Getting Started Right — A Good Course Syllabus

Starting off right for the fall semester (or the start of any teaching activity) begins with a good course syllabus. As instructors, we are actually not even required to have a written syllabus, once the course is approved by campus. That approval may have occurred years ago!

Why have a course syllabus? Think of the syllabus as a contract, or a pre-course agreement. The instructor provides sufficient information for the students to know what is going to happen, what each party of the contract is expected to do, and what the results will be if the terms of the agreement are not fulfilled.

**Instructor Information.** Most syllabi begin with what the instructor will do. By sharing pertinent information about the instructor and any teaching assistants, the message is sent that the instructor is available to assist students as needed. Be careful — indicating "office hours" of one hour per week for a course with 100 students sends the message that the instructor is NOT willing to meet with students! But providing a web board, email address or chat space can be an excellent opportunity for students to ask questions and receive feedback.

**Course Objectives.** The most important content of the syllabus is the list of course objectives. Here is where the instructor says "This is what you will learn. And if you show me you have learned this, you will pass the course." Objectives can be broad, but they must be written so that course topics and daily class topics can be tied back to them. Class topics help students (and the instructor) keep on-task and on a reasonable time line. And the daily schedule helps students plan for reading, homework, papers and examinations. It is only fair to let students know, at the beginning of the course, what is expected and when.

**Assignments.** Students turn to this section first. What do they have to do in the course? All course assignments should be listed on the syllabus. Remember, the students are entering into a contract, and they deserve to know every expectation up front. Additional details of assignments can be distributed later if necessary, but the outline of expected work should be on the syllabus. Assignments must be aligned with the course objectives. Students should be able to see how each assignment contributes toward their learning and toward the instructor's assessment of how well the objectives are being met.

**Grading.** Grading criteria must be congruent with what was approved for the course and any department regulations. The grading scale must appear on the syllabus, and must not be changed during or after the course! Be clear about the use of plus/minus grades. Each evaluation of a student's work should contribute to the student's ability to evaluate his or her own work more effectively. Timing is also important; will the student have sufficient knowledge of the progress being made in the course prior to the deadline for dropping the course?
Excuses and Errant Behavior. Not every concern can be anticipated, but it is helpful to be ready for common concerns such as the late paper, missed exam, or illness. The course policy should be included in the syllabus, but be prepared to temper the strict written version as needed. Include a statement on academic misconduct, indicating that students are responsible for understanding campus rules and that the rules will be followed.

A clear and complete syllabus paves the way for good communication throughout the semester and prevents surprises and disappointments along the way. Good communication during the course helps prevent confrontation at the end. A well-written syllabus is worth the investment!