

Building a Better Mousetrap: The Syllabus, the Student, and You

While a syllabus reflects both the content of the course and the personality of the professor, most importantly it provides a road map for the student (and teacher). At any given time, the syllabus for any class acts as a contract, a record of events, and a learning tool for students (Jay Parkes and Mary B. Harris 2002). Departments and Colleges routinely use faculty syllabi for accreditation, evaluation, and nomination.

Often overlooked, the course syllabus has received increasing scholarly attention. Recent research argues that a well constructed syllabus helps students learn more effectively and creates more productive student/faculty interaction. The syllabus is, as Sharon Rubin notes, “a small place to start bringing students and faculty members back together” (56). The syllabus is, quite frankly, the students’ first impression of both the class and the instructor. This relationship, combined with course topic, course execution, and the physical environment, influences both student satisfaction and performance (J.M. Curran and D.E. Rosen 2006).

Syllabi and the initial discussion of the syllabi set the tone for the class (Applebey 1999; Littlefield 1999; qtd in Slattery). A clear syllabus provides structure and direction for both student and faculty. Importantly, J.M. Slattery and J.F. Carlson (2005) note that “Students who cannot predict . . . their professor's expectations and behavior may give up and display typical signs of learned helplessness.” In other words, a poorly designed syllabus can increase student passivity.

Certainly, there is not a one size fits all syllabus. However, research consistently shows that effective syllabi

- Include clearly stated course objectives/learning outcomes;
- Include a schedule identifying specific reading assignments and due dates;
- Offer clear statements regarding make-up dates, attendance and grading standards;
- Provide faculty contact information, including office hours, e-mail, available hours in home office, etc.
- Provide specific information regarding technical needs and support services.

Kristina Kaufman, Project Director for 4Faculty.org, notes that research into learning centered education suggests that syllabi should also “accomplish certain basic goals:

- Define students' responsibilities;
- Define instructor's role and responsibility to the students;
- Provide a clear statement of intended goals and student outcomes;
- Establish standards and procedures for evaluation/assessment;
- Acquaint students with course logistics (a particularly important element as we include more group work and out of class experiences);
- Establish a pattern of community between instructor and students;
- Include difficult to obtain materials such are readings, complex charts, and graphs.”

In addition, as at many universities, faculty syllabi must also adhere to a specific Operating Policy (ASU OP 06.14) and legislative requirements. The current trend toward accessibility and transparency by both the legislature and SACS necessitates changes to our syllabi. We need to show connections between course activities, course learning goals, and university learning goals.

The syllabus, in other words, should not be something we take lightly.

Building a better syllabus requires some self-reflection and some coordination: objectives might be specific to individual classes, but learning outcomes might be shared across departments.

While students benefit from a clear and detailed syllabus, producing a learning-centered syllabus offers the faculty an important opportunity to reflect on his or her assignments, exams, and other classroom activities. Simply put, your syllabus should help students (and you) understand **what you want students to understand and be able to do after completing your class.**

The CITR has created a Syllabus Template that reflects the best practices and ASU OP. Obviously, there are classes that require unique items on the syllabus. If so, you should add them.

As a final word, we recommend you spend time the first day of class discussing your syllabus with the students. The syllabus offers you an opportunity to begin the learning process and to engage students.

Good luck and have a great semester.

Guidelines for Developing a Syllabus—Angelo State University CTR

While you don't necessarily want a syllabus that is more than 5-7 pages, student learning increases when the course structure is explicit and clear. Note that any syllabus focused on student learning will, by necessity, be longer than many of us are accustomed.

(**Denotes information required by [ASU Operating Policy 06.14](#) for traditional classes and [ASU Operating Policy for Distance Education 04.11](#). All other categories and suggestions are based on identified best practices to aid student learning.)

****General Information:**

1. Course Name and time/location of meeting
2. Faculty Name
3. Contact information: office location/phone/email/etc.
 - a. Include any special circumstances regarding contacting you
 - b. If you have a preference for contact/communication, notify the students.
4. Times available for student interaction
 - a. Include any specific technological requirements/options (SKYPE, chat, etc.)
 - b. Include specific information regarding interaction with students (face to face/virtual/phone/IM and include specific information regarding times available)
5. If there is a web site or other location for the class and materials, include that here.

****Materials:**

1. Texts
2. Supplemental Materials (be specific about the location of these materials)
3. Subscriptions
4. Equipment/supplies/etc.
5. ****Technology requirements:** Be specific. If the course requires a Blackboard component, provide a link to [E-Learning](#) and the [IT Support Services page](#).

Course Description:

1. You can reproduce the course description from the ASU Bulletin; however, you should feel free to add items that make your course unique. This is an ideal spot to show your passion for the course and material.

Prerequisites and skills required:

1. Despite published prerequisites, students still manage to enroll in certain courses. Allowing them to remain in the course without the prerequisite or required skills damages their chances for success.
2. You might find it useful here to list student services opportunities (Writing Center, Tutoring Services, Learning Labs, etc) for students concerned about the specific skills required. (This information is particularly important for Distance Education students.)
3. Faculty are responsible for informing students about technical skill prerequisites and required hardware, software, and supplemental materials necessary for course participation in the catalog description or syllabus. *For Distance Education courses:* The syllabus should provide links to information regarding curriculum, course and degree

requirements, nature of faculty/student interaction, assumptions about technological competence and skills, technical equipment requirements, availability of academic support services and financial aid resources, and costs and payment policies.(See #2 above)

4. You might find it useful to add Netiquite and classroom behavior statements here.

Course Objectives:

1. Reproduce the 2-3 Objectives listed on your IDEA FIF. See [Reading the Tea Leaves: IDEA Results and Student Learning](#) on the CITR Blackboard page for more information regarding choosing course objectives. IDEA recommends that you choose no more than 3 Important or Essential items. These objectives should be referenced throughout the semester. The more often you make a clear connection between each assignment and the course objective, the better.

****Student Learning Outcomes:**

1. Specifically, **What should your students be able to do at the end of the course?**
2. These will be similar to the Course Objectives above.
3. Mike Ferrer does an excellent job capturing the idea [here](#). ASU's [Academic Assessment](#) page has helpful hints regarding SLO's, also.
4. While you must show the student learning outcomes for the course, you should also show the progression from course learning outcomes to department outcomes/undergraduate learning goals/core curriculum goals.
5. Choose the most important learning outcomes.

****Student Learning Assessment:**

1. How do you measure whether students have achieved the goals of this class? List specific questions, lessons, exercises, etc.
2. Note: Each of you already measures your student learning. You are simply telling the students that the assignments and exams are directly related to the core objectives. A learning assessment statement can be as simple as: "Student learning outcomes will be measured by two essays, course exams, and class participation."
3. Faculty should include a link (or a copy) of any course rubrics or department rubrics. For instance, if this is an upper division course, include a link to your department assessment rubric. This provides an excellent opportunity to help students see how this class fits within the larger goals of the major.
4. For core classes, provide a link to the rubric for the undergraduate goals. Again, you have the opportunity to show students the link between the material studied and the larger goals of the university. (This offers you the chance to show the class is important within the larger community.)

****ASU Academic Honesty Policy:**

1. "Angelo State University expects its students to maintain complete honesty and integrity in their academic pursuits." ([ASU Honor Code](#), Student Handbook)
2. Faculty must include a statement regarding Academic Integrity. The statement above is directly from the Handbook, but faculty should feel free to expand on this statement. Include specific comments regarding cheating in your field.

3. Research by the Center for Academic Integrity has shown that students are less likely to cheat if they know the faculty member cares about the issue.

Student Responsibilities:

1. Be specific about your expectations for student learning/participation/reading/etc.
2. If you expect students to be active learners, define it for them.
3. This is a good place to include attendance policies, policies regarding late work, etc.

****Grade Determination:**

1. How will you determine the students' grade in the course?
2. If you use rubrics or have specific criteria, provide those for the students either in the syllabus or provide access for the students.
3. Include reminder about attendance and late work if those influence a student's grade.
4. As with the entire syllabus, this is an excellent opportunity for faculty to reflect on how they will measure student performance as it relates to student learning, changes in their discipline, and expectations.

****Students with Disabilities:**

1. "Angelo State University is committed to the principle that no qualified individual with a disability shall, on the basis of disability, be excluded from participation in or be denied the benefits of the services, programs, or activities of the university, or be subjected to discrimination by the university, as provided by the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act of 2008 (ADAAA), and subsequent legislation."
2. "Student Contact: The Student Life Office is the designated campus department charged with the responsibility of reviewing and authorizing requests for reasonable accommodations based on a disability, and it is the student's responsibility to initiate such a request by contacting the Student Life Office, Room 112 University Center, at (325) 942-2191 or (325) 942-2126 (TDD/FAX) or by e-mail at Student.Life@angelo.edu to begin the process."
3. Faculty must include a statement regarding reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. The above two quotes are taken directly from [OP 10.15](#).

****Student absence for observance of religious holy days**

1. "A student who intends to observe a religious holy day should make that intention known in writing to the instructor prior to the absence.
2. Faculty must include a statement or link to [OP 10.19](#).

****Course Outline/Calendar/Schedule**

1. Be as detailed and specific as you can. Like other parts of the syllabus, a schedule affords us an opportunity to reflect on the material we teach and the relationship between our class time and student learning.
2. We must provide students the opportunity to plan. As a community, we expect our students to meet deadlines and plan their work. We owe them the same courtesy.
3. Include due dates for major assignments and other means of assessment. Omitting this information has a serious impact on students' ability to plan and learn.

4. Consider including other important dates from the Academic calendar: withdrawal dates, advising dates, registration dates, major speaker/conferences, etc.
5. If possible, include information that connects assignments to your course objectives and student learning outcomes.
6. Avoid changing due dates and assignments throughout the semester. Course execution matters to students and helps them learn.
7. Obviously, though schedules change and you should maintain that flexibility. Make the students aware that you reserve the right to change the calendar if necessary. If you know you will change your schedule, offer the students information about how to find out about changes.

References:

Curran, J.M., & Rosen, D.E. (2006). Student attitudes toward college courses: an examination of influences and intentions. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 28(2), 135-148.

Kauffman, Kristina. *4Faculty.org*. Accessed 1-2-2010.
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Parkes, Jay and Mary B. Harris. (2002). The Purpose of the Syllabus. *College Teaching*, 50(2), 55-61.

Rubin, S. (1985, August 7). Professors, students, and the syllabus. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 1-3.

Slattery, J. M. and Carlson, J. F.(2005). Preparing an effective syllabus: current best practices. *College Teaching*, 53, 159-165.