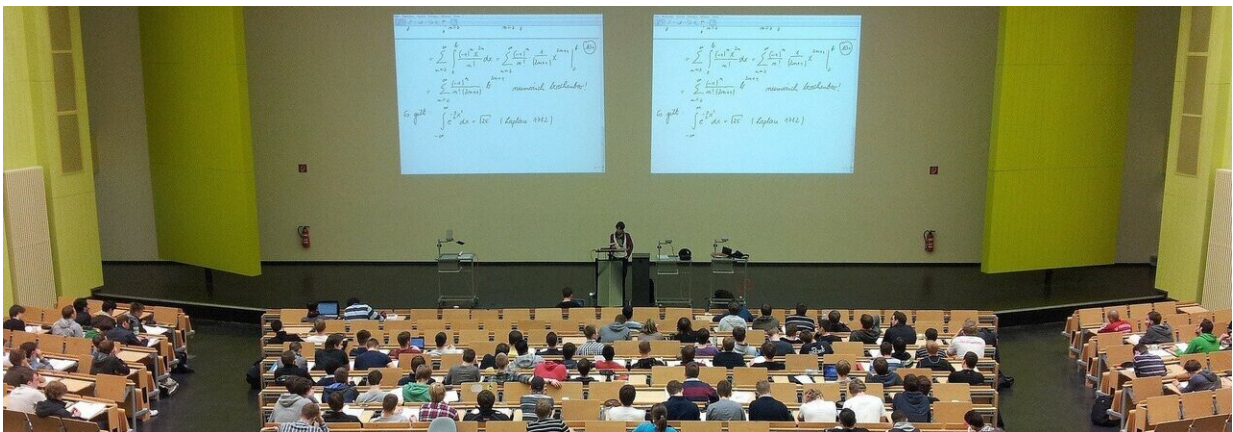


Using a warmer tone in college syllabi makes students more likely to ask for help, study finds

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College course syllabi written in a warm, friendly tone are more likely to encourage students to reach out when they are struggling or need help, a new study from Oregon State University found.

Conversely, when a syllabus is written in a more cold, detached tone, students are less likely to reach out.

The study also compared the effect of syllabus tone with the effect of a deliberate "Reach out for help" statement included in the document.

"The instructor has to ask themselves, what's the first point of contact with the class for the [student](#)? In an [online class](#) and in remote learning, the syllabus is often the first thing. An impression of the course and you the instructor is formed on the syllabus," said Regan A.R. Gurung, lead author of the study and director of the general psychology program in OSU's College of Liberal Arts.

"In the old days, before Canvas and other online teaching tools, the student wouldn't see the syllabus until I handed it out. That gave me a lot of time to create that impression," he said. Now, however, students often read syllabi to determine if they want to take a course or not.

During the pandemic, when the majority of courses have moved online and students may be struggling with more stress and pressure than they would in a normal school year, conveying that it's OK to ask for help is even more important, Gurung said.

The study, published recently in the journal *Teaching of Psychology*, recruited 257 student volunteers from introductory psychology courses at OSU. They were tasked with reading one of four sample syllabi: warm-toned with or without a "reach out" statement, or cold-toned with or without the "reach out" statement.

The warm-toned syllabi included phrases like "I welcome you to contact me outside of class and student hours," and used more "We will" framing instead of the cold-toned version's "You will."

Student participants rated the hypothetical instructor based on the syllabus and answered some basic questions to verify they had read the document. They then ranked how likely they would be to reach out to the professor in each of five situations: help on an assignment, when feeling low, personal issues with friends or family, medical issues and to ask about campus resources.

"Reach out" statements have become more popular in recent years as a way to destigmatize mental health needs and point students toward available mental health and academic resources. But the study found that syllabus tone, more than these statements, made students more likely to seek help.

Results showed an increase in likelihood to reach out on three of the five situations among students who read the warm-tone syllabi, while students who read the syllabi with a "reach out" statement were more likely to ask for help in only one of the five situations. Warm versus cold tone had no impact on how students perceived the instructor's overall competence.

Gurung cautioned that the study is limited by being performed in lab conditions rather than in a real classroom. Researchers capped the syllabi used for the study at two pages each, when real course syllabi may be 15 pages or more. And the syllabus was the sole component for students to judge.

"But that's exactly why I think a study like this is powerful—that even without that human component, even something as black-and-white as a syllabus can make a difference," Gurung said. "If you're a great approachable person, good for you; you'll just be able to magnify these effects."

With this study, researchers are not suggesting that professors ditch all discipline or craft an overly touchy-feely syllabus.

It's the difference between rapport and rules, Gurung said.

"You can absolutely have rules, and you should be firm and you should be fair and you should be clear, but that is sort of separate from your interaction with the student as a person," he said. "You don't have to be extroverted or cracking jokes, but you can still show that you listen."

More information: Regan A. R. Gurung et al, Syllabus Tone, More Than Mental Health Statements, Influence Intentions to Seek Help, *Teaching of Psychology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/0098628321994632](https://doi.org/10.1177/0098628321994632)

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