Ten Tips for Syllabus Preparation

1. The syllabus is the front door to the course. Make it welcoming and let it set the tone for student engagement in the course. Is your course informal, like a family home? Is it a prison with many regulations and cells for separate inmates to serve alone? Is it a place where teams meet challenges together to build knowledge and skills? Set student expectations for the course with the syllabus.

2. Begin with a brief list of major goals for the course. These should be consistent with the catalog description of the course, but written in terms that students understand. These are the things you will return to throughout the course. They should be prominent.

3. Make it short. Students are intimidated by lengthy syllabi and will tend not to read them, OR to read them and be anxious and confused. The syllabus is not the course outline. It is not a compilation of all assignments and rubrics for the course. It is not a comprehensive list of all resources for the course. It can be linked to all of those. It should be a brief description of the goals, processes, and policies of the course.

4. Highlight course processes so that students know how they should be engaging in the course. Will the course involve a variety of formats, or be primarily one? How should students prepare to get the most out of those formats?

5. Make class policies clear. Refer to college policies for academic integrity, attendance, illness, etc., and restate those that are particularly relevant for this course. For example, some of these policies are more difficult for first year students than upper level students.

6. Grading standards and how assignments, exams, attendance, etc. figure into the grade should be clear and placed near the end of the syllabus. Students want to know how they will achieve the grades they want. Putting the information first makes grades appear to be more important than learning.

7. Make your preferred contact information prominent. You should be available to students, but not necessarily 24/7, nor through all channels. Tell them what you prefer and then make it easy for them to contact you that way.

8. Content outline, assessable objectives, details on assignments, resources for student learning are all important parts of the course, but they do not necessarily belong on your syllabus. Select the best way to get the information to your students. The course management system can provide most of the information the students need to succeed in your course, and provide it at the point in time that they need it.

9. The syllabus can provide a foundation for good assessment of student learning. That assessment should be aligned with the objectives of the program, college, and specific course. You may provide the assessment map for the course to the students, but do so at peril of boggling or boring them. It is your tool, and you should use it grade students’ work and to improve the course.

10. Remember to purpose of the syllabus. It introduces students to the course, keeps them on track as they traverse the content and skills to be delivered by the course, and gives them a clear understanding of what is expected of students and instructor during the course. The syllabus should be primarily for the students, not for committees, administrators, or accreditors.