

# Effects of Syllabus Transparency on Undergraduates' Perceptions of Learning, Support, and Success

## Background

- The way a syllabus is written can directly impact how students perceive the instructor and the course (Richmond et al., 2019).
- Students' perceptions may change when encountering indicators that the instructor has put effort into the structure of the course and clearly communicates this (i.e., transparency of purpose) (Saville et al., 2010; Winkelmess, 2013).
- Undergraduates given a more detailed syllabus were more likely to give higher ratings to the instructor and to recommend the course to a friend, compared to a less detailed syllabus (Saville et al., 2010).

## Current Experiment

- We investigated the effects of syllabus transparency on undergraduates':
  - predicted level of learning and course success.
  - perception of the extent to which the instructor cares about student learning
  - likelihood of seeking instructor support
  - overall motivation to participate and succeed in a course

## Participants

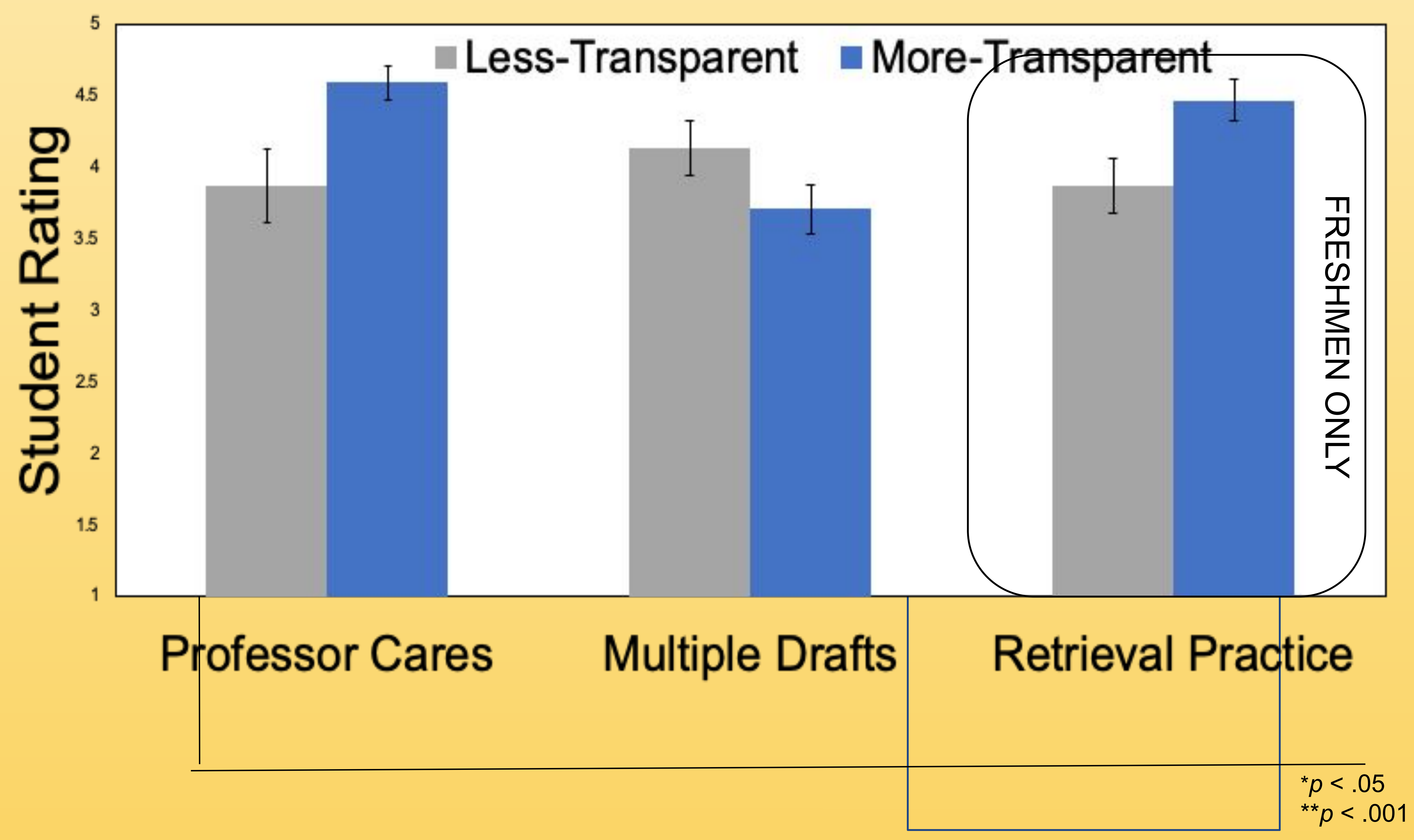
- $N = 111$  undergraduates enrolled at a small liberal arts college

## Materials & Procedure

- Online survey, via Qualtrics
- Participants randomly assigned to view one of two syllabi for an unnamed course:
  - *More-Transparent Syllabus*: states purpose, provides more description for course elements
  - *Less-Transparent Syllabus*: parallel in structure and content, but less detailed explanation and no explicitly stated purpose
- Participants were directed to a survey with 14 Likert-scale items measuring student perception of the course and instructor in response to the

# Transparen-SEE? It Does Make a Difference!

Students believe an instructor cares more about their learning after reading a syllabus with explicit communication about the purpose behind course design.



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## Results

- Participants in the more-transparent condition felt the professor cared more about their learning, compared to the less-transparent condition,  $F(1,109) = 16.76, p < .001$ .
- Participants in the more-transparent condition indicated lower benefits of multiple drafts, compared to the less-transparent condition,  $F(1, 107) = 4.65, p = .033$ .
- Freshmen in the more-transparent condition rated the benefits of retrieval practice higher than those in the less-transparent condition,  $F(1, 30) = 6.24, p = .018$ .

## Discussion

- A more-transparent syllabus may be especially impactful in improving students' perceptions of how much the instructor cares about student learning. This, in turn, may translate into greater student engagement and motivation.
- It is not clear why the benefits of multiple drafts were rated lower in the more-transparent condition. Perhaps too much information about this course component actually undermined student buy-in.
- It is promising that freshmen who read the syllabus describing the purpose of repeated and effortful retrieval practice (RP) rated the value of this strategy higher. This difference did not reach significance in the larger sample, suggesting that higher-level students either knew about the value of RP already, or that the explicit statement of purpose did not convince them of the merits of RP.
- These results can help instructors understand the potential benefits of transparent syllabi and course design. More research is needed to replicate and extend these initial findings.

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