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Syllabus Tone, More Than Mental Health Statements, Influence Intentions to Seek Help

Regan A. R. Gurung[1] and Noelle R. Galardi[1]

Abstract

Background: Mental health issues are increasing in higher education and finding ways for students to get help when needed is important. **Objective:** We tested if the tone of a short syllabus and the presence of a special statement addressing mental health would increase intentions to approach instructors for help. **Method:** We used a 2 (Tone: warm vs. cold) × 2(Statement: present vs. absent) experimental design. Participants (N = 257) read one of four, two-page syllabi, and rated intentions to reach out for help and the instructor. **Results:** We found a main effect for tone on three Reach Out statements and ratings of the instructor. Presence of the statement influenced likelihood to reach out for help with personal problems. **Conclusions:** Both the tone of a short syllabus and the presence of statements normalizing reaching out for help can influence student intentions to contact instructors for help. **Teaching Implications:** Writing a warm toned syllabus and addressing stress and mental health with a university statement may increase student's intentions to ask for help.

Keywords

syllabi, tone, mental health

Mental illness cases on campus have risen significantly over the years, with diagnosis increasing from 21.9% to 35.5% from 2007 to 2017 (Lipson et al., 2018). The severity of mental illness has also risen (Xiao et al., 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic has made matters worse with especially high levels of perceived stress identified listed in April 2020 (Hoyt et al., 2020). Communicating mental health support to college students during COVID-19 is especially challenging (Seidel et al., 2020). With the effects of COVID-19 with us for the immediate future it is critical to identify factors that may increase how often college students utilize psychological services. The goal of this study is to assess if the tone of a course syllabus and the positioning of a university "Reach Out for Success" statement on syllabi can increase students' self-reported intentions to seek help from their instructor and also relate to ratings of the instructor.

The majority of college-aged individuals with psychiatric disorders do not seek treatment (Blanco et al., 2008) and treatment seeking is more difficult since COVID-19 (Son et al., 2020). Psychological service utilization on campus differs by gender, with women significantly more likely than men to access various forms of professional treatment, including psychotropic medications and therapy (Eisenberg et al., 2011). Utilization also varies by race and ethnicity. White students are substantially more likely to receive treatment than those who are Asian, Black, or Latinx (Eisenberg et al., 2013). To better understand this lack of utilization, researchers have identified several barriers to help-seeking behaviors among college students experiencing mental health issues.

There are various perceived barriers to seeking mental health care, including embarrassment, denial, stigma, and being unsure of where to go for help (Corrigan et al., 2003; Li et al., 2014; Vidourek et al., 2014). Attitudes toward seeking professional help predict actual use of services (Kahn & Williams, 2003). A lack of perceived need, unawareness around insurance coverage or available services, lower SES, and not believing in the effectiveness of treatment are all predictors of not utilizing services (Eisenberg et al., 2007). Due to these barriers, many students are left with untreated mental health issues. As a result, these students are at higher risk for lower GPA, school dropout, and unemployment (United States Government Accountability Office, 2008). Depressive symptoms in particular can negatively impact academic performance, personal relationships, and overall well-being (D'Amico et al., 2016).

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Although stigma to seeking treatment has decreased, it is still a significant barrier to help-seeking behaviors among college students (Hogan, 2003). Stigma can be both public—the ways in which the larger social group labels and discriminates against those with mental illness—and personal—the internalization of these negative beliefs (Corrigan, 2004). Many college students report high perceived public stigma but low personal stigma (Eisenberg et al., 2009).

If seeking help was made more normative by featuring it explicitly in course syllabi, would the stigma to seek help be reduced and result in higher intentions to seek help? Instructors are in a position to make help seeking normative given they are often looked up to by students and are in positions of authority. Specifically, instructors may be able to help reduce help seeking stigma and increase awareness around psychological services available to students through their course syllabi (Goldman, 2018).

Syllabi play many roles. A syllabus can serve as a contract between students and professor, a permanent record of the course, a cognitive map, and a learning tool (Richmond et al., 2016). A growing body of research has examined the effectiveness of different types of syllabi and focused on how syllabi reflect campus culture (Stanny et al., 2015), their optimal length (Harrington & Gabert-Quillen, 2015) and level of detail (Saville et al., 2010), the usefulness? of visuals (Overman et al., 2019), and their utility in skill development (Appleby et al., 2019). Key elements of effective syllabi are writing them to be student or learning centered (Cullen & Harris, 2009; Richmond et al., 2019) and using a warm and friendly tone (Slattery & Carlson, 2005; Waggoner & Veloso, 2018). Participants who read a friendly syllabus perceived the instructor as more caring, motivating, and approachable (Denton & Veloso, 2018).

In a direct test of the effectiveness of tone, Harnish and Bridges (2011) modified two syllabi to reflect either a warm or cold tone. Criteria used to classify a syllabus as warm-toned included using positive or friendly language, providing a rationale for assignments, using humor, conveying compassion, sharing personal experiences, and showing enthusiasm for the course. Participants who read the warm syllabus perceived the instructor as being more approachable, and more motivated to teach the course. Furthermore, warm-toned syllabi do not negatively influence ratings of competence of either male or female instructors (Waggoner & Veloso, 2018). Given how tone also underlies learner-centered syllabi, we focused on this element and tested whether a warm-toned short syllabus would be more likely to have students reach out for help from the instructor.

Beyond tone, there are also more direct ways of getting students to reach out for help. Some universities have begun requiring or suggesting that instructors include a statement on course syllabi addressing student mental health. For example, Oregon State University recently required all instructors include a "Reach Out for Success" statement in syllabi. This statement, developed by the office for student services and endorsed by the faculty senate, was designed to show the instructor's and university's commitment to students' mental health. Does including such a statement have any effect on students' likelihood to ask for help or their ratings of their instructors?

Teachers have been evaluated in a number of different ways and a wide variety of measures exist to evaluate and rate teachers (Richmond et al., 2016). One of the most commonly used scales in this arena is the Teacher Behavior Checklist (TBC, Keeley et al., 2006). Coming out of a long line of active research aiming to determine the characteristics of strong teachers, the TBC is easy to use and well-validated. It features ideal teacher behaviors and requires students to rate how frequently their instructor exhibits each behavior. The TBC correlates with both measures of how learner-centered a syllabus is, and student-professor rapport (Richmond, 2021).

Given the increasing rates of mental health issues on campus and the documented resistance of students to get help, our main research question was: Does creating a warm-toned syllabus and including a mental health statement increase student intentions to contact a faculty member for help? Based on past research showing tone also influences the student-teacher relationship (e.g., Harnish & Bridges, 2011; Richmond et al., 2016) we also asked: Does syllabus tone and presence of a mental health statement influence how an instructor is rated (personal characteristics and effectiveness). Because of existing gender differences in support seeking (Martínez-Hernáez et al., 2016) and the role of attitudes in predicting behavior (Lundquist & Gurung, 2019), we measured attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help and gender and controlled for both in our analyses We predicted that syllabi containing the "Reach Out" statement and written in a friendly tone would contribute to greater intentions to ask for help and more positive instructor ratings.

Method

Participants

College students from an introductory psychology course at a large state university volunteered to take part in this study in exchange for research credit. The sample consisted of 257 students, 199 women (76%) and 56 men (21%). Participants were between 18 and 52 years old ($M = 22.05$, $SD = 6.21$). The majority of the sample were European American (89 students, 34%) with large groups of Asian American (59 students, 23%) and Latinx (61 students, 24%) participants. Ten percent of participants did not list their ethnicity (28 students) and 8% represented a variety of different ethnic groups. A large portion of the sample were 1st year students (95 students, 37%) with near equal second (58 students, 23%) and 3rd year (60 students, 23%) students, and a smaller group of seniors (37 students, 14%).

Measures and Materials

Syllabi. We modified two syllabi from Harnish and Bridge (2011), one of which was warm-toned and the other was cold-toned. They were corrected for grammatical errors and

then duplicated. To facilitate a 2(Tone: warm vs. cold) by 2(Statement: present vs. absent) design we added a "Reach Out" statement to both a Warm and Cold syllabus. The warm-toned syllabi differed from the cold-toned syllabi by providing a rationale for assignments, using positive or friendly language, sharing personal experiences, using humor, showing enthusiasm for the course, and conveying compassion. For example, in the warm-toned syllabi, the instructor in response to missing assignments states "Such life events are unwelcomed and because I understand how difficult these times are, . . . I will be happy to give you a make-up exam.". All syllabi were two pages long and omitted the professor's first name to convey gender ambiguity. For each page of the syllabus, we used the survey software to ensure the survey could not be advanced for 60 seconds ensuring students read the syllabi for a minimum of 120 seconds.

The "Reach Out" statement presented on the final page of syllabi read:

University students encounter setbacks from time to time. If you encounter difficulties and need assistance, it's important to reach out. Consider discussing the situation with an instructor or academic advisor. Learn about resources that assist with wellness and academic success at Oregon State University. If you are in immediate crisis, please contact the Crisis Text Line or call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255).

Dependent variables. Participants rated how likely they would be to reach out to the faculty member that wrote the syllabus using a five-item Likert-type measure ranging from 1(*Extremely Likely*) to 5(*Extremely Unlikely*) for five personal issues that are commonly seen in college (Son et al., 2020): help with a class assignment, feeling low, having a personal issue such as an argument with a friend or family member, having a medical issue (e.g., Strep), or asking for more information about a campus resource. Reliability was moderate, Cronbach's α = .72.

We used a modified form of the TBC (Keeley et al., 2006) to measure ratings of the teacher for the presented syllabus. We asked participants to rate the instructor on the basis of the course syllabus on 14 items (e.g., is approachable/personable). We excluded questions such as "Presents current information" and "Provides constructive feedback" as irrelevant in the context of the current study. Participants rated the professor using a Likert scale with response options ranging from 1(*Strongly agree*) to 5(*Strongly disagree*). Reliability was high, Cronbach's α = .91.

Control variables. We used the Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help shortened form (ATSPPH-SF, Fischer & Farina, 1995) survey to assess students' opinions regarding help-seeking behaviors for mental health treatment (e.g., "I would obtain psychological help if upset for a long time). This scale consists of 10 items, half of which were reversed scored. Participants used a 5-point Likert scale

ranging from 1(*Strongly Agree*) to 5 (*Strongly Disagree*). Reliability was acceptable, Cronbach's α = .68.

Participants also completed a 5-item quiz, testing them on basic information from the syllabus (e.g., What type of class is this syllabus from?) to assess their attentiveness. We asked students about material featured on the syllabus (e.g., "What is the teacher's last name?"). See complete survey questions here: https://osf.io/4nkjb/

Procedure

Participants enrolled in this study using SONA software to access the university psychology department participant pool experiment sign-up system. We used Qualtrics to create the surveys. Participants were randomly assigned to each condition and first read a consent form. Then, in this order, they read the syllabus, completed the syllabus quiz, followed by the Reach Out questions, the TBC, and the ATSPPH-SF. Participants then completed a second separate study. The current study took approximately 10 minutes on average. Given the short duration of the study, we did not counterbalance surveys.

Results

We tested our main research questions and hypotheses using a set of analyses of covariance (ANCOVA)[1] on each of the five main Reach Out questions controlling for attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help, TBC, and gender. Each analysis was a 2(Tone: warm vs. cold) × 2(Statement: present vs. absent) between-subjects factorial ANCOVA.

We found some support for our hypotheses that the presence of a mental health statement and syllabus tone are important. Statement presence had a significant main effect on reaching out to the faculty member for help with having an argument with friend or family member, $F(1, 255) = 5.64, p = .018, n_p^2 = .02$. Students who read the syllabi with the statement indicated a higher likelihood of reaching out for help. Tone showed a significant main effect on likelihood to reach out in three areas: on a class assignment, $F(1, 255) = 4.24, p = .041, n_p^2 = .02$, when feeling low, $F(1, 255) = 4.32, p = .039, n_p^2 = .02$, and to ask about more campus resources for mental health, $F(1, 255) = 4.40, p = .037, n_p^2 = .02$. Students reading the warm-toned syllabi reported they would be more likely to reach out. None of the tone by statement interactions were significant: reaching out on a class assignment, $F(1, 255) = 0.09, p = .764, n_p^2 = .00$, when feeling low, $F(1, 255) = 0.02, p = .894, n_p^2 = .00$, for family issues, $F(1, 255) = 0.19, p = .667, n_p^2 = .00$, for medical issues, $F(1, 255) = 0.04, p = .835, n_p^2 = .00$, and to ask about more campus resources for mental health, $F(1, 255) = 0.76, p = .383, n_p^2 = .00$. See Table 1 for descriptive data.

ATSPPH-SF was not a significant covariate but gender was significant in predicting reaching out with a class assignment, $F(1, 255) = 3.95, p = .048, n_p^2 = .02$, when feeling low, $F(1, 255) = 10.54, p = .001, n_p^2 = .04$, and when having a personal issue with friends or family members, $F(1, 255) = 8.29$,

Table 1. Descriptive Data for Reach Out Statements and Instructor Ratings Across Conditions.

	Statement Present		Statement Absent	
	Cold Tone M (SD)	Warm Tone M(SD)	Cold Tone M(SD)	Warm Tone M(SD)
1. Help with a class assignment	3.97 (0.93)	4.27 (0.78)	3.94 (1.05)	4.19 (0.85)
2. When feeling low	2.37 (1.20)	2.73 (1.29)	2.53 (1.31)	2.92 (1.21)
3. Having a personal issue with friend of family	1.85 (0.99)	2.02 (1.08)	2.14 (1.34)	2.51 (1.43)
4. A medical issue (e.g., Strep)	3.56 (1.38)	3.71 (1.29)	3.81 (1.30)	3.92 (1.38)
5. Ask about campus resources	2.94 (1.42)	3.51 (1.33)	3.00 (1.36)	3.24 (1.28)
6. Teacher Behavior Checklist	1.76 (0.54)	2.21 (0.75)	1.92 (0.57)	2.10 (0.65)

Note: Items 1 to 5 ask how likely it is for participant to reach out to faculty for each of the following (where 1 = *Extremely unlikely* and 5 = *Extremely likely*).

$p = .004$, $n_p^2 = .03$. Women were more likely to reach out in all cases.

In predicting our second major question, syllabi effect on the ratings of the instructor, tone again showed a significant main effect, $F(1, 255) = 11.22$, $p = .001$, $n_p^2 = .04$, and gender was a significant covariate, $F(1, 255) = 4.10$, $p = .044$, $n_p^2 = .02$. Statement presence, $F(1, 255) = 2.65$, $p = .705$, $n_p^2 = .00$, and the interaction were not significant, $F(1, 255) = 2.65$, $p = .105$, $n_p^2 = .01$.

Scores on the syllabi quiz showed participants paid close attention to the syllabus ($M = 4.29$, $SD = 1.01$). An analysis of variance testing quiz score across the four cells showed no significant main effect of tone or statement and no interaction effect. Participants spent close to 3 minutes reading page 1 of the syllabus ($M = 170.70$ secs, $SD = 226.88$) and close to 2 minutes reading page 2 of the syllabus ($M = 100.43$ secs, $SD = 76.01$). Again, there were no statistically significant main effects or interactions on seconds spent reading the syllabus.

Discussion

Our investigation of whether a warm-toned short syllabus and one with a Reach Out statement (making getting help seem normative), reinforced the importance of friendly syllabi. Participants who read a short syllabus designed to be warm and friendly were more likely to report intentions to reach out to the faculty member writing the syllabus for three different domains of troubles. Participants who read a syllabus with a special statement addressing mental health and providing contact information were more likely to report intentions to reach out when having an argument with friends or family.

Our study expands the research on the importance of tone into a new realm. In light of the dramatic increases in mental health issues on campuses around the United States, our results provide additional strong evidence for the importance of writing a friendly syllabus. Nicely complementing past research showing the association of a warm and friendly tone with perceptions of the instructor as caring and motivating (Denton & Veloso, 2018; Waggoner & Veloso, 2018), our results show students reading such a syllabus may also be more likely to reach out to them for help. Given that many students receive the syllabus on the 1st day of class, or even earlier if it is posted in

an online learning management system, a warm-toned syllabus will go a long way toward creating a welcoming environment that may make a student more likely to view the instructor as a resource when they have personal troubles and not just for class-related assistance.

While our study does not provide resounding evidence for the benefits of the presence of a special statement, it does promise that having a statement in a short syllabus can make a difference. Although only significant for one item, participants who read a short syllabus with the Reach Out statement were more likely to reach out to the instructor.

There are significant implications for this research especially as more classes put material online. Similar to past work on learning-centered syllabi (e.g., Richmond et al., 2016), if a syllabus provides a good first impression of the instructor, the student may develop positive expectations for the course. Especially during times of stress, such as the COVID pandemic, expectations for a course can significantly predict learning (Gurung & Stone, 2020). If a warm-toned short syllabus and the presence of a Reach Out statement can provide an expectation of the availability of help as suggested by our results, it would be easy to make this modification to a syllabus.

Like many past studies of syllabi, our study is constrained by the artificial nature of the task. In an actual classroom, the personality, preparation, and behaviors of the instructor would go a long way toward setting up expectations for the course. Here, our participants only read a static, short syllabus. While our assessment of page-read time and the syllabus quiz suggest participants paid attention to the syllabi and the task, the task may not have been as salient as this was not a syllabus for a class the participant was in.

Another limitation is that our syllabi were not as long as traditional syllabi. The research syllabi were only two pages long, and while this made it more likely they would be read, many college classes have much longer syllabi. It is possible that even warm-toned syllabi may not generate the same intentions in the student if it is 10 or 15 pages long. Furthermore, given that many policy statements required by universities are buried at the end of a syllabus, a Reach Out statement near the end of the document may have even less impact than we saw in two pages. We note that we did not counterbalance surveys which may have produced an order or priming effect. Finally,

while we measure intentions to ask for help, we do not know if the participant would actually ask for help.

Conclusion

While this study does not measure learning or give us an indication of whether the tone and statement presence would influence learning, our work addresses a significant issue for higher education. For learning to take place, mental health issues need to be addressed. Future research needs similarly to examine the effects of different syllabi components and should modify placement and language. Teachers should also examine their syllabi and aim to modify the tone, making it as warm as possible. Perhaps having a Reach Out statement up front versus at the end would be beneficial. It is also possible that the value of a Reach Out statement is lost when part of policy pages (e.g., academic honesty). Finding additional ways a syllabus could be modified to increase the likelihood of students reaching out for help is a worthy goal to undertake.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

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Note

1. We examined our data to assess whether they met the assumptions for an ANOVA (e.g., normality, homogeneity of variance, and random independent samples) and ANCOVA (e.g., linear relationship between dependent variables and covariates, homogeneity of regression slopes, and independence of covariate and independent variables).

Open Practices

This article has received badge for Open Materials. More information about the Open Practices badges can be found at http://www.psychologicalscience.org/publications/badges.

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