

ABSTRACT

Title: A Well Designed Syllabus is a Necessity for a Successful Semester.

Instructors should utilize their syllabus as a proactive teaching tool. A well-designed syllabus can help instructors and students enjoy a more productive semester. It can also help to minimize frustration for students and, more importantly, for instructors. A well-designed syllabus will focus the instructor's efforts on day-to-day teaching instead of day-to-day scheduling. It will also assist the students plan their semester more efficiently and effectively. Instructors can incorporate important personal preferences in their syllabus that will help them minimize the time needed to hear student's excuses for non-performance.

A WELL DESIGNED SYLLABUS IS A NECESSITY FOR A SUCCESSFUL SEMESTER.

Even though I have been teaching accounting at the university level for a few years, I still remember the nervous feeling of facing a classroom full of students for the first time. I have developed my own teaching style over the years. I know that what works for me might not work for somebody else, but my advice to new instructors is to have a syllabus ready to hand out on the first day of class. I believe that being proactive is the key to a successful semester and a thoughtfully designed syllabus can be a very useful tool. The class syllabus can be used as a proactive tool that will help minimize arguments from the students. The first class meeting is the key to set the tone for the rest of the semester.

Advance planning is necessary if a course is being taught for the first time. The syllabus will only need fine tuning the second time and each time thereafter that the particular course is taught. The syllabus should contain the basic information that students need such as the name of the instructor, how to get in touch with the instructor by using e-mail or calling the instructor's office number, office hours, the objectives of the course, textbook and other material required, and how the students will be graded. It is important that the office hours listed on the syllabus be kept as consistently as possible. This seems like a minor issue, but it reduces the students' stress level to know that their

instructor will be available at definite times. It must also be stressed to the students that their e-mails and voice-mails will be answered in a timely manner. It should be emphasized here that some thought needs to go into the office hours set. The office hours should last long enough to allow for interaction with the students when they do come by, and the office hours should be scheduled at times that are accessible to the average student. If the majority of the student population consists of day time workers, then the instructor would need some office hours in the evening when the student is able to seek help. If the majority of the student population consists of full time students without job responsibilities, then some office hours, if not most of them, should be during the day when the students are on campus.

In addition to the routine information, the syllabus should list the date of every class meeting and the objectives for that particular day. Every class meeting needs to be planned before the class meets for the first time. I realize that this task is easier said than done. The undergraduate classes are the least difficult to plan, and, of course, the master level classes are more difficult to plan. Regardless of difficulty, it is imperative that each class meeting should be planned. The result of this effort is that the instructor can now concentrate on teaching as opposed to planning each class meeting. Another result of planning each class is that students know what is expected from week to week and they can in turn plan more efficiently. Detailed planning of each class meeting has helped me minimize the time needed to listen to the thousand excuses that students have for missing assignments. I make it very clear at the beginning of the semester, in the first class meeting, that the test dates are set and will not be changed. There are always unforeseen

events that might require a change in the amount of material covered, or that might require changes in the homework assignments. I tell the students that the possibility exists that some changes might be needed, but the test dates will not be changed. I make it a point that they understand this so that they can schedule time off from work or so that they try not to have scheduled surgery on test dates. I do make allowances for emergencies. If an emergency occurs, then the student must be prepared to document it so that the student may be allowed to take the exam at a later date. My policy is that the student will take the exam missed on the day of the final exam along with the final exam. If a school event required one or more students to miss the test, then I do allow for a make up exam date at my convenience and as close as possible to the actual test date. This policy is clearly delineated in the syllabus. This practice has allowed me to avoid long discussions with students. I remember the time when a student called me three hours before exam time and said she needed to take her daughter to the doctor and could she take the exam later. I referred her to the syllabus and told her that she could take that particular exam along with the final exam at the end of the semester. Needless to say, she was present for the regularly scheduled test time.

Another time-consuming request of students is extra points and the ability to make up missed work. The syllabus should include built-in extra points. The way I accomplish this is by giving students a 10% discount on homework and in-class points. Homework points and in-class points are only awarded if the student is present during the class period when the assignments are due. What this means is that the student can miss up to 10% of the homework and in-class points and he or she will still receive full credit.

I tell students that I know we are all busy and this policy allows them to miss some homework assignments and some class meetings without dire consequences for them, as for me, I avoid listening to inane excuses from the students. When the 10% discount policy is discussed during the first class meeting the students are informed that 100% submission of homework and in-class assignments means extra points for them. The points added to the final grade through this policy add up to about 2% of the final grade. This is not much but the students do not realize this and they really try to earn the extra points by doing their homework and attending class. I believe that getting the students to show up for class is half the battle. Informing the students of this policy on the very first day allows them to make choices. The responsibility is shifted to them. They decide what grade they want to work for and I do not have to hear the often-asked question “can I do something to get some extra points?” The syllabus should explicitly state that this is the only opportunity to earn extra points.

An instructor can use the syllabus to share with students the instructor’s pet peeves and to minimize aggravation for the instructor. My main pet peeve is that students not wear hats that cover their eyes. I have incorporated this preference of mine into the syllabus. I inform the students that I prefer that no hats be worn during class, and that absolutely no hats are allowed during exams. If the student is having a ‘bad hair day’ (and who hasn’t, occasionally) I allow them to turn the hat around so that their eyes are not covered. I scan the students’ faces as I lecture to determine whether the topic for that day is being understood or not. It is difficult to do this when the student’s eyes and face are shadowed by a hat’s bill. I explain this reasoning to the students on the first class

meeting. The reason some students wear hats that covered their eyes is to be able to take a nap during class. I tell the students that I realize this is the case and if they need to take a nap they might as well enjoy it, to go right ahead and put their heads down. I just ask them not to snore. I am actually interested in the students who want to learn, so a little catnap does not bother me. It bothers me if I am not sure whether the information I am sharing with the students is being understood or not.

Some professors and instructors become very upset when students are tardy. If this is you, then your pet peeve should be prominently stated in the syllabus. The students must be told what 'tardy' means to the instructor. Is the student tardy if he or she walks into the classroom one minute late or five minutes late? The syllabus can also spell what the consequences of this behavior are. Will the instructor close and lock the door? Will roll be taken during the first few minutes of class? The students cannot argue their way out of a situation that has been discussed and is written on the syllabus that was handed to students on the first class meeting.

I like to view the syllabus as a contract. I stipulate the rules of the game and consequences to certain behaviors. The students accept this contract by remaining enrolled in the class. This is the first choice that they make. The syllabus allows them to make choices throughout the semester. They choose to attend class or not. They choose to do homework or not. They choose whether to study or not. And they choose whether to allow me to instruct them or not. A well-designed syllabus helps me minimize aggravation from students who think they can talk their way to graduation. This also

reduces the workload and unnecessary time required to spend with these students. I have found that the students who truly want to learn appreciate knowing the rules and expectations in advance. The students who are not serious about their career usually end up dropping shortly after the semester starts. I firmly believe that using the syllabus as a proactive tool has rewarded me with dedicated students that make teaching a joy.