THE COURSE PACKAGE: THE SYLLABUS

A syllabus is a snapshot of our “vision” of the educational experiences that we wish to share with our students through the activities in a course. When done well, it communicates a whole variety of information about the course activities, our teaching philosophy and style, and our expectations. Judith Grunert, in her book called *The Course Syllabus: A Learning Centered Approach*, provides a checklist of the items that she has found most useful in developing a syllabus, but she suggests that what we select from the list is determined by our student needs, course type, and the rationale for the course. They include: Title page, table of contents, instructor information, letter to the student, purpose of the course, course description, course and unit objectives, resources, readings, course calendar, course requirements, evaluation, grading procedures, how to use the syllabus, how to study for this course, content information, learning tool.

According to the Teaching Center staff at Penn. State, our syllabus might be the most important document we create for our class. It is a legally binding agreement between the faculty member and the students as to how the class will proceed. Equally important, a well-written syllabus communicates our vision of what the class will be like, what the students will do and learn, and what students can expect of us. It helps students succeed in our class by guiding their learning in accordance with our expectations. Therefore, this document merits our time, effort, and thought.

Although, syllabi will vary from course to course and from discipline to discipline, the elements listed below should probably be included in all syllabi:

**Course information.** At a minimum this includes the course title, code number, number of credits, day(s) and time(s) when the class meets, the location of the class, and a brief description of the nature of the course which corresponds to the University catalogue. We might wish to personalize and embellish the catalogue description. This is a good place to tell students about the special emphases we will bring to the course and to answer the important question "Why would a student want to take this course?"

**Personal information.** Our name, office location, office hours, and office phone must be included. We might wish to include other information such as our e-mail address, fax number, home phone number with any restrictions on use (e.g., "No calls after 10 p.m."), and whether or not we are willing to meet with students outside of scheduled office hours.

**Materials required.** Include the complete citations for required textbooks and for recommended books as well. If we have materials at a copy center on campus, give the location of the copy center and the price of the packet. List any additional equipment, materials, or supplies they will need (e.g., floppy disk, specific type of notebook, calculator) and suggest where they might be purchased. Be clear about which books and/or materials are required and which are optional. We might wish to tell the students why these books/materials have been chosen and how we expect them to use them (e.g., reference only).
Course goals and objectives. Clarify for students what we intend for them to accomplish in our course. Do we want students to memorize certain information? Become proficient problem solvers? obtain specific skills? Improve their communication skills? Telling students what we expect them to learn and be able to do by the end of the course will help students know how to study for the course. If there are prerequisites for this course, be sure to state what they should already know and be able to do so they can assess their readiness for the course.

Course expectations. Providing students with a clear understanding of their role in the classroom can prevent later problems and misunderstandings. What approaches will we be using in the class (lecture? discussion? group work?) and why have we chosen these approaches? Are students expected to attend all class sessions? Will this be a part of the grade? Are they expected to participate actively in class? If so, what do we consider "active" participation? Is it important that all assignments are handed in on time? What will happen if they aren't? Is it important to keep up the readings on a daily basis or is it only necessary to complete the readings before the exam?

These course expectations are strengthened by adding rationales. For example, "Because our class activities are dependent on the reading in the text, you are expected to read each chapter before the topic is discussed in class." Although some expectations might seem self-evident-"Since I ask them if they have any questions on the readings, they know I expect them to ask questions when something isn't clear," or "If I hold small group discussions, it's obvious that I expect everyone to participate"- students are more likely to meet our expectations when they are explicitly stated. We might also include some information about what they can expect from us. One instructor at the University divides this section of her syllabus into three parts, "Student Responsibilities", "Instructor Responsibilities" and Collective Responsibilities".

Course calendar. This is our plan for the course and should include the dates for assigned course topics, readings, projects, exam, etc. Any changes to the calendar should be made in writing. To maintain some flexibility, we may wish to indicate to students that this is a tentative schedule and subject to change, but assure the students that they will receive appropriate notification of any changes. We may wish to explain why we have chosen to organize the class the way we have. This is particularly relevant if the order in which we will be covering topics in class deviates from the order in which they are presented by the text.

Course grading. This section is the one that creates the most anxiety for students and, therefore, it is especially important that the information be complete. Indicate what percentage of the course grade will be assigned to each course activity (examinations, reports, homework, class participation, journal, etc.). Knowing the relative importance of the requirements at the beginning of a course helps students budget their time. In this packet, there is a separate file on grades and grading systems that provides some ideas that might be useful in thinking about this aspect of course development.

Whenever possible, criteria for evaluation should also be included. What kind of exams will be given? Will the exams test memory? understanding? ability to apply knowledge in a new context? Or to present evidence logically? Are the mechanics of writing included in the grading for papers and essay tests? Is there a penalty for late
work? Is it necessary for students to show their work in problem solving? Is credit given for a sound approach even if the answer is wrong? This section can be especially effective in guiding student learning when, grading criteria are accompanied by suggestions for how they might best prepare for exams or approach assignments.

**Recommended Statements.** It is recommended that we include the following statement in each syllabus:

"It is University policy to provide, on a flexible and individualized basis, reasonable accommodations to students who have disabilities that may affect their ability to participate in course activities or to meet course requirements. Students with disabilities are encouraged to contact their instructors [or TAs, etc.] early in the semester to discuss their individual needs for accommodations."

**Miscellaneous.** Other items often included in a syllabus include:

- A statement regarding where students might obtain help if they are struggling with the course requirements, e.g., information about the Writing Resource Center, University Learning Center or special tutoring provided by the department.

- A section on expected student conduct (sometimes entitled Class Atmosphere). This is especially appropriate in classes where controversial issues are discussed. The statement might include certain ground rules concerning how students are expected to treat each other, rules for class discussion, and general classroom “etiquette” (this may range from mobile phone use to policies on lateness). There is also a file in this packet that provides some ideas about how to deal with “Problem Students”.

- A statement regarding academic misconduct. The University policy statement on academic misconduct can be found on [http://www.legal.uncc.edu/policies/ps-105.html](http://www.legal.uncc.edu/policies/ps-105.html). Guidelines to assist faculty in understanding the rights and responsibilities associated with the policy can be found at [http://www.legal.uncc.edu/policies/ps-105.html#VI](http://www.legal.uncc.edu/policies/ps-105.html#VI). In classes where students will be writing papers it is advisable to include a definition of plagiarism in this section.

- A grade recording sheet on which students can keep a running record of their grades in the course.

**Reviewing the syllabus.** Because it is such an important document, ask a colleague or friend, or a TA to read the syllabus and ask them the following questions:
1. Has any essential information been omitted?
2. What questions did you have after reading this syllabus?
3. Based on this syllabus, describe what you think the class will be like.
4. What does the syllabus tell you about how I view my role in the class?
5. What other information can I give students to help them succeed in this class?