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ABSTRACT

An undergraduate student offers reflections and observations on college course syllabi. Since the syllabus is the student's guide through the course, it should be clearly organized allowing students to find information quickly. It should outline the expectations that students and instructor will have during the course. In addition a syllabus must make clear the dates and deadlines for tests and papers with explanation of the content of each test and the subject matter of the papers and projects. Syllabi should explain the penalties for cheating, plagiarism, missed attendance, missed exams, and late assignments. Finally, the syllabus should make clear how grades will be calculated. In a final section the paper offers eight suggestions for effective syllabi: (1) keep information concise; (2) present important ideas at the beginning; (3) make expectations clear; (4) list all important dates and deadlines; (5) give an explanation of all grading factors; (6) explain how the course material relates to life beyond the course; (7) explain the role of the syllabus in class; and (8) call attention to the course objectives frequently throughout the course. (JB)

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The Course Syllabus as Seen by the Undergraduate Student
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Running head: COURSE SYLLABUS

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Abstract

An undergraduate student has a vastly different perspective of the course syllabus than do regular faculty members and/or administrators. This presentation will examine course syllabi from the perspective of the undergraduate student. The syllabus is a student's guide through the course. While a delineation of course objectives during the initial class period may be informative, students typically do not give these objectives further thought during the academic term. What, then, are the important features of the syllabus? Attention will be focused upon a description of such aspects as clarity, ease of comprehension, the instructor's expectations, presentations of important dates and deadlines, and an explanation of all factors that enter into calculation of course grades. Summative statements will attempt to reconcile discrepancies that may exist between views and needs of the instructor and those of the undergraduate student.

My name is Julie Leeds and I am a senior psychology major at Emporia State University, in Kansas. Because I am the only person on this panel whose role is strictly that of a student, my perspective of the course syllabus may differ from the rest of the members you will hear. For students, a syllabus is a guide through the course. It acts as a map, illustrating to students where they are going, how they are going to get there, and what interesting sights they may see along the way.

As with any good map, a good syllabus has several key features for undergraduates. First, the information should be clearly organized. The clear structure of the syllabus allows students to find information quickly. The organization assists students in locating their position and their direction during the course if they should lose their way. A map also needs to be easy to understand. Students should be able to comprehend the information contained in the syllabus after the first reading. At the beginning of a course students rarely have (or want to take) time to reread and decipher the syllabus.

It is important to understand the journey through the course at the outset because it lessens the probability of the students beginning the journey traveling in the wrong direction. Part of knowing how to reach the final

destination of the course, is understanding what is expected during the conquest. Students wish to know what the instructor expects of them and of him or herself. The more knowledge the students possess concerning the relationship between themselves and the instructor, the more relaxed and comfortable they will be on the trip through the course.

Students also like to see exactly what the destination is, and what the different stops will be during the journey. The route and the final goal is best illustrated for students in the presentation of the dates of the tests, and the due dates of papers and projects. An explanation of the content of each test and the subject matter of the papers and projects clarifies what will be covered during the course. Once students have read through the dates and explanations they know where they are traveling and when they will arrive at the various destination.

Since the information is contained in the map, students can also refer back to it throughout the course when questions arise. As with any journey, there are appropriate and inappropriate ways to travel. Students need to know what the consequences are of disobeying the rules of the road. Is the student given a ticket (such as a deduction of points) for not complying with the policies on cheating, plagiarism,

attendance, missed exams, and late assignments, or is he or she given a jail sentence (failure of the course)?. These laws should be clearly posted, so that students will know how to safely travel through the course. 10.00

Understanding the criteria of judging whether the journey was a success or not also is important. Students like to know how grades are calculated. The knowledge of what is required allows students to work toward the desired grade and monitor their own progress during the course.

Now that the important features of the syllabus have been listed, as a student I have eight suggestions for instructors, to help make their syllabi more effective.

First, keep information concise. Show students the way through the course with clearly marked, major routes, don't try to include every small back road and detour. When large amounts of details are contained in the syllabus, students get bogged down in the information and often do not ever read the entire syllabus.

Second, present more important ideas at the beginning of the syllabus. Students will at least see the information as they look through the syllabus for the aspects that are the most important to them. Burying important information at the back of the syllabus, may mean students will never see it, because they stop at the point they believe is the most

beneficial or when they feel they have seen the essentials.

Third, make your expectations clear. Class time won't be disrupted for clarification if everyone is traveling on the same path through the course.

Fourth, list all of the known dates in the syllabus. Overdue materials will be kept to a minimum if students know what speed at which to proceed. As on any well planned journey, obstacles (such as employment, other course work, etc.) may be easily by-passed if the students are familiar with the course requirements.

Fifth, give a specific explanation of all of the factors involved in grading, not just generalizations. Specifics eliminate conflicts over grading on the different tests, projects, and papers.

Sixth, include in the syllabus how the course material relates to life after the course and after graduation. Often, students don't see the relevance of a certain course. Even though students will gain this knowledge through the presentation of course material, students wish to know it at the beginning of the course. This section does not need to be extensive, but it should briefly outline how the information may be used. Illustrating to the students the importance of your course may also help to maintain their focus through their journey of your class.

Seventh, instructors make an impact in the way a syllabus is presented. Upon the initial presentation, the instructor should explain the role of the syllabus. Not all students fully understand how useful this map can be. Review the syllabus after the first few weeks of the course to reinforce the information in the students' minds and to point out the highlights to late registrants.

Eighth, throughout the course, bring attention to the course objectives. Students rarely contemplate these after the initial presentation of the syllabus. When the instructor presents how the objectives are being achieved, it will add to the sense of accomplishment for the students. Possessing this information will also allow the students to make an informed critique of the journey at the end of the course.

For undergraduate students, the course syllabus can be a tremendous asset. Having a clear, easily understood map through the course, allows students to concentrate on learning during your class and not on the basics of how learning is supposed to occur according to the syllabus.