

# Syllabus Construction With a Commitment to Shared Governance

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The course syllabus has been one of the most recognized tools for facilitating the teaching and learning process in higher education. Historically it has represented the intellectual capital that the knowledgeable and well-credentialed instructor brings to bear. In a practical sense, the syllabus has become better known as the prelude to the course and roadmap for students to understand what they “will have to do” to complete it. 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, he/she implicitly agrees to abide by the syllabus. Similarly, an instructor agrees to follow and execute in good faith the terms of the syllabus. When grievances arise, the syllabus becomes a core document for academic administrators to inspect. Clearly then, the importance of the syllabus warrants a closer look at best practices in its construction.

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

At a certain level, some faculty’s failure to construct and present a quality and *comprehensive* syllabus is understandable. Where in our academic training have we been taught to develop a *comprehensive* syllabus that *by design* meets the needs of stakeholders at every level—students, faculty, academic departments, respective colleges within the university, and the overall interest of the institution?

This is not to say that department chairs, deans, or mentors have never “introduced” us to the syllabus or provided 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, colleges, and 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 also exist. For example, a good treatment of designing the syllabus can be found in *The Survival Guide for Adjuncts* (Lyons, Kysilka, & Pawlas, 1999). Many readers 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 most of us have probably 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 better prepared 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 students and pique their interest in the subject matter at hand.

I submit that the shortcomings—again, there are several—of syllabi on campuses stem from a misunderstanding of or lack of appreciation for the fundamental purpose of a *comprehensive* syllabus. It 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, faculty may not view syllabus construction as a shared governance issue, but as an activity that can easily be directed by conventional practice within the institution. However, I will show in this article 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 and skills and reach appropriate competencies in an area of study, and the institution can minimize the 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 must accurately and consistently communicate academic policies and procedures that help students complete a course without incident. It must clearly spell out what coursework is expected of students. It must meet accrediting agency, university, and respective academic schools/division/units standards. And while the syllabus must be comprehensive, it must also eschew classroom management and course process issues that are more appropriately addressed in another communiqué (or risk becoming distracting and unwieldy and deviating from its core function). Most important, the syllabus must contain the elements, language, and constructs that foster healthy teaching and learning and play a preventative role in minimizing student grievances. The well-constructed syllabus should ensure that students and faculty understand what is expected 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 by faculty or uncooperative or recalcitrant students. They

are usually the result of misunderstood expectations in the teaching/learning process. I believe that building and enhancing 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 transient students' syllabi from other schools to assess their learning for credit transfer or waiving a course. Syllabus construction should aim to be an accurate, clear, comprehensive and institutionally sound representation of the teaching and learning that took place in a course, during a given time. It must 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 of syllabi to assure they meet the standards of the university and the academic unit. If we are inattentive or fail to practice due diligence in this oversight, syllabi will naturally deteriorate given the proclivities of the many new creators.

In this article, I outline the essential elements of a *comprehensive* syllabus and explain the rationale for each construct. While many of the constructs will seem 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, not all syllabi include this information. Courses are sponsored by our respective institutions and, therefore, deserve to have their banner 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 include 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. Pay attention to qualifier names of Special Topics, Current Issues, or Independent Studies courses. This information could become important when reviewing prior coursework for transfer students or adults returning to school.

### Time and Place Identifiers

Instructors should make the effort to supply as much time, date, and place information on the syllabus as possible. Each course is unique and should be identified as such. They may even include 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 increasingly so as branch campuses, corporate universities, accelerated, and online courses proliferate. Instructors should get in the habit of using these labels in their course syllabi:

- **Semester:** Term and year
- **Credits:** List number and level, e.g., graduate or undergraduate
- **Day/Time:** Course meeting schedule
- **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

Include the instructor’s full name. Any titles associated with the instructor should be formal, accurate, and in the appropriate university style. Deans and department chairs should check university policy to see how adjunct faculty are titled. Casual practice in this area could lead to legal problems if the *ostensible agency* doctrine 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 the institution or individual 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.

Instructor contact information should be given. In this day and age, it is unacceptable for an instructor to not list a phone number or e-mail address so students can reach him or her, especially in emergency situations. Deans and department chairs should ensure that this actually occurs and should develop policies or best practices for handling this information for adjuncts.

Office hours should also be included. Full-time faculty members know to list their office hours and office location. However, other staff in the university who may teach a course should not assume that students know where to locate them. 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 their office hours as “by appointment” should be sure that they are most responsive when students request a meeting.

### Course Description

The course description must be included *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 in which they enrolled bears a resemblance to what the catalog describes. Understandably, some course descriptions have become general and lean, a reaction to concern about expanding course catalogs. With time, some course descriptions may bear little resemblance to the content in the “updated” course. Nevertheless, a syllabus needs to carry the official course description. One way to deal with the aforementioned concerns 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 during the syllabus review in the first meeting. Attention should be given to special topics courses and independent studies.

### Course Learner Objectives

While student outcomes and learning objectives are probably the most important aspects of a course’s academic integrity (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001), they often do not

receive the attention they deserve. As a starting point, each course should be assigned an "official and approved" set of learner objectives. Colleges have a systematic and formal process for approving courses. Somewhere in the gestation of the new course, learner objectives were identified and approved. If, over time, instructors have inconsistently stated/pursued these learner objectives, the course's "official learner objectives" should be researched. Academic units being evaluated by external 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 learner objectives need to be updated or enhanced, 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.

### **Instructional Approach/Format**

Instructors know and are confident about their approach and format for teaching a course. However, students are not aware of the nuances in the art of teaching. They deserve to hear up-front what instructional approach and teaching/learning format the instructor plans 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, instructors must think about how they will approach the teaching/learning process and try to articulate this for the students. Generally, students come to a course thinking that they will receive the obligatory didactic approach to teaching. In many cases, the instructor will be doing much more than that and needs to describe for the students the art brought to the teaching and learning activities.

For example, one instructor describes his 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 about 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**

Course materials today have certainly expanded beyond textbooks. The listing of course materials should include appropriate citations, as a faculty member would expect in a student's research paper. Be as descriptive as possible to assist the student with other non-textbook related materials. Check departmental policy for how to advise students on where to procure the materials, e.g., bookstore arrangements, preferred online vendors, and so on. 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 get it. 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, website 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 the instructor will accomplish and within what timeframe. There are 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, the instructor can 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 accompanied by a separate document detailing the readings, outside preparations, and assignments. This separate document approach is also helpful when the course gets a bit off track or behind. The instructor can easily hand out an updated course learning activity sheet with a date and have students follow the errata sheet rather than re-issuing a full syllabus. This technique also protects the faculty member, because he/she is staying committed to giving major changes to the syllabus in writing.

If outside assignments have detailed specifications, e.g., a research paper or a demonstration project, it may be helpful to first give a general explanation of the assignment and let the students know that a specification sheet is forthcoming. This helps keep the length of the syllabus manageable, especially if there are several assignments that require detailed explanation of format and criteria for evaluation. For example, one instructor asked 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 instructors carefully define what learning activities they will assess, what criteria they will apply to the performance of a learning activity, and how they will define and determine quality points (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 the university uses. 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 (e.g., A, B+, B-, C+, and so on). 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 claim that they thought they did quite well in a course and expect a higher grade. The instructor may ask: Did you produce “excellent” work, “good” work, or simply “satisfactory” work during the term, thus actually earning a fair grade

of "C"? Use the nominal characteristics to reinforce the meaning of the 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 instructor presents the scale on the syllabus. Schools that have a defined scale to coincide with letter grades should refer students to the catalog or, ideally, 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 alert instructors of their special accommodation needs. This statement should be consistent across all syllabi in the university. 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 details the instructor's qualifications and interests in teaching the course.

### **Student's Responsibilities**

It is also good practice to include a number of carefully worded expectations under the rubric of "student's responsibilities." These administrative issues are designed to help the student complete 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, explaining how students can 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 Policies, 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 had gradually built into the syllabus an excessive amount of upper-case typeface. The syllabus became so unattractive that students dreaded consulting it.

Instructors should minimize classroom management issues and general classroom behavior instructions in the syllabus. This could take some discipline. Issues such as keeping cell phones off, arriving late or leaving early, or what to do during inclement weather 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 cover such points on a brief section of the syllabus marked: "for 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 campuses. Shifting the paradigm 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 about why shared governance is the driving force in improving syllabi on campus. 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 create and present a syllabus template using an existing 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. Providing a model based on 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 pursue.

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 for an electronic version of the template that 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 is unlikely that this type of behavior change will occur by a second term or perhaps even in 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.

This change initiative's main purpose is to improve the teaching/learning experience of our students. This purpose should be kept in mind as we judge the appropriate level

of effort, creativity, and cooperation needed to improve 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, 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. **JCHE**

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