



## Summary of the Purposes of a Syllabus and Associated Elements

### Syllabus as a Contract

Clear and accurate course calendar  
Grading policies: components and weights  
Attendance policy  
Late assignment policy  
Make-up exam policy  
Policies on incompletes and revisions  
Academic dishonesty policy  
Academic freedom policy  
Accommodation of disabilities policy

### Syllabus as a Permanent Record

Title and date(s) of course  
Department offering the course  
Credit hours earned  
Title and rank of instructor(s)  
Pre- or co-requisites  
Required texts and other materials  
Course objectives, linked to professional standards  
Description of course content  
Description of assessment procedures

### Syllabus as a Learning Tool

Planning and self-management skills  
Time to spend outside of class  
Tips on how to do well on assessments  
Common misconceptions or mistakes  
Specific study strategies  
Availability of instructor(s) and teacher assistants  
Campus resources for assistance  
Offices that aid students with disabilities  
Relevance and importance of the course to students  
A model of high-quality work

For example, if there is no explicit policy on late assignments, students may feel they have been treated unfairly, whether they submit an imperfect assignment on time or a completed one after the deadline. If the policy is given in the syllabus—and applied consistently—the instructor will likely be exonerated from the charge of unfairness (Whitley et al. 2000, Wittig et al. 1999).

Sometimes syllabi and whether the instructor and student have abided by them actually do become legal issues. For example, a medical student's legal challenge to his expulsion from medical school was dismissed, in part, because a course instructor had followed the guidelines in his syllabus when failing the student in a course (*Hill v. University of Kentucky, Wilson, and Schwartz* 1992). Likewise, an instructor's suit challenging his dismissal was also dismissed, in part, because he had imposed additional assignments and grading criteria on a student that were not mentioned in the syllabus (*Keen v. Penson* 1992). Though in neither case were the syllabus issues decisive, they were cited and added to the evidence involved.

Viewing a syllabus as a contract leads to a number of implications for what should be included in its content. First, a clear and accurate course calendar should be provided. This timeline should make explicit what the student is expected to do and bring for each class; for example, be prepared to discuss particular readings, bring a laptop to work on certain problems, be ready to work with others in a small group assignment, and so forth. The syllabus should include as many due dates as possible, especially for assessments that carry great weight in the determination of the final grade. If certain meetings will take place outside the classroom or if students will be expected to bring additional materials on a particular date, this information should be provided. If some dates cannot be set at the beginning of the class, it is also useful to add a note to the agenda that the instructor reserves the right to alter the schedule, although only with full and fair disclosure to the students. Having some flexibility to accommodate circumstances that arise during the course of a class is probably a good idea (McKeachie 1986).

Second, any behaviors or policies that could affect a student's grade should be addressed in some way. It may seem obvious that a syllabus would describe the number and kinds of assessments that will determine the final grade, but it is also important to discuss the ways in which the various components will be weighted. Additional policies that should be mentioned in the syllabus include those dealing with attendance and the consequences of missing class, late assignments, missing exams, grades of "Incomplete," correcting and resubmitting work, changing one's grade, and dropping the course.

Third, it is also important to discuss questions related to academic dishonesty. To what extent, if any, are students permitted to work together on assignments? What are the penalties for cheating on exams or assignments? What are the penalties for plagiarism? Providing a definition of plagiarism and a reference to the university policy may be particularly helpful.

Fourth, it is useful to mention policies related to the academic freedom of students, for example, that you expect students to respect the right of their peers to express their views on topics relevant to the course and that you intend to respect that right as well. It may be wise to indicate that if one or more students wish to continue discussion on a topic that is not germane to the content of the class, you may have to ask that they suspend the discussion until they can meet with you individually at a later time.

Fifth, in some courses it may be appropriate to include "disclaimers" on the syllabus. For example, it might be useful to advise students about what they should and should not reasonably expect to be able to do after passing the course. Passing a course in tax law, for example, would probably not fully equip a student to go into private practice as a tax preparer. Other kinds of disclaimers or warnings may raise legal issues as well as issues related to student learning (see section 3). A course at the University of California at Berkeley about pornography contains a warning about the "offensive or arousing" content of the course (Atlas 1999). Courses containing cultural or religious topics might mention that students may

ated, the syllabus ultimately becomes an agreement on roles and responsibilities.

This focus on the syllabus as a contract is useful for students and instructors. For students, this approach makes clear what the rules are (Smith and Razzouk 1993, Pastorino 1999). By having the requirements and expectations for performance by both the student and the instructor in writing, students can decide whether or not they wish to take the course, plan appropriately for what they need to accomplish during the term of the course, and check their performance and behavior against the written contract. For instructors, this contract perspective is particularly helpful in settling formal and informal grievances. Many grievances arise out of unclear expectations or unclear communication of expectations.

end up changing in ways they don't wish to change. An instructor might indicate her or his own limitations or biases in teaching a certain course if that would be of use to students.

Finally, the syllabus should mention the rights and responsibilities of students with disabilities and provide a discussion of how you will accommodate students with particular learning needs. Most universities have services available to students with disabilities, including assessment of their specific needs and provisions of ways to meet them. It is likely that the administration has some formal policies consistent with the Americans with Disabilities Act, as well as suggestions for faculty on how to implement them in their classrooms.

### **The Syllabus as a Permanent Record**

There are at least two general reasons why a syllabus is useful as a permanent record of what was taught in a course: accountability and documentation. In this age of outcomes assessment, which is often mandatory for accreditation of programs and institutions, more and more evidence is often sought to show evidence of effectiveness. By providing details of what was covered, what students were expected to do, and how these outcomes and performances were assessed, syllabi can be quite helpful in efforts to evaluate both individual instructors and entire programs.

Instructors are held accountable for their performance through processes such as annual reviews, merit pay reviews, and promotion and tenure reviews (Glassick, Huber, and Maeroff 1997). As part of the review process, course syllabi are often used to communicate information about the instructor's teaching ability (Hutchings 1996, Kahn 1993, Malik 1996, Seldin 2000). Review committees will consider syllabi to determine if courses contain information about a topic that is appropriate in terms of both scope and depth. They may evaluate whether or not the instructor appears to be cognizant of the level of students in the course, the uses to which the students will put the knowledge and skills learned in the class, and the correspondence between the content and the current demands of the pro-

fession or discipline. They may also consider a syllabus as evidence of an instructor's clarity of writing, attitudes towards students, knowledge of pedagogy, and fairness in evaluation.

In addition to faculty reviews, academic programs, departments, colleges and whole universities often undergo accountability reviews for which syllabi are helpful. Examining syllabi for a series of courses making up an academic major or minor can help communicate what students are expected to know when they complete such a degree. Most academic programs and institutions choose to undergo accreditation reviews by professional organizations. Syllabi are often required as part of these reviews as well. For example, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, which accredits schools and colleges with teacher preparation programs, uses syllabi to determine if the program covers all of the professional education knowledge bases (NCATE 1992). The syllabi can be used to demonstrate that courses are in alignment with the department and/or institutional mission statements (Woolcock 2000). They can also be used to show that the program is consistent with the expectations of the discipline and the accrediting agency.

There is a second set of reasons for using a syllabus as a permanent record, in addition to helping to demonstrate the effectiveness—or ineffectiveness—of an instructor or academic unit. As a permanent record, a syllabus can serve to document what was covered in a course; at what level, scope and depth; and for what kinds of credit. When students wish to transfer credits from one institution to another institution or to substitute one course for another, the course syllabus may be used to help determine whether or not the request is appropriate. Since many students are now attending a number of institutions of higher learning in the course of obtaining a degree, as well as requesting credit for professional experiences or on-line courses, a detailed syllabus can play an important role in documenting what a particular course included and how it might fit into a cohesive course of study.

For a syllabus to be most useful as a permanent record, the document should

contain a number of small but important pieces of information in addition to a detailed description of the content and the assessment procedures: the title and date(s) of the course, including the name of the department; the number of credit hours; the title and rank of the instructor; any prerequisites or co-requisites for the course; required and optional texts; other materials and experiences that the course will involve. For courses that are linked to accreditation, certification, or licensure, it may also be helpful to have course objectives explicitly linked to professional standards. A reference to these standards—which could be in the form of a hyperlink for an Internet-available syllabus—could be provided.

Finally, we wish to issue a caution about the use of a Web-based syllabus as a permanent record. Such a syllabus can be extremely flexible and easy to update, incorporating a great variety of useful hyperlinks. However, a syllabus will function as a permanent record only if it is an accurate description of what a particular course entailed at the time it was offered. We suggest that instructors either keep a printed copy of their on-line syllabus, print out an index to it—if the entire syllabus is extremely long—or store each semester's revised syllabus in a different file. Otherwise, it will be difficult to document how the course was changed or what a particular student studied when he took the class back in spring 2000.

### **The Syllabus as a Learning Tool**

A course syllabus can serve as a highly effective facilitator of student learning (Grunert 1997, Pastorino 1999), something that many faculty may not fully consider (Woolcock 2000). With the increasing influence that cognitive, constructivist, and social learning theories are having on higher education as well as the effects of the many technological advances in modes of delivery of instruction, faculty members realize that students do not do all of their learning while sitting in the classroom. Students learn as much or more by reading, writing, researching, and discussing outside of class as they do from direct interaction with a faculty member. Even with phones, Web sites, and e-mail, a faculty

member cannot personally be available to guide all out-of-class learning. However, the syllabus can (Hockensmith 1988; Leeds 1992). Moreover, a well-designed syllabus can provide information that assists students to become more effective learners in areas that go beyond the scope of our own courses.

Among the most potent influences on how these issues are addressed in the course and the syllabus are the instructor's own philosophies about teaching, learning, and the content area. They will shape the course and consequently the syllabus both implicitly and explicitly. A faculty member who holds a social constructivist view of learning would design a course very differently than a behaviorist would, for example. Sometimes informing students about the instructor's philosophical beliefs can be useful. Moreover, in addition to the instructor's own beliefs, there is likely to be an institutional mission or vision statement that might also appear on syllabi. The course may be designed with those broader kinds of philosophical underpinnings in mind, too.

Being an effective learner requires a complex assortment of skills, including time management, the abilities to prioritize and multitask, strategies for studying and learning, the use of technology, social skills, maturity, and responsibility. Not all students possess these abilities, but a syllabus can assist in their development. A learning-centered syllabus is one that focuses on the students and what they need to be effective learners (Grunert 1997). Such a syllabus will provide several pieces of useful information for students, in addition to the contractual and documentary material previously mentioned.

First of all, a learning-centered syllabus will provide information about how to plan for the tasks and experiences of the semester, how to evaluate and monitor one's performance, and how to allocate time and resources to areas in which more learning is needed. This information can help students develop self-management skills that are valuable beyond the demands of a particular course. Self-regulated students can then take the timeline explicated in a contractual syllabus and use it to plan and monitor their learning,

comparing their performance to the objectives identified by the instructor. The more clear and articulated the performance goals are, the more effective students will be at achieving those goals (Diamond 1998).

Second, a learning-centered syllabus will give guidance to students about the learning to be done in the course. This might include expectations for how much time students should spend with the class outside of the course meeting times, tips for how to do well on certain assignments or on course assessments in general, and mention of common misconceptions or mistakes students in the course typically make (Pastorino 1999). Specific suggestions might also be provided about strategies for studying, writing, and taking notes in the class (Grunert 1997). The kinds of strategies that are most appropriate for a language class, for example, might be ineffective for a class in statistics or in education.

Third, the syllabus might help students to identify whether or not they are prepared for the work the course involves, and if not, what they might do about it (Pastorino 1999). This is where listing prerequisite courses or skills can be very helpful. They syllabus might also point students to places where they can get assistance. Instructors should mention their own availability and willingness through office hours, e-mail, or other means to help students learn in the course. They should also mention the availability of teaching assistants or tutors; specific computing or library services or personnel relevant to the course; specialized units on campus such as writing centers or study skills centers; and student services such as offices that assist students with learning disabilities. For almost any course, there are likely to be many Web-sites of interest or aid to the students; a list of such sites in the syllabus could be very helpful. For example, Jay's syllabus for a graduate course in educational measurement includes Web site addresses for two professional organizations students are encouraged to join, major testing companies and organizations, as well as links to on-line journal articles and standards for educational testing.

Fourth, a syllabus might be used to provide pieces of context about the

course content for students so that they are able to see where the course fits in with other courses they have taken or will take. Equally important may be a description about how the course will enrich the student's life. We have seen examples of an introductory physics class where the revelation of secrets behind everyday phenomena was promised and of a course on gems and minerals promising students will become "inquisitive jewelry store customers." The syllabus can help address the "why do we have to learn this?" question by providing information about where the skills and knowledge gained in the course will be relevant to their future careers. Through these comments or others, instructors might also communicate to students their philosophy about the course content.

Fifth, a syllabus might help to teach other, broader lessons. For example, an instructor might add to the description of the policy on academic dishonesty a discussion of why academic dishonesty is a problem. What is plagiarism and why is it a concern? Through additional discussions, the syllabus might also help students develop professional skills such as arriving on time to class or providing the instructor with notice if they will be absent.

Finally, a syllabus can serve students as a model of professional thinking and writing. If it is clearly written, organized, helpful, appropriately humorous, thoughtful, and perfect in style and grammar, it conveys to the students that the instructor values these qualities. A syllabus that is contradictory, sloppy, misleading, and incomplete models a lack of respect and of care which the students may well resent or even emulate. An instructor who intends to grade on organization, precision, and depth of thought runs the risk of being considered hypocritical or incompetent if these characteristics are not embedded in the syllabus. Similarly, if the syllabus reflects substantial time and effort, the instructor has a right to expect this investment from the students as well.

## Conclusion

In line with our previous statements about accuracy, we must acknowledge that we have not come across any

research that has empirically, let alone experimentally, evaluated the effects of syllabi upon student learning. Nor have we conducted such research ourselves, although we hope to do so in the future. We emphasize that our suggestions above and those we will provide below reflect professional judgment but not quantitative analyses. We urge readers to consider these suggestions and to recognize that a syllabus is a personal document as well as a professional one. A syllabus reflects the instructor's feelings, attitudes, and beliefs about the subject matter as well as about the students in the class. By making those opinions salient, a syllabus can serve as a guide to the instructor as much as a guide to the class.

As we reviewed the literature on syllabi and looked at our own collection of syllabi, we noticed some potential elements of a syllabus that, at least from our perspective, are helpful and some things that seem distracting. To decide what to include in a syllabus, we find it helpful to consider it to be a reference document (Grunert 1997) which students will use throughout and even after the course. As a reference source, like a dictionary or telephone book, a syllabus must be well organized and structured to maximize the ability to locate the necessary information efficiently. Although the typical organization is topical rather than alphabetical, it probably helps to use a variety of organizational devices: headings and subheadings; boldface, italics, and underlining; spacing and indenting; variable font sizes and styles; bullets and/or numbers; and perhaps color. Too much of any of the above can be distracting, however. Pages and pages of text seem less useful to us than bulleted or numbered lists. Indeed Diamond (1998) has suggested preparing a student manual to supplement a syllabus rather than trying to incorporate too much information in the syllabus alone.

The particular structure that a syllabus includes will vary greatly with the type of course that it details. However, we have found that it is generally useful to delineate the following topics or divisions:

- basic information about the course: title, department, credits, meeting location, and instructor
- basic information about the instructor:

office location; office hours; phone and fax numbers; e-mail address; degree(s) and titles

- required and optional course materials
- schedule or calendar
- expectations for student performance and behavior
- grading procedures and policies
- information about learning strategies
- additional policies

Some instructors choose to reveal a substantial amount of personal information about themselves in their syllabus, including cell phone numbers, names of family members, and information about their reasons for teaching the class or studying the topic. Some choose to use colored paper; to include graphics, jokes, or quotations; or to supplement a minimalist syllabus with subsequent handouts. The decision to construct a Web-based syllabus permits the use of color and links as organizational devices but may end up being a less helpful reference tool, particularly if the syllabus is too lengthy to be printed and the student does not have access to a laptop. Such choices about the structure and format of a syllabus provide a way to serve the needs of the instructor and the student. In making these decisions we suggest that the instructor design a syllabus so that a reader can use it easily to achieve its major purposes: as a contract, as a permanent document, and as a tool to enhance student learning.

The sample syllabus in the appendix incorporates many of the ideas we have suggested here. Although we recognize that there is no such thing as a generic "good syllabus" that fits all courses and all instructors, this example might serve as an appropriate synthesis of our discussion.

## APPENDIX

### HIED 501: The Purposes of a Syllabus Spring Semester, 2001 1 credit

Instructors:  
Dr. Jay Parkes  
Asst. Prof. of Educational Psychology  
[Original syllabus includes  
address, telephone number, and  
e-mail address]

Office Hours:  
M 1:45–3:45  
T 10–11:30  
and by appointment

Dr. Mary Harris  
Professor Emerita  
[Original syllabus includes  
address, telephone number, and  
e-mail address]

M 10–11:30  
TH 10–11:30  
and by appointment

### Course Materials

Texts:

- Grunert, J. 1997. *The course syllabus: A learning-centered approach*. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Company.
- Student Packet available from the College of Education Publications Copy Center

### General Course Information

*Pre- or Co-requisites:* None

*Credit Hours Earned:* 1 graduate credit

*Departments Offering the Course:* Higher Education (HIED)

*Catalog Description:* Designed for university faculty, part-time instructors, and teaching assistants, this course teaches syllabus construction from a purposive perspective. Purposes of a syllabus, such as a contract, a permanent record, and a learning tool are considered.

### Course Objectives

This course is designed to provide you with a workshop-style experience in syllabus writing. At the completion of the course you should be able to:

- List the major purposes syllabi serve in higher education.
- Discuss the implications of those purposes for syllabus content.
- Write syllabi for your own courses that appropriately consider the purposes for writing syllabi.

### Course Procedures

The course meets Mondays from 12:00–1:00 p.m. in Simpson Hall Room 125 throughout the semester. This meeting will consist primarily of discussion of the week's assigned readings, as well as workshop time spent in drafting syllabi or portions of syllabi. Students will be expected to critique and revise syllabi provided by others as well as their own work.

### Assessment and Grading

- Grades for the course will depend on class participation and discussion indicating that you have read the assigned readings (25 percent of course grade), timely completion of all assignments, including critiquing the syllabi written by classmates (30 percent of course grade), and writing and submission of three course syllabi, (45 percent of course grade).
- Failure to complete any of the work will result in a zero being recorded for that assignment.
- No incompletes will be given.

- Each assignment may be revised once, with the revision due no later than one week after the assignment was returned.
- Early drafts of the three syllabi will be reviewed by the instructors if submitted at least two weeks before they are due. We will provide comments on these drafts but not grades. Submission of such drafts is optional.
- Your final course grade will be assigned according to the following scale, though we reserve the right to lower the cutoff points, leading to higher grades:

A+ 97%–100% of all possible points  
 A 93%–96%  
 A- 90%–92%  
 B+ 87%–89%  
 B 82%–86%  
 B- 80%–81%  
 C+ 76%–79%  
 C- 65%–75%  
 F 0%–64%

### Expectations of Professionalism

#### Ethics

- You are expected to abide by the University policies on academic honesty and integrity as given in the *Student Handbook*. Violations of these policies will not be tolerated and are subject to severe sanctions up to and including expulsion from the university.
- While study groups are encouraged, their proper purpose is not to do the homework assignments, but to help you learn the material. Each student is responsible for writing up and submitting the assignments. Separate copies of a group-constructed assignment are not acceptable.

#### Behaviors

- All pagers and cell phones should be turned off during class. If you must be available for emergencies, please sit near the door so you can make a quick and non-disruptive exit.
- Please be in the classroom and ready to begin promptly at 12:00 p.m.
- You are expected to take responsibility for your attendance by making arrangements to acquire all materials and information covered during your absence.

#### Work Habits

- Due dates for assignments and exams are non-negotiable, and late work will be penalized 10 percent per class period.
- All work submitted for the course must be legible, well-organized and labeled, and stapled (not paper-clipped) together. Handwritten computations are acceptable though other portions of assignments should be typed and proofread. Illegible work will be returned to you without a grade, and you may resubmit it in legible form subject to the late penalty.

#### Other Course Policies

- In accordance with university policies, these instructors will make reasonable

accommodation to a student's religious observances and practices due to national origin. If you must miss class because of a feast day or religious holiday, please inform us promptly and we will permit you to make up the work at the next class meeting.

- We will also make accommodations for students with disabilities who have been diagnosed as having physical or mental limitations and special needs [unless such accommodations have the end result of fundamentally altering a program or service or placing an undue hardship on the operation of the university]. Students with disabilities should contact the Office of Equal Opportunity or the Office of Student Support Services for information regarding accommodations. If you bring in a letter from the Office of Student Support Services describing your needs for special services, we will attempt to meet such needs. Also, please let us know if there are things we can do to make it easier for you, such as having you sit in the front row or facing you as we speak.

### How to Succeed in This Course

We encourage you to consider the following:

- This course will be most beneficial to you if you can tie it directly to your day-to-day life as a college-level instructor. Watch for opportunities throughout the week to apply or challenge what you're learning here.
- Realize that the assignments will likely sound deceptively simple. Plan more time than you think they will require to complete them.
- Remember that critiquing other people's syllabi will benefit you as well as them. Please consider what would be most useful for them to know.

### Additional Resources

- Be aware that our campus has an Office of Instructional Development that has staff available for one-on-one consultations with faculty on a broad range of topics. The number for that office is 555-3548.
- Your department chair and other colleagues are often good resources for course development issues.
- The Dean of Students Office, the Office of Student Support Services, and the Center for Faculty Teaching and Development have resources that you may wish to use as well.

### Tentative Course Calendar

Date	Topics
Jan. 22	Introduction to the Course What is a syllabus?
Jan. 29	What is learning-centered teaching?—Pt. I. Reading: Part I.
Feb. 5	What is learning-centered teaching?—Pt. II. Reading: Part I.

Feb. 12	Information about the instructor. Reading: pp. 24–27. Due: Assignment #1.
Feb. 19	A letter to the student. Reading: pp. 28–30.
Feb. 26	Information about the course. Reading: pp. 30–38. Due: Assignment #2.
Mar. 5	Reading: pp. 39–44.
Mar. 12	Spring break (no class)
Mar. 19	The course calendar. Reading: pp. 45–47.
Mar. 26	Requirements and Assessments—Pt. I. Reading: pp. 48–59.
Apr. 2	Requirements and Assessments—Pt. II. Reading: pp. 60–64.
Apr. 9	Grading. Reading: pp. 65–69.
Apr. 16	How to study for this course. Reading: pp. 69–72. Due: Assignment #3.
Apr. 23	Student Selected Discussion—Topic I. Reading: TBA.
Apr. 30	Student Selected Discussion—Topic II. Reading: TBA.
May 7	Final Exam Week. Due: Final Project

*Key words:* syllabus, course policies, teacher expectations, learning aid.

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