

BEST PRACTICES IN SYLLABUS CONSTRUCTION

Gambescia, S.F. (2006). "Best Practice in Syllabus Construction with a Commitment to Shared Governance." *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 54, 1, pp. 20-27.

What follows below is an abbreviated version of the article listed above. For the full article, see http://www.elegantbrain.com/edu4/classes/readings/depository/TNS_560/tools/syllab_construct_best.PDF

"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 needs to accurately and consistently communicate academic policies and procedures that facilitate students completing a course without incident. It needs to clearly communicate student expectations in coursework and meet accrediting agency, [college], and respective academic standards. And while the syllabus is comprehensive, it needs to be sanitized of classroom management and course processes issues that are more appropriately addressed in another communiqué; otherwise the document becomes distracting and unwieldy and deviates from its core function. Most important, it needs to contain the elements, language, and constructs that foster healthy teaching and learning and plays a preventative role in minimizing student grievances. The well-constructed syllabus should ensure that student and faculty expectations are understood 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. . . . and [it] needs to be understandable to the outsider."

Essential Elements for Syllabus Construction Below are many *essential elements* of a comprehensive syllabus to consider, with commentary and a rationale for each construct.

- Place the official name of the college and its location at the top of the syllabus.
- Your department
- Course Number and Title: Syllabi should carry the complete and official course identifiers without any abbreviations. Attention should be given to qualifier names of Special Topics, Current Issues, or Independent Studies courses
- Time and place of course meetings
- Semester: term and year
- Credits: List number and level, e.g., graduate or undergraduate.
- Location: building and room number. Check to see how online or hybrid courses should be listed.
- Instructor Information: provide your name clearly. Any titles associated with the instructor should be formal, accurate, and in the appropriate academic style. Consider an "Instructor Profile": most students are genuinely interested in an instructor's background. Consider including a brief profile in the syllabus that explains instructor qualifications and interests in

teaching the course. 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 college.

- Be sure to include a phone number and an email address so students can communicate with you, especially in emergency situations.
- Office hours: be sure to list your office hours and office location.
- Course Description: To begin, the course description needs to be *verbatim* as it appears in the updated and *official college course catalog*. Students may select a course based on the description in the official school catalog. They deserve to learn that the course that they enrolled in bears a resemblance to what the catalog states. Craft a second or third part of the course description that shows how the present course expands or emphasizes certain aspects of the catalog description.
- Course Learner Objectives: Student outcomes and learning objectives are probably the most important aspect of the academic integrity of a course. Make sure you research the specific learn educational outcomes associated with your course.
- General Education Student Learning Outcomes: [Course Name] is designated as a General Education course. The General Education curriculum at Rhode Island College is designed to provide a cohesive program of study that promotes the development of a broadly educated person with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in university studies and in your future career. This course has been approved as meeting your requirement in the [Distribution] area. (If relevant, include a Connections statement): As a Connections course, we will explore_____. The major General Education learning outcomes for this course are [Learning Outcome 1, Learning Outcome 2, etc.]. Students will learn and practice [Learning Outcome 1] through a [quiz, exam, etc.] and [Learning Outcome 2] through a [quiz, exam, etc.].
- Instructional Approach and Pedagogical Format: Most instructors know and are familiar with their approach for teaching a course. However, students are not aware of the variations in the art of teaching. They deserve to hear up front what instructional approach and teaching and learning format you plan on using in the course. For example, one instructor gives a general feel for the 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.*
- Course Materials: All works should use appropriate citations, as you would expect in a student's research paper. Course materials today have certainly expanded beyond textbooks. Be as descriptive as possible to assist the student with other non-textbook related materials. Be sure to identify where students may obtain course materials.
- Assessment and Grading Policy: Students will be most interested in this section of the syllabus, so it is important that you carefully define what learning activities will be assessed, what criteria will be applied to the performance of a learning activity, and how quality points, however

defined, are determined. The syllabus may also include how other grades without quality points may be given for special situations, and outline policies for "Incomplete" or "Withdrawal." Ask students to consult the catalog to learn when and why these grades are given.

- Americans with Disabilities Act--Syllabus statement: "Rhode Island College is required by law to ensure that students with documented disabilities are provided with the reasonable accommodations necessary to effectively address their individual educational needs. Students seeking course accommodations for a disability must first register with the Disability Services Center (DSC) at 401-456-2776, dsc@ric.edu. For more information, visit the Disability Services Center's website at www.ric.edu/disabilityservices."
- Student's Responsibilities:
 - *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.
 - *Class Attendance*: While most instructors feel that they have wide latitude in this area, be sure to articulate a clear attendance policy, complete with consequences. Class attendance policy can be grounded in an overall philosophy of student expectations.
 - *Academic Honesty Policy*: Syllabi should include an approved statement, notifying students of how to become familiar with the college's academic integrity policy. For example, *The College is committed to a learning environment that embraces academic integrity. 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 college 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.
- Weekly Topical Outline/Course Learning Activities: Naturally this is **the heart of the syllabus** because it outlines what you will accomplish and when. Take care to follow the college's academic calendar, observing all holidays, and so on.
- You may want to include a final statement 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.*