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# EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH IN ACTION

## Best Practices in Syllabus Writing Contents of a Learner-Centered Syllabus

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This article presents an overview of syllabus structure for faculty members and administrators who would like to develop and evaluate their syllabi. A brief overview about syllabus contents and a checklist is provided. (The Journal of Chiropractic Education 20(2): 139-144, 2006)

**Key Indexing Terms:** chiropractic; education

*The syllabus functions as a major communication device that provides details of how student learning will be assessed and about the roles of both student and instructors in the learning and assessment process.*— Habanek<sup>1</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

The syllabus is a description and plan for a course and, if well written, may be a tool that improves student learning, facilitates faculty teaching, improves communications between faculty members about their courses, and assists with monitoring program quality.<sup>1-6</sup> Altman and Cashin state that, "The primary purpose of a syllabus is to communicate to one's students what the course is about, why the course is taught, where it is going, and what will be required of the students for them to complete the course with a passing grade."<sup>7</sup> Additionally, Parkes, Fix, and Harris suggest that the syllabus serves as a contract between the instructor and the learner.<sup>8</sup> Typically focused on the learner, well-written syllabi communicate to students what is expected to succeed in a course and what competencies must be mastered.<sup>2,3</sup> Thus, syllabi assist faculty

members with communicating with their learners and help learners understand what is expected of them.<sup>1,5</sup>

The lead instructor for the course and, depending on the college, other recognized bodies (eg, departments, supervisors, administrative bodies, program review committees, etc) are responsible for developing and maintaining course syllabi. Typically the lead instructor is responsible for the distribution of the most updated syllabus to all other course instructors and to the students in either printed and/or electronic formats.<sup>2</sup>

As a general rule when writing or reviewing a syllabus, the syllabus contents should be so clear that they are easily understood by others who are not familiar with the course (ie, those who have not taken the course). The syllabus should provide enough detail for students to understand what is expected of them and how the course proceeds. Optimally, the course syllabus should generate interest and motivate students to take responsibility to learn the contents of the course.<sup>1,2,5</sup> The syllabus contents should be in compliance with the college's other documents, such as course catalog and policy documents, in order to ensure that there is consistency and a relationship with the educational program.

This review provides a structure by which faculty members and administrators may evaluate and deve-

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lop current syllabi and consider methods for improving syllabi through methods such as peer review from other faculty and feedback from student evaluation of instructional methods. A checklist (Appendix A) is provided so that one may download and modify this form from *The Journal of Chiropractic Education* website ([www.journalchiroed.com](http://www.journalchiroed.com)) to best suit his or her needs. The checklist may also assist an instructor who is developing a new syllabus or may be used to review existing syllabi through peer review or a review committee in preparation for curricular improvements, external review by credentialing bodies, or in the development of new programs. This review is not intended to cover course or curriculum development. Instead, it is assumed that the course has been developed and integrated appropriately within the educational program.

## SYLLABUS CONTENTS

Presented here are the typical components of a syllabus. The order of presentation matches that of the checklist in Appendix A.

### General Course Information

This section orients the reader to the basic components of the course.<sup>2-7</sup>

1. *Name of course and course identifying information:* The course name should match the most recent college catalog. Include the course number and level of study, as found in the most recent catalog.
2. *Term/quarter/semester:* State when the course is being offered, unique to the delivery of the course (eg, season and year), such as “Fall 2008.”
3. *Location:* List where the course will be held (e.g, classroom, clinic, etc). Website or other electronic locations for the course (eg, Blackboard) may be listed here.
4. *Units/time dedicated per week:* For lectures and laboratories, state how often the course meets for each. List any other time required to satisfy the course, such as independent study, clinical contact, supervised patient care, and distance learning.
5. *Prerequisites/corequisites:* List the prerequisites (a prerequisite is a course that must be successfully completed prior to enrolling in the course) and/or corequisites (a corequisite is another course that must be taken at the same time). This

section should include course names and numbers in order to easily identify them.

### Instructor Information

Information about the faculty members involved with the course will help students know how to reach the instructors for answers to questions regarding course materials and lessons.<sup>2-7</sup>

1. *Instructors' names:* Clearly list the instructors' names and their function in relation to the course, such as lead instructor, laboratory instructor, and so forth. Degrees and credentials may also be included.
2. *Office hours and contact information:* Include information about how students should communicate with faculty. Include items such as office hours, where the meeting place is located, how students make appointments (eg, drop in, phone, sign up). Contact information typically includes both phone number and e-mail address.<sup>6</sup>
3. *Additional instructor information:* Some faculty members prefer to include additional personal items, such as their teaching philosophy and additional information about their professional backgrounds.<sup>6</sup>

### Purpose of the Course

This section establishes what the learner will be able to know or do upon successful completion of the course.<sup>2-7</sup> A course purpose, goals, and objectives are established in different manners, depending on campus culture and policies. Some campuses allow faculty members to modify course descriptions or goals as they see fit, whereas other campuses require faculty peer review and integration of the course into the program before changes in a course purpose may be approved.

1. *Course purpose:* Include the catalog description as it appears in the most recent course catalog or whatever the official source of course information is for the given college. The purpose should clearly describe the course contents and what the learner may expect.<sup>5,7</sup>
2. *Course goals:* Course goals are broad, general statements that are directly related to programmatic goals. Course goals describe a practical purpose for a course. Typically goals relate to core competencies (eg, CCE competencies). Each course goal should represent a solution to a

well-defined training need. Course goals establish the direction of the course. Goal statements describe a general learning outcome and are typically not measurable. The successful implementation of program goals is accomplished through clear, well-defined course goals stating the overall purpose of the course. Therefore, course goals should be clearly linked to program goals.

3. *Course objectives*: Course objectives are more specific than goals and address achievable, measurable skills, knowledge, and attitudes that students will need to acquire.<sup>5</sup> Course objectives are specific statements that describe, in precise and measurable terms, what the student should be able to do or know once completing the course. These are specific items written for the learner (not the educator) and typically are written with action verbs (eg, using terms as found in Bloom's or other taxonomies). Course objectives translate the goal into specific outcomes for the learner. Objectives help students understand the clear expectations that they will need to meet in order to pass the course and master the competencies that the course training provides. A course objective should be measurable, understandable, and attainable within a given amount of time. An objective should advance the student toward a corresponding course goal. Ideally, objectives should aim at what the student should be able to know or do as a result of the learning experience, as opposed to what the teacher will do or provide. Writing the objectives from the students' point of view helps learners better understand what is expected of them. Course objective may then be broken down into lesson, module, or unit objectives, which are more detailed and aimed at specific learning activities and lesson plans.<sup>5</sup>
4. *Additional course information*: Some faculty members include additional material describing the importance of the course and how the material fits into the larger educational program. This helps the student understand where they are on their path toward their ultimate goal of graduating with a degree.

### The Learning Environment

This section defines the environment in which learning will take place.<sup>2-5</sup> This helps students know what to expect in preparation for the course.

1. *Facilities and teaching methods*: Describe the different types of formats that will be used to

facilitate student learning in the course. In what manner will the student be learning and in what particular environment (eg, open lab small group sessions, video review in the library, Roentgen film review in radiology lab, online listserv discussions, taking notes in a lecture hall, etc.)?

2. *Required texts*: List the required text(s) title, author(s), publisher(s), and edition (e.g, 2nd edition). If textbooks are not required, clearly state so.
3. *Required materials and attire*: What materials must the student obtain for this course (eg, diagnostic kit, speeder board, skin-marking pencil, etc)? Provide information that will assist the student in obtaining materials for the course. List materials that the student is required to access, such as any other required reading (eg, journal articles, etc). List other items, such as videos, slides, or images that they are required to view. List required attire, if needed, such as the need to wear clinic attire or a patient gown.
4. *Provided materials*: What materials will the faculty member provide? Common materials include microscopes, dissection kits, and patient gowns. Be sure to obtain copyright permission for any materials that will be duplicated for the course.<sup>2</sup>
5. *Recommended texts/resources*: Resources that the student will find helpful in learning, but are not required, may be listed here.

### Time Schedule/Course Plan

This establishes what the student may expect at a particular point in time during the course.<sup>2-7</sup> This section helps students prepare in advance for the learning environment<sup>7</sup> and balance their study schedule with the many other courses that they are taking concurrently. The schedule should be as clear as possible and relate to the course competencies, goals, and objectives.

1. *Schedule/course plan*: Provide the course calendar, including what materials are covered and when. Course schedules are typically organized by week and by topic; however, they may be arranged as modules, depending on the course and program.
2. *Lecture and/or lab topics*: For each week or section, describe the topic or theme of the lectures/labs. Topics may be subcategorized by lecture hour or by week. The topic should be descriptive enough that students clearly understand what is

being taught so that they may best prepare for in-class time.

3. *Landmark events, assessments, and due dates:* Include in the schedule all assessments for lecture/lab, due dates for projects, special projects, and presentations. Include reading assignments, including pages/text that students are expected to read prior to class. List any special or additional equipment that students are required to bring to a particular class. Include dates that are holidays or days in which classes are not being held.

### How Learning Will Be Assessed

This section describes the methods of how the learner will be assessed (eg, oral examination, essay examination, OSCE format, etc).<sup>2-6</sup> Students should be made aware of both formative and summative assessments. Evaluation should reflect the listed competencies and course objectives. Ideally the assessment tools will be the most appropriate for the type of assessment and each objective will typically have one or more assessment methods.

1. *Grading procedure:* List and describe all assessments in the course.<sup>5</sup> These may include self-assessments, peer assessments, out-of-class assignments, multiple-choice exams, portfolios, essays, oral reports, group projects, and so forth. Include any atypical evaluations, such as if “pop quizzes” may be expected and what value they may be worth. This section should include all points or values that the course has to offer, as well as how points will either be gained or deducted.
2. *Grading scale and method:* Grades should normally be in compliance with the college policy or catalog (eg, A, B, C, D, F, etc.). State how grades are calculated, such as by norm-referenced or criterion-referenced methods. List any other information relevant to grading, such as if extra credit will or will not be offered.
3. *Missed assessments:* Items may include consequences for missing or being late to an assessment or not participating in or turning in an assessment. Will the score be dropped or will the missed assessment need to be retaken? If students are allowed to make up missed exams/assessments, explain within what time frame students are allowed to make up an exam. What notification will they need to give to the instructor? Is the student responsible for follow-up? Include the

results to the course grade if the student does not follow the instructions in the syllabus.

4. *Grade posting:* Include how often feedback and assessments scores will be given to the student and how this information can be accessed. Will the grades/information be posted on a bulletin board or a website, or will the student need to set up an appointment with the instructor to review the assessment and receive feedback? How often will this information be updated throughout the course?
5. *Results of a failing grade:* Some syllabi include information to advise students how to access student support services or tutoring services. Specific instructions may be included for the student who is not doing well during the course or who fails the course.
6. *Additional student support information:* This section may include other helpful materials relating to assessment, such as assessment measurements and grading rubrics that the student may reference while preparing for examinations.<sup>6,7</sup>

### Technical, Classroom, and College Policy Information

This section clarifies expectations within the learning environment, helps address unforeseen events, and provides information about what is expected from the student.<sup>4,7</sup>

1. *Syllabus amendments:* What if the instructor needs to alter the plan after the syllabus has already been distributed? Some colleges allow amendments to occur by following a certain protocol. It is helpful to have this statement included in the syllabus to inform students that they need to be aware of any changes and how they will be informed of these changes.<sup>4</sup> A general statement may be included, such as, “The information in this syllabus is subject to change in extenuating circumstances. Changes to the course syllabus will be provided to the student in writing within 1 week prior to the event.”
2. *Special needs:* Information specific to the course that relates to students with special learning needs or disabilities, physical handicaps, or religious obligations may be included (eg, students with hearing deficits may need special listening equipment; Muslim women do not expose themselves in public for activities such as physical exam skills courses, etc.). The syllabus may require that students contact the lead instructor within the first

week of the course in order to accommodate any special needs as early as possible.

3. *Last course revision date*: Including the date of last revision of the course or syllabus helps the lead faculty member and other constituents track how often the course is updated and make sure the students have the most up-to-date version of the syllabus.
4. *Student conduct and class/college policies*: List specific policies for the class (eg, cell phone and laptop use in class). Be sure that these policies are supported by the most recent college policy. The instructor may choose to include specific classroom policies in regard to academic honesty (e.g., plagiarism, cheating), attendance, tardiness, class participation, and how attendance affects grades. Statements such as “Students must arrive within the first 15 minutes of class to be counted as present” or “No make-ups will be given for lab periods” make attendance policies clear. Other details relating to health and safety issues may also be included. The syllabus may state that the course follows the college policy. Verify that your classroom policies and regulations are in compliance with your college’s policy manual.

### **Additional Information**

Depending on the course, one may wish to include additional information, such as charts, study suggestions, information on how to access the course website, advice for preparing for assessments/exams, appendices, and so forth.<sup>4,5</sup> Most faculty members agree that syllabi that are too long are not read by most students. However, syllabi that are too brief may not include important and relevant information. Some authors suggest that more details are better than fewer and result in better learning.<sup>4,5</sup> Each course instructor should consider if additional information is best to include in the syllabus or as a separate handout later on in the course.

## CONCLUSION

Providing a well-written syllabus will help the students in the learning environment and will assist faculty members as they teach. This review provides a guide to the variety of sections that may be included in a syllabus. This is not an exhaustive list and some syllabi will typically contain only portions of all the items listed here.

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**Appendix A: Syllabus Checklist** (This form may be downloaded at no cost from: [www.journalchiroed.com](http://www.journalchiroed.com))

Syllabus Checklist	Required or optional?	Present and complete?
<b>General course information:</b>		
1. Name of course and course identifying information		
2. Term/quarter/semester		
3. Location		
4. Units/time dedicated per week		
5. Prerequisites/corequisites		
<b>Instructor information:</b>		
1. Instructors' names		
2. Office hours and contact information		
3. Additional instructor information		
<b>Purpose of the course:</b>		
1. Course purpose		
2. Course goals		
3. Course objectives		
4. Additional course information		
<b>The learning environment:</b>		
1. Facilities and teaching methods		
2. Required texts		
3. Required materials and attire		
4. Provided materials		
5. Recommended texts		
<b>Time schedule/course plan:</b>		
1. Schedule/course plan		
2. Lecture and/or lab topics		
3. Landmark events, assessments, and due dates		
<b>How learning will be assessed:</b>		
1. Grading procedure		
2. Grading scale and method		
3. Missed assessments		
4. Grade posting		
5. Results of a failing grade		
6. Additional student support information		
<b>Technical, classroom, and college policy information:</b>		
1. Syllabus amendments		
2. Special needs		
3. Last course revision date		
4. Student conduct and class/college policies		
<b>Additional information:</b>		