Syllabus Design Guidelines

Version 4 (2023-2024)[1]

Overview

A well-designed, student-centered syllabus can be a powerful tool for student success by clearly communicating course expectations. These guidelines provide several ideas to assist you in this important aspect of your teaching.

Consider describing how the ***learning environment*** (course structure and subject matter) fosters a positive learning experience for a diverse array of learners and describing your ***expectations*** for successful student behaviors. You may design your course syllabus as you choose as long as it includes the following components that are essential for compliance:

- Uses a format which adheres to accessibility guidelines
- Includes a statement for students with disabilities
- Includes a statement about religious observance
- Lists texts and any other materials students must obtain
- Clearly identifies graded course elements with their due dates, their weight within the final grade, and their connections to learning outcomes

Faculty should provide a copy of the course syllabus to their enrolled students, department chair, and the Dean's office at the start of the semester.[2] Once shared, we suggest instructors make changes to the syllabus thoughtfully and sparingly. Instructors must balance progression through a pre-determined syllabus with "just in time teaching" to allow a course to flow with the students' interests and learning. When instructors must make minor changes to the syllabus during the semester, they should announce these modifications to the entire class and provide the edits in writing as far in advance as possible. Any changes (even sometimes extensions) can wreak havoc on students' schedules and timing of their work.[3]

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[1] This document was prepared with input from the Academic Advising Office, the Reading Lab, and the Dean's Office across many years. It was fully revised with assistance from faculty and staff of the Assessment and Curriculum Committees, in the academic years 2016-17 and 2017-18. Further updates by the CTLA correct outdated information and increase accessibility of the document.

[2] According to the *Faculty Handbook* "each faculty member should prepare a syllabus for each course the faculty member is teaching, following the Dean's guidelines for syllabi. Copies should go to the Dean's Office and to the students enrolled in the course."

[3] Students typically take four courses and make plans to accomplish the work required in all four courses simultaneously. Faculty do not always realize what difficulty they cause even the most conscientious student when they suddenly announce an additional reading or assignment which is not on the syllabus. If changes must be made, do so with as much advance notice as possible. Also, changes that reduce the amount of work required in the course are usually well-received; however, students who aren't doing well in the course and are anticipating another assignment to boost their grade will miss the opportunity to do so.

Course Description

Format: Make content accessible, organized, and easy-to-navigate

Provide your syllabus in an accessible electronic format, preferably in an online location before the first day of class. Accessible digital content benefits most students. Accessible content is compatible with assistive technologies and is rapidly customizable for students with disabilities. Aspire to build an exemplary syllabus according to [Universal Design of Learning](#) principles.

Students appreciate well-organized, easy-to-navigate content that helps them find information quickly. Increase readability by using legible fonts and clearly ordered section headings. Aim to provide sufficient guidance while avoiding a text heavy document. Posting the syllabus online allows students to access course information from any place at any time. Try one of these formats:

- **Create an accessible PDF:** Start with a Microsoft Word document using "styles" (Alt +H, L) to format the headings and other elements. Fix all accessibility issues identified by the Accessibility Checker (Alt + F, I, I, A). Save as PDF (Alt +F, Y1). Get help from the Assistive Technology team, if needed.

- **Develop your own webpage:** Use a carefully constructed navigation system and adhere to the [Grinnell College Web Standards](#). Test the [Accessibility](#) of your site with a tool such as [WAVE](#).

Your Academic Assistant (AA) can help with making your syllabus accessible and with creating electronic course materials.

Instructor information

Help the students learn a little about you and your teaching philosophy so you can begin building a relationship with the students. Offer varied ways to contact you with questions or concerns by posting student drop-in hours, email address, phone numbers, or other opportunities for instructor-student interaction.

Class format and description

Help the students know they are in the right place by listing the course name, number, and description. Describe the goals for the course. Let students know about how you structure the course activities including group work, technology use, discussions, hands-on applications, etc.

Learning outcomes: Write measurable course learning outcomes

Strive to include 3 to 6 major things that you want students to be able to do upon completing the course. Use specific action verbs to describe what you will observe to know what students are able to do, value, or know. Tie these desired outcomes directly to your assignments and grading rubrics. When possible, connect your learning outcomes to your [departmental learning outcomes](#), and possibly to the [College-wide learning outcomes](#).

Avoid non-quantifiable terms such as "understand" or "know." The Center for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment has resources to help you with writing learning outcomes. Appropriately tune your learning outcomes to the unique characteristics of your course, including: a) class size, b) course level, c) enrolled students' characteristics and incoming knowledge, and d) how your course relates to other courses within the department's curriculum. Consider consulting a knowledge taxonomy such as Bloom's or Dee Fink's Taxonomy of Significant Learning.

Course Work Expectations

Texts and Materials: List required texts and any optional readings

Let students know in advance the texts, software, supplies and other materials they must obtain to be successful in your course. Tell the students <u>why</u> you selected these particular texts or materials. Provide an electronic equivalent or order texts early enough to ensure timely conversion to an alternate format as needed. Include information about where students can purchase the materials.

Do you know how much the books and resources in your course cost? The Instructional Support Committee, following a careful study of the issues, encourages you to consider affordability of your course materials when selecting texts for students to purchase. Work with the Libraries to explore [alternatives to traditional commercially available texts](#) where possible for your classes. Please put hard copies of your textbooks on 2-hour eReserve for your classes.

Schedule: Sequence the course events and list the due dates

The schedule helps students to plan their study. List the topics, readings, questions or discussions in chronological order along with the assignment and assessment due dates. Include enough information about the topics, context, key events, and dates to guide students through the course. Clearly indicate when you will provide additional information at a later date. Don't forget to add dates for breaks into the syllabus and honor these breaks by not assigning more work. Appropriately sequence and space out coursework across the semester so that students are not expected to turn in all work within a short period at the end of the course.

Let students know when aspects of the schedule are tentative. If the schedule changes, notify the class as soon as possible, both in writing and as an in-class announcement.

Mid-Semester Breaks

Honor mid-semester breaks by not having major assignments due the week after the break, other than, perhaps, typical amounts of reading/work for the next class period. Major assignments due after break prevent students from using their break as a *break*. In addition, noting break times on the syllabus helps students (and you!) plan.

End-of-Semester Work

The end of the semester ought to allow a student to wrap up any project(s) and demonstrate competency in the subject. However, give thought to how much you want to require of your students at the end of the semester. It is not appropriate to assign a paper/project, *and* an oral presentation, *and* an exam all to be due in the last week or two of the semester. This is too much work for one course when students are taking 3-4 courses at a time. A more reasonable approach is one major assignment due during the last week or two of classes and one final exam, paper or presentation during Finals Week, at most.

Expectations: Describe what you expect from students

In addition to serving as a roadmap to students by outlining course assignments, due dates, and the breakdown of the grade for the course, the syllabus is an explicit statement of your expectations. This frequently relates to your policies for the course. To keep the tone positive: 1) focus on learning by connecting policies to clear pedagogical purposes and 2) avoid focusing on punishments for violating policies. Frame policies in positive ways. Consider including statements about class participation, academic honesty, late work, class attendance, and willingness to [accommodate students with disabilities](#).

Explain ***why*** you have these expectations. For example, participation is a significant component of most courses at Grinnell College. Describe, either in writing or orally, the reasons that students need to participate and how. You may say, for instance, that one of the goals for the course is to develop skills for collaboration, or that everyone has something to learn from other students, or that learning to take risks – and even to be *wrong* sometimes! – is an important skill.

Student Workload

Help students succeed in your course by explicitly stating how much time a student can expect to spend studying for the course. For example, you might indicate, "I expect students to spend about three hours each week preparing for each class session, including completing homework and writing papers." The assignments and assessments for the course should be closely related to the stated learning outcomes.

Grinnell College defines 4 credits as equivalent to an expected minimum of 3 hours per week of in-class instruction and 9 hours per week of out-of-class time (totaling 12 hours of academic work per week) over 15 weeks, including the final exam period.[4] This standard allows for different pedagogies, and can be applied, with the appropriate scaling, to short courses of various formats. Consider this definition carefully as you plan class sessions and the work students will complete outside of class.

Faculty are advised to require attendance only during the published times for their course. If you expect that students meet or participate in events outside of your regular class meetings, include these expectations clearly in your syllabus. It is unreasonable to expect

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[4] This definition was discussed and formulated by the Curriculum Committee in 2015-16, and with the whole faculty in May 2016.

that everyone in your class will be able to participate at times outside of class (e.g., for a field trip, to watch a film, or to hear a visiting speaker), so you should consider ways in which students can most reasonably compensate for missing an outside-of-class event if they are unable to participate.

Student Resources

Provide general information about student-oriented campus resources (e.g., Academic Advising, Writing, Reading, and Speaking Center, librarians) and highlight specific additional resources that may be unique to the course.

Late Work

Clearly explain your class policies related to accepting and grading late work from students. Do you accept assignments after the due date? How does late submission affect the grade?

Course Policies

Grading: Describe grading expectations and connection to learning

Describe the graded course elements and list their due dates, weight within the final grade, and connection to learning outcomes. Ensure the student workload is appropriate for the credit value of the course.

Assessment Alignment

Clearly indicate how each major assessment activity connects to at least one course learning outcome. Ask yourself which assessments are measuring mastery for each learning outcome. Ensure that the weighting of assessments reflects the importance of each learning outcome. For example, if learning to write in the discipline is a key learning objective, writing assignments should dominate the grading scheme.

Grading Process

Make your grading formula clear to students on your syllabus and consider using the grading tool available in the learning management system. Describe all graded elements in the course, including the due date, criteria for success, and information to be assessed.

Give students multiple opportunities to practice the material in your course and receive feedback. Grading and returning student work with comments in a timely fashion, aids student success. Build assessments to increase in complexity throughout the course, and schedule at least one assessment early in the semester. By the midpoint of the semester (if not well before!), students should have a good idea of where they stand in the course. Ideally, students will have completed multiple (graded) assignments or exams and will be aware of their progress by the withdrawal deadline.

If discussion, participation, and/or attendance is a requirement of the course and is grade-dependent, provide students concrete feedback on their performance along this dimension. If this is a significant part of the grade in the course, as may well be true in seminars for

example, students benefit from written feedback within the first several weeks of the semester.

If students are earning a sub-standard grade or are in such danger at any point in the semester, clearly communicate this to them, preferably in writing. Please regularly use the [Academic Alert system](#) that the Academic Advising Office coordinates.

Assignment Descriptions

Clearly define the basic features of the major *summative* assessment activities within a prominent and easily identifiable location, such as a section labeled "Assignments." Provide instructions that include a rationale for the assessment activity and the scoring criteria. Make sure that students understand your expectations related to the low-stakes, *formative* assessments, such as homework and discussions, that will be available as practice opportunities throughout the course.

Written Assignments

If you assign papers, when will you hand out the writing assignment? Including both the start date and the due date on the syllabus helps students plan on a particular period of time to work on the paper. Following universal design principles, explain assignments both orally *and* in writing, using a separate sheet of written instructions. Scaffold larger assignments such as research papers so that they are segmented into manageable steps.

Reading Assignments

Faculty should be realistic about the amount of reading they expect students to complete. More is not necessarily better, nor is it a sign of a superior course, teaching style, or instructor. When an assignment is very difficult to complete in the allotted time, students may just "throw in the towel," realizing that even their best efforts will be insufficient.

It is helpful, especially as you introduce a new section of material, to provide guidance about the reading. Is there a part of the assignment that students should give more time and attention to than another part? What might they skim? What information should the students look for? Specific direction and instruction to prepare students for a reading assignment facilitates more productive class discussions and prepares students to follow the professor's line of questioning. Some faculty say, "But I want the *students* to be able to set up their own questions!" As in the case of giving very specific instructions when assigning papers, you will get better quality output from your students if you are equally directive about reading assignments, or slowly build the skills for them to start asking questions for themselves.

Class Attendance

The Faculty Handbook contains no general regulations from the College about class attendance, and you are not required to report class attendance formally.[5] You determine the class attendance policy for your course and are responsible for informing students of

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[5] Faculty Handbook revised 4-18-2017 and approved April 2017 (Retrieved from http://web.grinnell.edu/dean/Handbook/FacultyHandbook.pdf)

the policy. Nonetheless, faculty should reasonably accommodate absences due to religious observances (see suggested wording for Religious Observance on page 9). Faculty should also reasonably accommodate absences due to varsity athletic competitions. Student athletes should notify you in advance, in writing, of their travel and competition schedule. Students missing class for any reason should arrange with you to complete work due at that time, or work associated with missed class periods, as appropriate.

The Student Handbook encourages students to participate actively in class and discourages absences[6]:

Students are expected to participate actively in classes. It is important that students avoid class absences. A student who has been absent for any reason is still responsible for all work in the course. Individual instructors determine the effect of absences upon course grades. An instructor may recommend to the Committee on Academic Standing that a student be dropped or withdrawn from a course because of excessive absences. (See policy on Instructor-Initiated Course Drop or Withdrawal.)

If a student is ill and must miss class, they should refer to the syllabus in that course and follow the absence/make-up policy established by the professor. If no absence policy has been established, the student should contact the professor prior to or as soon as possible after the absence to discuss whether the absence will be excused and whether make-up work will be accepted. In all cases, it is the instructor's decision whether to excuse the student from class.

Grinnell College acknowledges and embraces the religious diversity of its faculty, students and staff. Faculty and students share responsibility to support members of our community who observe religious holidays. Students will provide faculty members with reasonable notice of the dates of religious holidays on which they will be absent, and this notice would be expected to occur no later than the third week of the semester. Faculty members will make reasonable efforts to accommodate students who need to be absent from examinations or class due to religious observance. Students are responsible for completing any part of the course work, including examinations, which they have missed due to religious observance, and faculty members are responsible for giving them the opportunity to do so.

Academic Honesty Expectations

Academic honesty relates to what work your students can collaborate with other students on and what work students should complete independently, as well as the academic conventions of citing others' work. Indicate your preferred systems for citation. Consider including in your syllabus a statement such as the following sample:

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[6] 2017-2018 Student Handbook Policies and Procedures Class Attendance section: Class Attendance. (n.d.). Retrieved November 22, 2017, from
https://catalog.grinnell.edu/content.php?catoid=12&navoid=2537#class-attendance

Sample. Grinnell College's [Academic Honesty policy](#) is located in the online Student Handbook. It is the College's expectation that students be aware of and meet the expectations expressed in this policy. In addition, in this course, it is my expectation that students may collaborate on the following assignments [add detail], but not on the following assignments [add detail]. If you have questions about how a particular assignment relates to the College's policy, I will gladly consult with you in advance of the assignment's due date.

Learning environment: Support inclusivity and positive motivation

Set the stage for the environment you want to create within your classroom. Use a positive, respectful, and inviting tone throughout the syllabus by using personal pronouns such as you, we, us instead of impersonal words like "the students," "the course," or "they." Directly address the student as a competent, engaged learner and invite students to engage in and take ownership of their own learning. Design the syllabus as a "promise" that students will achieve important learning outcomes through mutual effort by instructor and students. Help students see the relevance of the course by making explicit connections between course content and paths to answering "big life questions" or long-term goals. Emphasize a collaborative spirit by focusing on what students and instructors do. Consider setting a tone of inclusivity by noting your preferred personal pronouns and encouraging the students offer theirs.

Clearly communicate high expectations for student success and project confidence that students can meet your expectations through hard work. Offer tips and strategies for how to meet and exceed expectations by providing information about review sessions, student drop-in hours, additional background material, etc.

Look at the existing content of your courses for opportunities to support the goal of full inclusion of a diverse array of learners. Each student brings one or more ethnic or racial backgrounds, different abilities, nationality (educational systems and expectations are vastly different across the U.S. and around the world), culture, health, prior exposure to higher education (first-generation students), social class (financial resources), religious heritage, etc. Each of these dimensions affects the expectations they bring to your course and how they will learn in your class. This begs at least two things from you: first, to be as explicit as possible about your expectations (the unwritten rules or expectations you have that live only in your head may not be theirs), and second, to identify those things you are already doing that serve to support multicultural goals and full inclusion. You do not necessarily need to *add more*, but rather you might be able to *do differently*.

Students with Disabilities[7]

By law and ethical commitment, the College makes accommodations for students with disabilities. We encourage you to make a statement on your syllabus that reflects your

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[7] Retrieved in part from Disability Resources on GrinnellShare:
https://grinco.sharepoint.com/sites/DisabilityResources/SitePages/Resources-for-Faculty.aspx

personal style and indicates your willingness to work with the diverse learners in your classroom. Consider using or adapting one of these sample statements:

Sample 1: I encourage students with documented disabilities, including invisible or non-apparent disabilities such as chronic illness, learning disabilities, and psychiatric disabilities, to discuss reasonable accommodations with me. You will also need to have a conversation about and provide documentation of your disability to the Coordinator for Student Disability Resources, Jae Hirschman, located on the 1st floor of Steiner Hall (x3089).

Sample 2: Grinnell College makes reasonable accommodations for students with documented disabilities. Students need to provide documentation to the Coordinator for Student Disability Resources, Jae Hirschman, located on the 1st floor of Steiner Hall (x3089) and discuss your needs. Students should then notify me within the first few days of classes so that we can discuss ways to ensure your full participation in the course and coordinate your accommodations.

Sample 3: I strive to create a fully inclusive classroom; thus, I welcome individual students to approach me about distinctive learning needs. In particular, I encourage students with disabilities to have a conversation with me and disclose how our classroom or course activities could impact the disability and what accommodations would be essential to you. You will also need to have a conversation about and provide documentation of your disability to the Coordinator for Student Disability Resources, Jae Hirschman, located on the 1st floor of Steiner Hall (x3089).

Religious Observance

As a body, the Grinnell College faculty has affirmed the importance of allowing students the flexibility to meet both class obligations and religious ones. Choose or modify one of the following for your syllabus.

Sample 1: I encourage students who plan to observe holy days that coincide with class meetings or assignment due dates to consult with me in the first three weeks of classes so that we may reach a mutual understanding of how you can meet the terms of your religious observance and also the requirements for this course.

Sample 2: Grinnell College offers alternative options to complete academic work for students who observe religious holy days. Please contact me within the first three weeks of the semester if you would like to discuss a specific instance that applies to you.

Academic Support

It is recommended to include a statement about Academic Advising that follows other mentions of support such as accommodation and religious observances.

Sample 1: If you have other needs not addressed above, please let me know soon so that we can work together for the best possible learning environment. In some cases, I will recommend consulting with the Academic Advising staff. They are an excellent resource for developing strategies for academic success and can connect you with other campus resources as well: http://www.grinnell.edu/about/offices-services/academic-advising.

If I notice that you are encountering difficulty and I have reached out to you and not received a response, or if you have missed multiple class sessions or are not meeting our class objectives repeatedly, I will submit an academic alter via Academic Advising's SAL portal. This notifies you of my concern, along with the Academic Advising team and your advisor(s), so that they can reach out to you with additional offers of support.

References

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