Syllabus Checklist: Essential and Recommended Content

1. Information from the official schedule of classes

Since students may acquire a syllabus through a variety of means or be unable to attend the first class session, include the essential information students need to locate and enroll in the course and class section.

Essential
- ☐ Course number and title.
- ☐ Semester and year.
- ☐ Meeting dates, times, and places.
- ☐ Schedule number unless suppressed in the official schedule of classes.

Recommended
- ☐ Special information on prerequisites, enrollment, and crashing policies.

2. Explicit, public description of the course

University policy requires that a syllabus describe a course's purpose and scope. Include the standard catalog description of the course syllabi as well as an amplified description reflecting the way the particular course offering is "operationalized." Syllabi may be used routinely to determine course equivalency in transfer situations, to resolve grievance cases, and for other purposes involving administration and advisement.

Essential
- ☐ Description from the official course catalog.
- ☐ Description of scope and purpose of course.

3. Contact with instructor(s)

Policies and procedures for contacting instructors vary widely. At a minimum, university policy requires that faculty "shall hold regular office hours and shall post a schedule for those hours."

Essential
- ☐ Basic contact information.

Recommended
- ☐ Multiple points of contact (e.g., available by phone, in person, by email).
- ☐ Variety of office hours convenient to students.
- ☐ Rules and/or policies regarding contact (when and about what students may contact the instructor via phone, email, etc.).

4. Student Learning Outcome Statements

University policies require that syllabi describe expected student learning outcomes. Almost all accrediting bodies now consider student learning outcomes and how they are assessed to be major issues in periodic reviews of institutional effectiveness. Accreditation standards have also shifted to emphasize the importance of outcomes that reflect the ability of students to actively analyze, synthesize, or evaluate rather than simply recall or comprehend information (i.e., more focus on broad competencies of transformation and less on storage and recall of topical content).

For more on how to formulate and write student learning outcome statements, see page 62 in this guide and go to http://dus.sdsu.edu/assessment/

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4. Student Learning Outcome Statements (continued)

Essential

☐ 5-10 student learning outcome statements for the course as a whole, consistent with the purpose and scope of the course.

☐ Expected learning outcomes stated as observable/measurable capabilities, capacities, or performance—not merely
—understand
—know
—demonstrate knowledge of
—be familiar with

☐ Student learning outcome statements are consistent with grading policies and procedures.

Recommended

☐ Outcomes emphasize dynamic student capabilities rather than mere recall or comprehension of content topics. They often employ "active verbs" to describe how students will demonstrate their capacities:
- analyze
- assess
- compare
- create
- critique
- depict
- elucidate
- implement
- predict
- solve

☐ Outcomes organized (e.g., listed, themed, grouped, or classified).

☐ Supplementary or more detailed learning outcomes are used to clarify the purpose or intent of specific assignments or activities.

5. Course activity sequences

A carefully designed and written description of course activities and assignments will help students stay on track and avoid confusion. Instructors often find that building in a few "buffer" sessions (not necessarily labeled as such) allows them to make adjustments in activities or assignments without the confusion attendant in re-issuing a course schedule.

Essential

☐ Due dates for major assignments and exams and method for submitting assignments.

Recommended

☐ Agenda for each class period, including topics, activities, and, if possible, expected learning outcomes.

☐ Major milestones for intermediate work products and dates identified or highlighted (e.g., drafts, practice exams, rehearsals, informal meetings).

6. Assessment and grading

No other aspect of syllabus content results in more confusion and disputes than grading. Lack of clarity about the nature and scope of exams often leads to misunderstandings as well. No exam can assess every possible topic or problem so that it is widely understood by students and instructors alike that exams will in some way sample the domain of the course.

However, such sampling should not reduce expectations about exams to mere guessing games that disempower students and can lead to fatalism and learned helplessness. Assist students to prepare for exams by reviewing student learning outcomes statements and by providing example and/or practice items consistent with both the outcomes statements and the actual exam items.

One of the most important strategies for developing well-rounded students and for accommodating diverse students' experiences and abilities is to vary assignments and assessment methods. Overuse of any one particular modality or measure of competence—such as formal exams or academic papers—can deny students the opportunity to demonstrate their competencies in other ways.

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6. Assessment and grading (continued)

Essential

☐ Grading methods consistent with stated student learning outcomes.

☐ Standards, logistics, timelines, and other requirements for students regarding submittals.

☐ Amount of assessment/grading appropriate to scope/purpose of course.

Recommended

☐ Explicit criteria for grading student work products issued early enough for students to use them as guidelines for preparation or study.

☐ Assignments varied in scope and emphasis (e.g., size and grade-weighting).

☐ Diverse modalities of assessment (e.g., journal, outline, essay, report, charts, tables, photo/audio/video).

☐ Varied assessment/grading methods (e.g., timed test, take home exam, oral performance, essay, multiple-choice).

☐ Methods used in major assessments such as exams are consistent with previous opportunities for practice and feedback.

7. Overview of venues, environments, and media to be employed

Student expectations regarding venues for course communications and activity are rapidly shifting towards a nearly universal assumption that basic course information and materials will be available online, particularly for larger courses. SDSU automatically creates a BlackBoard course site for every course and populates it with student enrollment data, although it does not require that such sites be activated by the instructor. For more information, go to http://blackboard.sdsu.edu

Faculty should check with your department administrative coordinator regarding requirements and options for notifying students in footnotes of the official schedule of classes regarding special scheduling or equipment requirements.

Essential

☐ Description of where and how materials, resources and environments provided by the university to students can be accessed/ obtained.

☐ Policies and procedures or how these can be accessed.

Recommended

☐ Whether and how course will employ BlackBoard, the university's course management system.

☐ Description of activities and assignments, differentiates between team-group assignments and individual work.

8. Materials and resources to be obtained by students

Syllabi should identify specialized equipment and tools required of students as well as conventional print materials.

Aztec Shops offers extensive services to assist faculty to order textbooks and customized materials. See https://www2.aztecshops.com/faculty.aspx

The library summarizes online support for faculty at http://infodome.sdsu.edu/faculty/faculty.shtml

Faculty should check with your department administrative coordinator regarding requirements and options for notifying students in footnotes of the schedule of classes regarding special scheduling requirements.

Essential

☐ Description, approximate prices, and how to obtain.

☐ Purpose and use (e.g., will a book be read intensively or used as occassional reference).

Recommended

☐ Materials and resource descriptions well organized (e.g., by type, purpose, topic, theme).

☐ Additional descriptions of optional resources—conceptual or practical—as appropriate.

9. General appearance, readability, and usability of syllabus (additional criteria apply to Web sites)

The appearance and organization of a syllabus may influence student perceptions of the organization of the course's content and activities—and the organization and competence of the instructor as well.

Essential

☐ Readable fonts and font size.

☐ Headings, (and for longer syllabi, subheads) and page numbers.

☐ Adequate margin space for student notes.

Recommended

☐ Effective use of tables, lists, numbering, and other indexing devices to enhance reference to particular elements during discussions or other course-related communication.

☐ Elements requiring repeated access by students (such as dates and assignments) are organized concisely for ready access.

☐ Adequate white space throughout syllabus.

☐ Consistent formatting.

Additional Recommended Syllabus Content

10. Rationale for sequence of topics and assignments

Students often ask (or think about asking) for more guidance in understanding how class assignments and activities fit into larger themes related to the course's scope and purpose. Consider including in the syllabus flags and pointers that remind students of the connections between individual activities and larger themes and goals of the course. Then review and expand upon these at appropriate times during the semester.

☐ Overview explains how topics and assignments fit into the learning arc of the semester.

☐ Elements of the overview are linked to or related to projects and assignments.

☐ Specific activities and assignments are linked to or related to major course learning outcomes.

11. Support for general academic development and skills training

Consider using the syllabus as a device for orienting students to study strategies or patterns appropriate to the scope and purpose of the course. Many younger students have learned in high school to expect that "homework" is primarily designed to "follow-up" on themes introduced during a class session whereas college courses often benefit from homework preparatory to class sessions.

☐ Strategies for study, preparation, and engagement.

☐ Time management skills.

☐ Pointers to workshops or special training for skill, development related to course.

☐ Implicit development of general academic skills not identified in student learning outcome statements.

12. Accommodations for students with disabilities

University policy requires that faculty cooperate with Student Disability Services in providing authorized accommodations for eligible students.

Although not required by official policy, syllabi should include language that encourages eligible students to identify themselves to the instructor. For more information on faculty responsibilities, see http://www.sa.sdsu. edu/sds/sds-main/facstaff.html

☐ Explicit statement indicating respect for and willingness to accommodate disabilities and protect student's confidentiality regarding disability issues.

☐ Indicates the appropriate means by which an eligible student can confer with the instructor on a confidential basis or in a private setting.

13. Orient students to engage with activities and assignments

Although abbreviated syllabi often stick to the bare essentials, an amplified syllabus can reinforce connections and meaning for students. Use the syllabus to indicate ways in which the course design builds on students' prior knowledge and experience. Help students to understand the benefits of the new capabilities they will develop whether these benefits are psychic, or entirely practical.

☐ Build on students' prior experience and knowledge.

☐ Explain benefits or value (of assignments and learning outcomes).

☐ Relate learning to situations (real world or otherwise) that provide context and meaning.

☐ Structure social organization (e.g., individual, group-team, community forum, or discussion).

☐ Diverse modalities of deliverables (e.g., journal, outline, essay, report, charts, tables, photo/audio/video).

☐ Interactive (require more than mere attendance or passive reception of content).

14. Student privacy and intellectual property

Federal Law (FERPA) imposes important obligations on instructors to ensure the confidentiality of student grades and other evaluation of student work. For example, instructors may not distribute or post grades in a way that allows anyone other than the individual student to access them. In addition, university policy grants to students intellectual property rights to work products they create as part of a course unless they are formally notified otherwise. Therefore, syllabi should notify students of special provisions regarding use or distribution of their work.

☐ Policies and procedures assure privacy of student grades and feedback on individual assignments or ensure that students have granted written waivers.

☐ Students notified at the time of an assignment if copies of students work will be retained beyond the end of the semester and/or used as examples for future students or the wider public.

15. Syllabus as social "contract" or agreement regarding expected student behavior, performance, and deportment

Although university policy does not accord syllabi the status of formal legal contracts, a course syllabus provides an excellent opportunity for instructors to clarify the obligations and responsibilities of the members of the course "learning community."

☐ Description/explanation of student and faculty responsibilities for contributing to a successful learning climate.

☐ Other policies regarding expectations—including consequences for behaviors such as academic dishonesty, uncivil, or disruptive behavior.

☐ Description of procedures and policies for addressing student or instructor concerns.