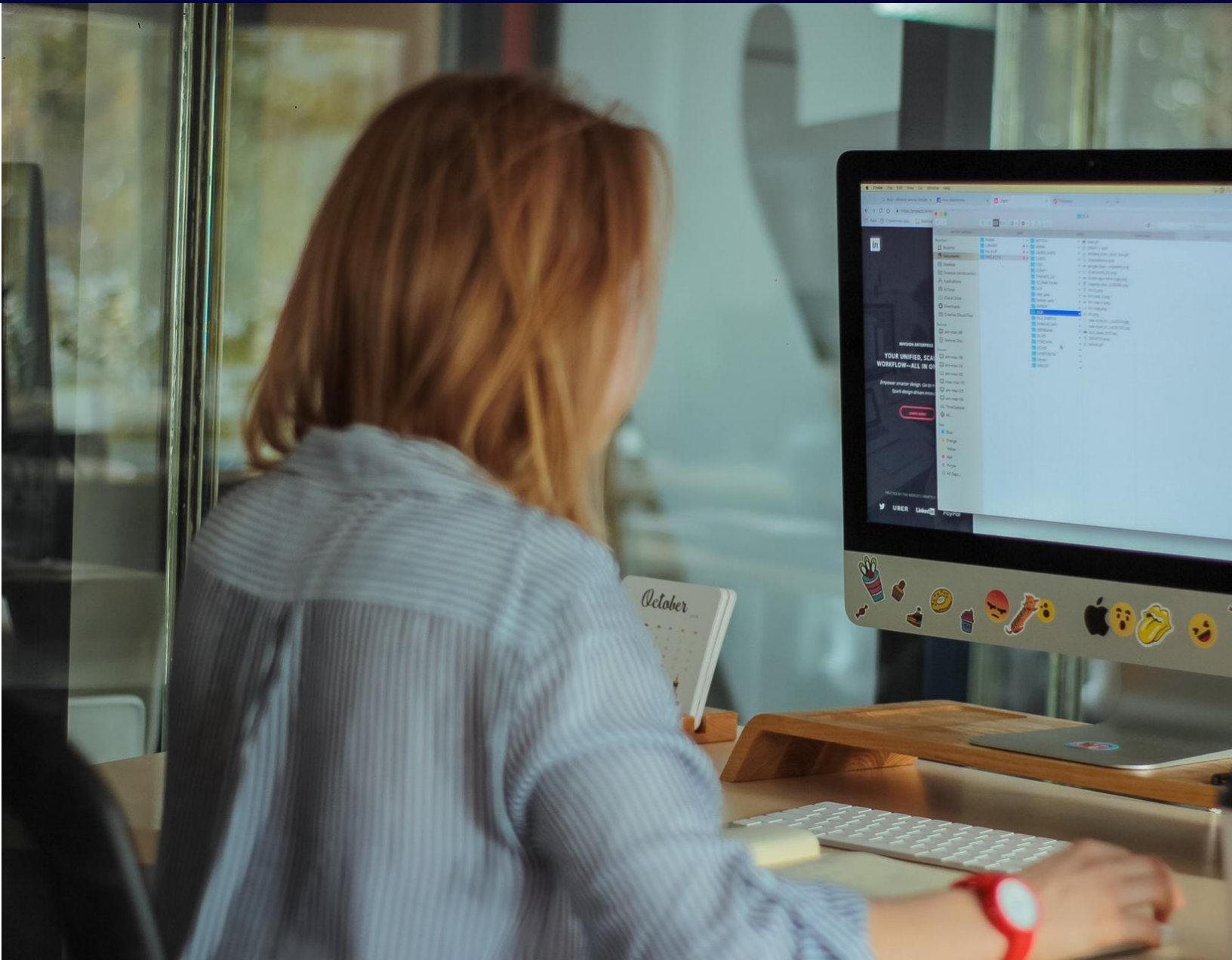


# CREATING STUDENT-FOCUSED SYLLABI: A Tool for Instructors

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Baehring, K. S.<sup>1</sup>, Barnes S. J.  
Department of Psychology University of British Columbia



This checklist is intended as a reflection tool that provides you with opportunities to design your course syllabi through the lens of supporting the wellbeing and learning of undergraduate students at UBC. On this checklist, you may notice elements that you already use.

# SUPPORTING UNDERGRADUATE LEARNING AND WELLBEING AT UBC

Previous projects at UBC have revealed particular instructional techniques that support student wellbeing and learning in the classroom (see Teaching Practices Checklist: <https://wellbeing.ubc.ca/teaching-learning-resources>). The present study and checklist extends from current efforts to support student mental health and learning by exploring the role of syllabi in learning and wellbeing.

## Did you know?

Only 39% of students strongly agree that they are aware of mental wellbeing resources on campus and how to access them



Student wellbeing is improved through effective teaching strategies

Syllabi serve as an educational tool and are the most immediate form of contact between instructor and student



A new [senate policy](#) on course syllabi at UBC is effective as of August 2019



## Why Course Syllabi?

On January 2019, the Vancouver Senate Academic Policy Committee approved a policy that makes course syllabi mandatory for all courses at UBC, and requires that syllabi have certain components (see [Senate Policy V-130](#)).

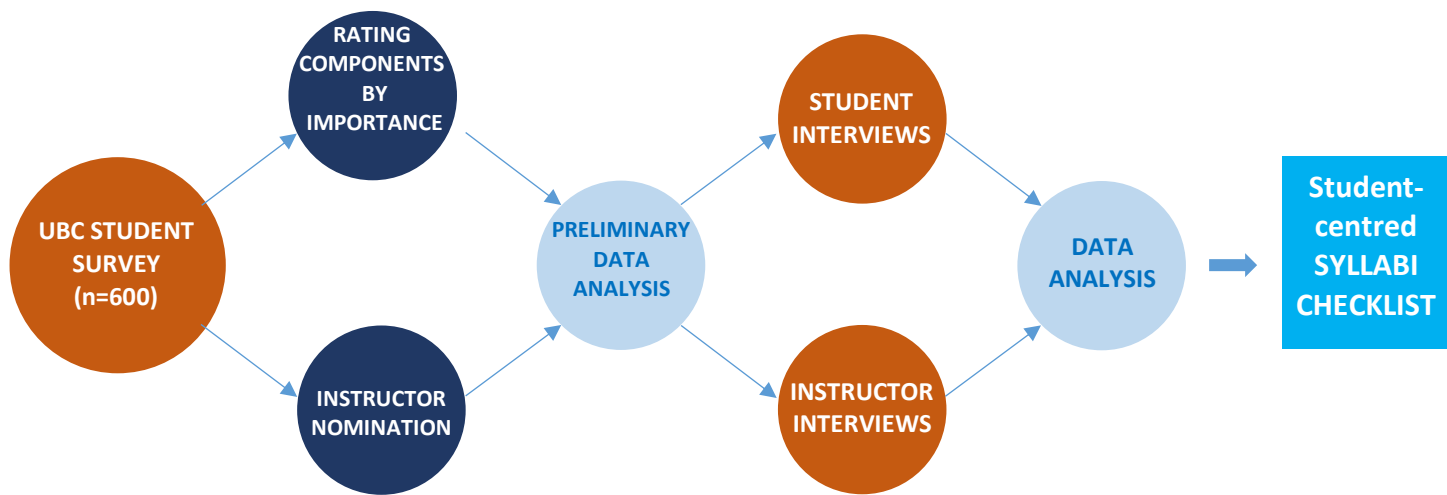
Although the senate and many faculties provide templates to aid instructors in developing a course syllabus, the role that syllabi play in student learning and wellbeing at UBC have not been evaluated. In addition, successful learning is promoted by utilizing effective teaching tools.

Thus, the purpose of this study was to gather insights from UBC undergraduate students and instructors to develop recommendations for student-centred syllabi that ultimately support student needs in learning and wellbeing.

## Objectives

- ✓ Determine which syllabi components are most relevant to student learning and wellbeing
- ✓ Identify instructor perspectives on syllabi components
- ✓ Develop a list of suggestions to create a student-centred syllabus

# Research Methods



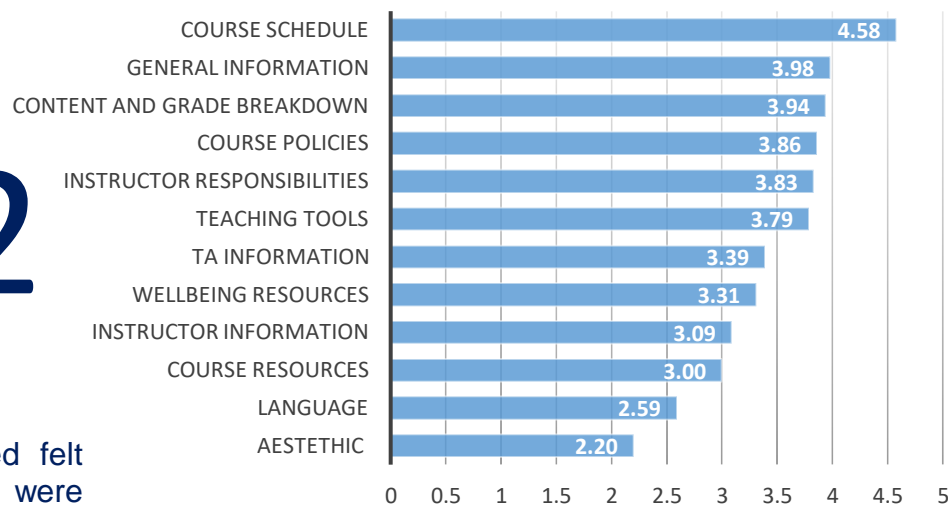
METHOD

**1** Students rated clarity and organization to be the most important feature of a syllabus

Students who experience lower wellbeing rated the listing of wellbeing resources to be more important than students who reported higher wellbeing

**3** The instructors interviewed felt that the course syllabi were important for relating their expectations and teaching style. They also acknowledged that their syllabi play a role in student learning and wellbeing.

## Importance Rating by Category



## Associations of syllabi components and wellbeing

Category	Pearson's r
Course Calendar	.18**
GPA	-.24**
Instructor Information	.13**
TA Information	.06
Course Content	.15**
Course Policies	.19**
Teaching Tools	.14**
Course Resources	.09**
Wellbeing and Learning Resources	.20**
Language Usage	.06
Design and Aesthetics	-.03
Instructor responsibilities	.13**
General Course Information	.13**

Note: Wellbeing was assessed with the College Student Subjective Wellbeing Questionnaire. \*\* p < 0.01



15 most frequently reported syllabi items that support students in their wellbeing

FINDINGS

\*mandatory based on Syllabi Policy; note that not all mandatory elements are listed in this guide.

All information on the checklist are derived from three sources: 1) student survey 2) Focus Groups 3) Scholarly-peer reviewed articles

# SUGGESTIONS FOR STUDENT-CENTERED SYLLABI

## Supporting student learning enhances wellbeing

*Student wellbeing is supported when their learning, and their motivation to learn, is supported (Eisenberg, Hunt, & Speer, 2013). In addition, students feel that they learn more effectively when the course is structured (El Ansari & Stock, 2010). Undergraduates at UBC confirmed that with their ratings: they gave the greatest value to the organization and clarity of a syllabus.*

- Using a course schedule that includes important dates, topics, and chapters in one coherent overview \*
- Clear grading breakdown for all student assessments \*
- Providing an easy to follow list of course material (textbooks, articles, i-clickers etc.)
- Clearly outlining late penalties and missed assignment policies (which should remain unchanged during any single offering of a course)
- Using UBC resources that support instructors in inclusive teaching (<https://inclusiveteaching.ctlt.ubc.ca/>)

## Providing learning and wellness resources on syllabi may help those who need it

*Research in health psychology suggests that perceived support is linked to higher wellbeing (Thoits, 2011): Even if the support may not be given or used, the perception of having adequate support available when needed positively influences psychological wellbeing. Our survey revealed that students with lower self-reported wellbeing also have a lower GPA, and students*

*with lower GPA rated the listing of wellbeing resources in a course syllabus to be significantly more important than students with a high GPA.*

- Providing a list of campus wellbeing resources (e.g., [students.ubc.ca/health](https://students.ubc.ca/health), the Kaleidoscope, Speakeasy)
- Listing a variety of learning resources directly applicable to the course (e.g., links to stats tutoring, software courses, online videos, [learning center](#)) \*
- Inform about the purpose and process of early alert (<https://wellbeing.ubc.ca/early-alert>)

## Personalization of syllabi supports course organization and may help students indirectly

*In our survey, we found no correlation between student wellbeing and the use of language or syllabi design. Although the student focus group emphasized not seeing an importance of the use of images, personal stories, or other aesthetic features, the instructors who were nominated by the students for having made the most positive impact through their syllabi have placed a high degree of importance to such elements (color coding, fonts, images, social media etc.) Instructors described the syllabus to “be the organizational anchor” of the course. Thus, using the syllabus as a medium for personal expression and as course organization tool may support the student implicitly. Research shows that a sense of personal connection to the instructor positively influences academic success (Frisby & Martin, 2010).*

- Building a syllabus that goes hand in hand with the structure of the course (chronological and functional order)

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- Using pictures, images and designs if the instructor sees personal value in them and aid to highlight important aspects
- Reflecting goals and personal interests for the course (e.g. if social rapport with students is an important part of the instructor's style, they may offer special discussion groups or social media exchange platforms) \*
- Avoiding the use of templates and stylistic features that do not align with the instructors' personal style.

## Wellbeing matters for both: Student and Instructor

*Especially in undergraduate years, students find themselves in a new environment and may seek guidance from their instructor. Thus, instructors may encounter situations in which students seek a form of help that they are not able to provide. Some instructors are concerned that listing wellbeing resources may imply that they are open to dealing with mental health issues of their students in a way that goes beyond their scope of their role as course instructor. This assumption may influence the instructor to avoid listing wellness resources on their syllabi. Here are some tips that may help to uphold appropriate boundaries while supporting students' wellbeing at the same time.*

- Being explicit about the level of support that students can expect from the instructor
- Explaining the importance of addressing wellbeing while stating one's own boundaries and limitations
- Assuring students: Know that they can ask for direction on how to connect to resources
- Having a list/handout with wellbeing resources available as well as learning resources that will complement the course

- Making use of online functions that connect students to wellbeing resources directly without the instructor as a medium, e.g. "Help-me button" on Canvas.

## Instructors who have made a positive impact on student learning use similar strategies

*Students were asked to nominate instructors that have made a positive impact on their learning through their syllabi. The four most frequently named instructors were contacted and asked to participate in a focus group. The instructors' syllabi commonly used the following elements:*

- No changes to the syllabus after its first release
- Use colour coding and/or fonts to visually organize the syllabus
- Use syllabus to reflect teaching style, course structure and organization
- Provide a detailed course schedule including dates, topics, and readings
- Highlight important dates
- Use pictures (e.g. of TAs) and address students in first person
- Use statements about class environment and values (e.g., respect and decency statement, positive space, teaching on x<sup>w</sup>məθk<sup>w</sup>əyəm (Musqueam) territory)
- Keep consistency, integrity and authenticity between syllabus and teaching

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## Student Focus Group: Top 3 elements of a good syllabus

Students from the focus group were asked to provide the three most important element each syllabi should have:

- A high degree of detail and clarity
- Break down of grading/weighting
- Listing all topics to be covered

## Instructor Focus Group: Top 3 elements of a good syllabus

Instructors from the focus group were asked to provide the three most important element each syllabi should have:

- Transparency of the structure of the course
- Grade breakdown
- Organized course schedule

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Overall, we surveyed 600 undergraduate students across UBC faculties. We randomly selected five students to form a focus group. In addition, students nominated instructors who had made a positive impact on student wellbeing and learning through their syllabi. The four most frequently named instructors formed a focus group. Collectively, all measures revealed that the most important features of a student-centered syllabus are **clarity**, **structure** and **consistency**. Beyond these aspects, using a syllabus as a reflection of personal teaching style may also have positive impacts on building rapport and connection between student and instructor.

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We gratefully acknowledge financial support from the UBC Alma Mater Society and the UBC Wellbeing Strategic Initiatives Fund.

We would also like to acknowledge the feedback on drafts of this document by Diana Jung and Patty Hamblar (UBC Health Promotion & Education), and Dr. Paul Harrison (Chair, Vancouver Senate Academic Policy Committee, Professor Emeritus, Faculty of Science)

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