

College of Nursing and Health Professions



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Best Practice in Syllabus Construction with a Commitment to Shared Governance

Rationale for Best Practice

The course syllabus has been one of the most recognized tools that facilitate the teaching and learning process in higher education. Historically it has represented the intellectual capital provided by the knowledgeable and well-credentialed instructor. In a practical sense, the syllabus has become better known as the prelude to and roadmap for students to understand what they “will have to do” to complete a course. More recently, the syllabus has become the agreement or even the legal contract between student and instructor and sometimes between the student and the institution. If a student stays enrolled in a course, *de facto* he/she agrees to abide by the syllabus. Similarly, an instructor agrees to follow and execute in good faith the terms of the syllabus as presented. When grievances arise, the syllabus becomes a core document for inspection by academic administrators. Therefore, a closer look at best practices in syllabus construction is warranted.

While the syllabus is a commonplace tool for faculty when teaching and serves as one of the most visible elements of curriculum and academic administration, it generally does not get the developmental or oversight attention that it deserves from faculty, chairs, and academic administrators. This may seem surprising and even ironic, and without an honest and careful analysis of syllabi across your college with an eye toward the interest of all stakeholders, it may strike you as incredible. Surprisingly, many syllabi can use improvement, even those crafted by the most seasoned faculty.

At some level, the failure to construct and present a quality and *comprehensive* syllabus by faculty is understandable. Where in our academic formation have we been oriented to and trained to develop a *comprehensive* syllabus that *by design* meets the needs of students, faculty, academic departments, respective colleges within the university, and the overall interest of the institution?

This is not to say that we have not been “introduced” to the syllabus by department chairs, deans, or mentors. Or that we have not been given a “sample syllabus” of a former course, from which to work. Certainly adjunct instructors are given a sample syllabus when they begin teaching at our institutions. Universities and colleges and their respective academic units usually have a “standard syllabus outline.” Works on developmental teaching and books to help adjunct instructors do a fair job in outlining and explaining the elements of a good college course syllabus. For example, a good treatment of designing the syllabus can be found in *The Survival Guide for Adjuncts* (Lyons, Kysilka, & Pawlas, 1999). Many of you have spent time developing syllabi for new courses or have worked on new degree program offerings. However, the construction and continued refinement of a *purposeful, useful and comprehensive syllabus* demands more attention than has probably been given.

At first, faculty may take umbrage with academic administrators who advocate for a “standard” syllabus. Who other than they, the subject matter experts, are best positioned to craft the syllabus that guides the art and science of their instruction and meets the learning objectives of the course? Understandably, faculty invest good time, effort, and

thought in designing a syllabus that will excite and interest students in the subject matter at hand.

I submit that the shortcomings, and again there are several, of syllabi on campuses stem from a misunderstanding or lack of appreciation for the fundamental purpose of a *comprehensive* syllabus. A comprehensive syllabus starts with the philosophy that a syllabus should reflect a healthy *shared governance* among faculty, students, academic administrators, and the overall stewards of the institution.

On the surface, syllabus construction may not be seen as a shared governance issue, but as an activity that can easily be directed by conventional practice within the institution. However, this article will show that by developing a syllabus with shared governance in mind, all stakeholders should be satisfied that their influence, decision making, and responsibilities are respected. For example, faculty will maintain their strong curricular imprint; departments/disciplines can ensure that students adequately obtain knowledge, skills, and reach appropriate competencies in an area of study; and the institution can minimize risk of student grievances.

The syllabus is more than the good intellectual capital and creativity of the instructor---although that is still the heart and soul of the work. The syllabus also needs to be student centered and student friendly. It needs to accurately and consistently communicate academic policies and procedures that facilitate students completing a course without incident. It needs to clearly communicate student expectations in coursework and meet accrediting agency, university, and respective academic schools/division/units standards. And while the syllabus is comprehensive, it needs to be

sanitized of classroom management and course processes issues that are more appropriately addressed in another communiqué; otherwise the document becomes distracting and unwieldy and deviates from its core function. Most important, it needs to contain the elements, language, and constructs that foster healthy teaching and learning and plays a preventative role in minimizing student grievances. The well-constructed syllabus should ensure that student and faculty expectations are understood for tasks, time, and quality in learning activities. A comprehensive syllabus meets the needs of all stakeholders that rely on this important academic tool: students, faculty, academic administrators and the institution.

As an academic dean, I know that the syllabus becomes a core reference document when a student grievance comes forward. Generally, I find that grievances, regardless of their nature, are not the result of poor instruction from faculty or uncooperative or recalcitrant students. They are usually the result of missed expectations in the teaching/learning process. I believe that constructing and improving upon a quality, comprehensive syllabus can reduce the number of grievances and improve the learning experience for students. Any time invested up front to improve the syllabus is time well spent because it helps prevent the exorbitant and exhausting amount of time instructors, academic administrators, and students will have to expend on each academic grievance.

As professionals in continuing higher education, we often rely on syllabi from students who have attended other schools to assess their learning for transfer of credit or waiving a course. Syllabus construction should aim to be an accurate, clear, comprehensive and institutionally sound presentation of the teaching and learning that

took place in a course, during a given time, and needs to be understandable to the outsider.

Given that relatively more adjunct instructors teach in our adult and continuing education programs, academic administrators and department chairs should exercise responsible oversight in assuring that syllabi meet the standards of the university and the academic unit. If we are not attentive and practicing due diligence in this oversight, syllabi will naturally deteriorate given the proclivities of the many new creators.

This “Best Practices” article outlines the essential elements of a *comprehensive* syllabus and explains the rationale for each construct. While many of the constructs are familiar, I want to introduce new and reinforce and expand upon existing constructs, to create and improve upon a syllabus that best serves the needs of stakeholders in the teaching/learning process and upholds the spirit of shared governance.

Essential Elements for Syllabus Construction

Below are many *essential elements* of a comprehensive syllabus to consider, with commentary and a rationale for each construct.

Name of University and Location

Place at the top of the syllabus the official name of the university/college and location. Surprisingly this does not appear on all syllabi. Courses are sponsored by our respective institutions; therefore, they deserve their banner to be displayed on the syllabus. Also, as those in continuing education know, a syllabus may need to be examined to validate transfer of credit or prior learning to assist with the continuing

education student's new degree course plan. It is useful and good form to have the university identification front and center.

Major Academic Unit Identification

For larger universities, it makes sense to have the official name of the college within the university, e.g. College of Business. Other larger academic unit identifiers may be appropriate, such as "Center for Graduate Studies," or "School of Professional Studies," or "University College."

Course Rubric, Number and Title

Syllabi should carry the complete and official course identifiers without any informal names or abbreviations. Attention should be given to qualifier names of Special Topics, Current Issues, or Independent Studies courses. Check with department chair, dean, or registrar if you are not sure how these course titles should be listed. This information could become important when reviewing prior coursework for transfer students or adults returning to school.

Time and Place Identifiers

Make the effort to supply as much time, date, and place information on your syllabus as possible. Each course taught is unique and should be identified as such. You may even include what could be known as a "CRN," course reference number. What may seem to be self evident or mundane identifiers can become useful information in the future. This information is helpful at both large and small colleges and becomes very helpful as branch campuses, corporate universities, accelerated, and online courses proliferate. Get in the habit of using these labels in your course:

- Semester: term and year
- Credits: List number and level, e.g., graduate or undergraduate
- Day/Time:
- Place: Building, Room, and number. Off-campus or corporate universities should work toward the appropriate specificity. Check to see how online courses should be listed here.

Instructor Information

Full name of the instructor should be given. Any titles associated with the instructor should be formal, accurate, and in the appropriate style devised by the university. Deans and department chairs should check university policy to see how adjunct faculty should be titled. Casual practice in this area could lead to legal problems if the doctrine *ostensible agency* is invoked. Using the legal theory of ostensible or apparent agency, one claiming a grievance or tort argues that the institution or individual led one to reasonably believe a certain status and authority and holds it liable for proven wrongdoing, even if that status or authority was not officially held. If for no other reason, students deserve to know who is teaching a course and the nature and extent of the instructor's affiliation with the university.

Responsible instructor coordinates should be given. In this day and age, it is unacceptable for an instructor to not have a phone number or email address listed so students can communicate with the instructor, especially in emergency situations. Deans and department chairs should ensure that this actually occurs.

Policies or best practices should be developed for how to handle this information for adjuncts.

Office hours--full time faculty know to list their office hours and office location. Other staff in the university who may teach a course should not assume that students know where to locate you. Adjunct instructors should be directed on how to handle office hours, as this could vary. Deans and department chairs should establish best practices for their individual units. Those instructors listing "by appointment" as office hours should be sure that they are most responsive when students request a meeting.

Course Description:

To begin, the course description needs to be *verbatim* as it appears in the updated and *official college course catalog*. This is a best practice. At some level, students may select a course based on the description in the official school catalog. They deserve to learn that the course that they enrolled in bears a resemblance to what the catalog states. Understandably, some course descriptions have become general and lean, reacting to concern about expanding course catalogs and with time, some course descriptions may bear little resemblance to the content in the "updated" course. Be that as it may, a syllabus needs to carry the official course description. One way to deal with the concerns above is to craft a second or third part of the course description that shows how the present course expands or emphasizes certain aspects of the conventional course. This is appropriate, but additions or expanded course descriptions should be cleared by the appropriate administrator and an explanation of these additions or clarifications should be

explained to the students when you review the syllabus during the first meeting. Attention should be given to special topics courses and independent studies.

Course Learner Objectives:

Student outcomes and learning objectives are probably the most important aspect of the academic integrity of a course (Anderson, et al. editors, 2000). Surprisingly, it does not receive the attention that it deserves. As a starting point, each course should be assigned an “official and approved” set of learner objectives. As you know, college courses have a systematic and formal process for approving courses. Somewhere in the gestation of the new course learner objectives were identified and approved. If, in time, these learner objectives have varied or lacked consistency across instructors teaching the course, make sure you research the “official learner objectives” for the course. Academic units receiving external evaluation from discipline specific accrediting entities are more attuned to this part of the syllabus. Regardless, it is good practice to have instructors consistently using the official and approved learner objectives. If new learner objectives need to be updated or added, follow the course approval process. Learner objectives should not be left to the vagaries of individual instructors, however well intentioned. Again, deans and department chairs should be persistent and vigilant on checking the syllabi of adjunct instructors to ensure that these learner objectives are used. Similar to the course description, if you feel that you are using the official learner objectives but find it useful to add some, seek the approval of the appropriate academic administrator.

Instructional Approach/Format:

Instructors know and are confident about their approach and format for teaching a course. However, students are not aware of the variations in the art of teaching. They deserve to hear up front what instructional approach and teaching/learning format you plan on using in the course. This element is not usually included in most syllabi, but it is good practice and useful to include. In this section of the syllabus think about how you will approach the teaching/learning process and try to articulate this for the students. Students come to a course generally thinking that they will receive the obligatory didactic approach to teaching. In many cases, you will be doing much more than that. Describe for the students the art you bring to the teaching and learning activities.

For example, one instructor gives a general feel for the instructional approach by stating:

The primary modes of instruction will be mini-lectures, class discussions, sharing sessions, small group work, presentations and reports. Students will be expected to read textbook assignments and other supplemental materials about various topics in the course. Students will be required to use the information and data from readings and research to participate in class discussions and complete projects, assignments and other learning activities.

Another instructor who asks that students read a daily metropolitan newspaper for a graduate education course included this statement as part of the instructional approach and format:

Students are required to access a metropolitan newspaper. We will read, report, critique, and discuss articles in these papers related to education and other areas of interest to a student or the group.

An upper division undergraduate course on leadership included this statement in the instructional approach section:

This course relies heavily on the students' open and intense participation in class as we discover the art and science of leadership. Each week focuses on a leadership role, using the biography of Thomas Jefferson on Leadership as a springboard for discussion and reflection. Each week we will pose one to three questions that will assist you in understanding your leadership style, potential, and future development. Students are expected to read the chapter in the biography before class. The instructor will use a variety of activities to stress important principles of leadership, such as news articles of the day, popular culture cinema, guest lecturers, group discussion and report out, skill building sessions, personal accounts of leadership, and didactic presentations

Course Materials:

All works should use appropriate citations, as you would expect in a student's research paper. Course materials today have certainly expanded beyond textbooks. Be as descriptive as possible to assist the student with other non-textbook related materials. Check departmental policy for how to handle advising students on where to procure the materials, e.g. bookstore arrangements, preferred online vendors, etc.

For example, if a course packet (such as a collection of journal articles or case studies) is to be purchased from the university print shop, give clear direction for how students can secure these for class. With the advent of ordering books and other materials online, either through the university assigned or free standing vendor, become familiar with the sundry of support materials that the publishers now make available (e.g. CDs, websites service). Let the students know just what materials they need for class. Also, be prepared for the question from the students on the utility of “used books” and the earlier addition of a text or reader.

Weekly Topical Outline/Course Learning Activities:

Naturally this is the heart of the syllabus because it outlines what you will accomplish and within a timeframe. Instructors have various ways to present this information. Some courses fit nicely into a week-by-week chart that identifies topics of study, learning activities, class preparation and readings, and outside assignments that are due. Some courses can generally mimic the topical outline along chapters in a book. Other courses have broad topical outlines and use this section to describe how the in-class learning activities and outside assignments integrate to create learning and build competency in the subject.

If the learning activities and/or class assignments are extensive, one approach is to create a separate document that charts the learning activity process. In this case, this section of the syllabus would include the overall themes and topics or learning objectives

for the week and a separate document would detail the readings, outside preparations, and assignments. This separate document approach is also helpful when the course gets a bit off track or behind. You can easily handout an updated course learning activity sheet with a date and have students follow the errata sheet rather than re-issuing a full syllabus. This also protects you by staying committed to giving major changes to the syllabus in writing.

If outside assignments have detailed specifications, e.g., research paper, demonstration project, it may be helpful to first give a general explanation in this section about the assignment and explain to the students that a specification sheet is forthcoming. This helps keep the length of the syllabus manageable, especially if there are several assignments that need detailed explanation of format and criteria for evaluation. For example, one instructor gave as an assignment to undergraduates to write an opinion piece that was ready for submission to a daily metropolitan newspaper. This was a challenging assignment for the students and warranted a separate handout that explained the general purpose of an opinion piece, approaches to writing an opinion piece, format and criteria for assessment. Therefore the initial syllabus simply stated in the learning activities section:

Students are required to write a 500-800 word Opinion Piece article reacting to an issue in the news of the day which relates to leadership in sport and society.

This is due on the final class meeting; format will be given in class.

Assessment and Grading Policy:

Students will be most interested in this section of the syllabus, so it is important that you carefully define what learning activities will be assessed, what criteria will be applied to the performance of a learning activity, and how quality points, however defined, are determined (Gambescia, 2003).

In many courses, instructors use some accounting system of student productivity, often based on 100%. Instructors outline for the students the percent awarded for each assignment or learning activity. For example, one syllabus reads:

The final grade for this course will be determined by the total percentage of credit awarded (100% maximum) for your participation and productivity as follows:

- *Class participation (10%)*
- *Three (3) news briefings (30%--10% each)*
- *Developed Personal Practical Theory (PPT) of teaching (20%)*
- *Opinion Article--readied for publication (40%)*

Some courses may use an accumulation of points, e.g., 200 or 500, but at some point the instructor needs to scale the points, however defined, to a grading system.

A best practice in syllabus construction is to list the grading system used by the university. This is not always printed on a syllabus. The grading system, after the accounting of credit toward each learning activity, is actually two parts. First, the syllabus should state all grades available for instructors to use. For example, A, B+, B-, C+, C, etc. The quality points given for each grade can be listed, e.g., B+ equals 3.3 quality

points. Also, it is useful to define the nominal characteristic associated with a letter or number grade. For example, one university associates an “A” with the descriptor “Excellent,” and “B” as “Good.” Listing the nominal equivalents alerts the students to an affective understanding of what grades mean. This may help when students quibble with grades. Ostensibly students may verbalize to you that they thought they did “o.k. in your course; expecting a higher grade. You may want to ask: Did you produce “excellent” work, “good” work during the term or simply “satisfactory” work; thus a fair grade of “C.”? Use the nominal characteristics to reinforce the meaning of your final grade awarded to the student.

Many colleges do not set via policy a *scale* that faculty need to follow; instructors are at liberty to set the points or percentage that matches a particular letter grade, e.g. 95-100 equals an “A.” In these cases it is imperative that the scale be presented to the students on the syllabus. Schools that have a defined scale to coincide with letter grades should refer students to the catalog or the better practice is to list the scale on the syllabus. Academic administrators who have ultimate responsibility for syllabi should closely monitor this section, especially among adjunct instructors who may be using scales and even unofficial letter grades from other schools.

The syllabus may also include how other grades without quality points may be given for special situations, e.g. “I” grade for “Incomplete.” Ask students to consult the catalog to learn why these grades are given.

Americans with Disability Act:

Academic administrators should have the department of special students services and counsel write and approve a statement for how students with documented learning disabilities need to proceed to alert instructors that accommodations are needed. This statement should be consistent across all syllabi in the University. There should be no variation from the approved statement. Academic administrators need to ensure that this approved statement is included on all syllabi.

Instructor Profile

Most students are genuinely interested in an instructor's background. Instructors may believe that students accept their qualifications to teach a course by virtue of the credentialing process established at the university. Students want to know in more personal terms why an instructor feels qualified and is the appropriate choice to teach a course. A brief profile can be presented in the syllabus that explains instructor qualifications and interests in teaching the course.

Student's Responsibilities:

There are a number of good practice elements that should be carefully worded under the rubric of "student's responsibilities." These administrative issues support the student in completing a course without incident. In each area, check with university policy or seek counsel for good practice.

Drop/Add/Withdrawal Policy: Reinforce in the syllabus the student's responsibility to officially add, drop, or withdraw from a course. While at some level these policies should be known by all students and are thought to be "basic"

procedures, reminding students of their responsibility in this area helps all stakeholders. When the proper procedures are not followed, academic administrators spend unnecessary time extricating students from academic record and financial problems.

Class Attendance: While most instructors feel that they have wide latitude in this area, it makes sense to check official policy and ask for guidance from the academic administrator. Class attendance policy can be grounded in an overall philosophy of student expectations. For a graduate course, one syllabus reads:

Attendance and full class participation is important for our collaborative learning group in this graduate level course. Students are expected to attend all classes unless a reasonable absence is warranted. All absences are to be communicated to the instructor immediately upon the student realizing that he/she will not attend a class.

Academic Honesty Policy: Syllabi should include an approved statement, notifying students of how to become familiar with the university's academic honesty policy. While well intended, instructors have introduced too much variability on the academic honesty policy. The required academic honesty statement on our graduate syllabi reads:

The College is committed to a learning environment that embraces academic honesty. Faculty, students, and administrators share

responsibility for maintaining this environment of academic honesty and integrity, accepting individual responsibility for all actions, personal and academic. Each member of our community is expected to read, understand, and uphold the values identified and described in our
“Academic Polices, Procedures and Regulations.”

Financial Obligations: Students should be reminded of their financial obligations to the university and it is fair to note that they are not entitled to a grade by the instructor or the college if financial obligations are not met.

Acknowledging Conditions and Obligations in Syllabus

A final statement should be on the syllabus which holds students accountable for the information within. A sample statement could read:

The student acknowledges receipt of this syllabus and the information herein contained by signing the attendance sheet circulated by the instructor or continuing to attend classes. The instructor reserves the right to make changes to this syllabus if circumstances warrant such change. All changes will be provided to the students in writing.

Format and Notes for the Good of the Order

Attention should be given to create a clean, attractive, and readable syllabus. As mentioned in the introduction, the syllabus serves as a week-to-week guide for the students and includes a number of important expectations. It should be unencumbered by distracting verbiage, typeface, and other stylistic markings. For example, in an effort to

emphasize several points on a syllabus, an instructor over time had built into the syllabus an excessive amount of upper-case typeface. The syllabus became so unattractive that students dreaded consulting the document.

Instructors should minimize classroom management issues and general classroom behavior instructions in the syllabus. For example keeping cell phones off, arriving late or leaving early, or what to do during inclement weather. This could take some discipline. Ideally, classroom management and student expectations in this area can be covered verbally on the first day of class or throughout the term. Ideally, a university is developing among its students and faculty an agreeable culture for “how we act” in an academic setting. (Trout, 1998). If classroom management instructions are that extensive, consider giving a separate handout on the issues. Or maybe cover such points on a brief section of the syllabus marked: “the good of the order.” Providing too many classroom management instructions becomes distracting to the purpose of the syllabus.

Replicability

Instituting a best practices approach to syllabus construction will take much effort, time, and a lot of cooperation among stakeholders. First, there are probably many well-entrenched conventions (not all useful) influencing the syllabus construction process on your campuses. Making this type of behavior change will not be easy and may have to evolve over time. Second, it may be challenging to get the attention of faculty, and even department chairs, who feel that something this commonplace and “obvious” does not need an overhaul. Third, some faculty may take umbrage with department chairs or

deans “meddling” in syllabus construction. They may believe that syllabus construction falls under the rubric of academic freedom, and feel that they are doing just fine in creating the syllabus for their courses.

I can offer a few helpful tips in instituting a comprehensive syllabus on a campus or in a program. First, and most important, advocates for a comprehensive syllabus based on shared governance principles must themselves believe and represent the shared governance principles of the institution. Advocates should spend time educating the university community to why shared governance is the driving force in improving syllabi on campus as explained in this article. This is a fundamental step and once stakeholders appreciate or maybe even acquiesce to this driving force, the openness to change will be much easier.

Second, it is useful to show a *syllabus template* using a course as an example. Keep in mind that some may dismiss the movement to create the comprehensive syllabus noting that departments or colleges/schools within the university already give outlines. Giving a model using an existing course not only ensures the usage of some mundane identifiers, e.g., providing the name of university front and center on the first page; or assists those faculty who take a check list approach to including all useful constructs; it also provides insight into the real application of the change and sets a standard to work toward.

Third, implement changes at a natural and appropriate time and allow time for the change to take place. Some chairs and academic administrators may want to work with adjunct faculty first, where the change process can happen relatively quickly. I actually

found adjunct faculty to be very appreciative for receiving extra guidance in this area and they are grateful to take an electronic version of the template so they can easily adapt their syllabus to the new standards. Use your own best practices approach to change on campus that meets the cultural norms of your campus.

Fourth, it's unlikely that this type of behavior change will occur by a second term and maybe even a year. As explained in the article, those overseeing syllabus construction will have to judge the priority order and minimum expectation in new syllabus construction. I believe that academic honesty verbiage, American with Disabilities Act language, and assessment and grading plans are constructs on the syllabus that we need to get right!

Finally, all should keep in mind that this change initiative's main purpose is to improve the teaching/learning experience of our students. This way we can judge the appropriate level of effort, creativity, and cooperation this change initiative deserves to improving a document that influences relationships between and among the many academic stakeholders on our campuses.

Summary

A comprehensive syllabus should by design meet the needs of students, faculty, academic departments, respective colleges within the university, and the overall interest of the institution. A comprehensive syllabus starts with the philosophy that a syllabus should reflect a healthy *shared governance* among faculty, students, academic administrators, and the overall stewards of the institution. Following these essential

elements demonstrates healthy shared governance without detracting from the all important art and science of the teaching/learning process. Any time invested up front to improve the syllabus is time well spent because it helps prevent the exorbitant and exhausting amount of time instructors, academic administrators, and students will have to expend on each academic grievance.

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