APPENDIX
THE SYLLABUS: A TOOL THAT SHAPES STUDENTS' ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES

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For some faculty members, the syllabus is a guide that outlines what learners should expect in a course and clarifies what is expected of them. For students, the syllabus helps them figure out what they need to do to ensure they will pass the course. However, in many ways the syllabus conveys so much more than rules and course expectations and as such, serves a larger purpose that can shape the students' academic experiences and foster their success. In traditional syllabi that focus on rules and course expectations, instructors outline basic course requirements. However, with well-crafted syllabi, faculty design learning experiences that positively shape and alter how students perceive their instructors and seek assistance for academic challenges.

In this resource, we outline the traditional purpose of the syllabus, use findings from empirical and peer-reviewed articles to answer questions that are often asked about syllabi, and offer examples of language for syllabi that support or hinder learners' experiences.

THE STANDARD PURPOSE OF THE SYLLABUS

For students:
- Provides learners with the expectations and required components of a course (Harnish & Bridges, 2011).
- Clarifies course expectations and goals along with the grading system used to assess learners' performance (Canada, 2013; Dowd & Bensimon, 2015; Slattery & Carlson, 2005).
- Sets the classroom's tone and motivates learners to set goals that are high, yet achievable (Slattery et al., 2005).

For instructors:
- Welcomes students to the class (Habanek, 2005).

- Serves as a planning tool that helps organize the work that students must complete during a course (Calhoon & Becker, 1995; Slattery et al., 2005).
- Helps faculty meet the course goals during the semester (Calhoon et al., 1995; Slattery et al., 2005).

For both:
- Often viewed as a contract between students and faculty, syllabi inform students about what to expect in a course and outline how they should interact with faculty (Calhoon et al., 1995; Dowd et al, 2015; Sulik & Keyes, 2014; Habanek, 2005).

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE SYLLABUS: ANSWERS FROM PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLES AND EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

Students usually receive the course syllabus on the first day of class, however with the availability of online courses and electronic distribution of syllabi prior to the first day of class, this first point of contact between students and faculty may occur before the two meet face-to-face. Therefore, how the syllabus is written informs learners' decisions to complete or withdraw from a course (Smith & Razzouk, 1993), shapes the way they view the course and interact with faculty (Habanek, 2005; Harnish et al., 2011), and informs their decisions to seek assistance when academic difficulties arise (Perrine, Lisle, & Tucker, 1995).

Findings from a review of studies and articles, focused on syllabi and their influence on learners' academic experiences, answer four questions that are often asked about course syllabi:
- Do students use the syllabus beyond the first day of class?
- How can the language in the syllabus affect students?
- In what ways can syllabi provide help when students have academic difficulty?
- Why are the content and style of syllabi important, particularly for students of color?

Do Students Use the Syllabus Beyond the First Day of Class?

- Faculty perceive that students do not use the course syllabus beyond the early weeks of class or ignore it altogether however, this perception is not accurate (Calhoon & Becker, 2008).

- While students often focus on certain aspects of the syllabus over others (e.g., test or quiz dates and grading policies versus academic dishonesty policies and textbook information) (Becker & Calhoon, 1999; Marcis & Carr, 2003, 2004), they keep and refer to course syllabi periodically during the semester (Calhoon et al., 2008).

- Concerns about students' use of course syllabi can be addressed by referring to syllabus policies as needed (e.g., directing students to the document one week prior to an assignment due date) (Calhoon et al., 2008).

How can the Language in the Syllabus Affect Students?

- Unlike an instructor's class comments that may or may not 'stick' with learners, the syllabus is a physical document that students can access over the course of the semester.   Therefore, it is important that faculty carefully choose language that encourage and motivate students.

- Language in syllabi often shape students' first impressions of instructors and help learners determine faculty's attitude toward teaching and learning (Harnish et al., 2011).

- When students believe language in the syllabus is friendly, they view instructors as warm and approachable and believe they are highly motivated to teach (Harnish et al., 2011).

- Syllabus tone sets the mood for the class and can range from pleasant and welcoming to formal and disciplinary or even condescending and demeaning (Slattery et al., 2014).

- Language that is pleasant and welcoming can:
    - encourage and motivate learners; this is particularly important in courses where students face academic difficulty.

- help readers recall information more easily than when they believe the language is unfriendly or punitive (Littlefield, 1991 as cited in Slattery et al., 2005).

- Harsh language in the syllabus can be intimidating and discouraging for some students (Ishiyama & Hartlaub, 2002; Singham, 2005) and as such, hinders their success.

In What Ways Can Syllabi Provide Help When Students have Academic Difficulty?

- When students know assistance is available to address their academic struggles, their concerns and anxiety about their difficulties are alleviated (Slattery et al., 2005).

- Explicit statements in syllabi that invite students to resolve academic struggles by speaking with faculty after class hours, encourage learners to seek support for trouble with coursework and are more effective than verbal offers of assistance from instructors (Perrine et al., 1995).

- When syllabi contain punitive language, students are less inclined to approach an instructor for academic assistance (Ishiyama et al., 2002).

Why are the Content and Style of Syllabi Important, Particularly for Students of Color?

- Socio-historical discrimination of Blacks and Latinos in education, resulted in their unjust exclusion from educational opportunities (e.g., Ledesma & Fránquiz, 2015; Martin, 2000; Moses & Cobb, 2001). As college access increases for these students (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Lewis & Middleton, 2011; Solorzano, Acevedo-Gil, & Santos, 2015), they continue to learn the social mores in higher education settings.

- These students and other non-traditional college students (Rendon, 1994) benefit from "full-disclosure of the terms of success" (Collins, 1997[1], p. 2). In this process, faculty demystify the academy's

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[1] Terry Collins (1997), a first-generation college student, is a retired professor from the University of Minnesota.

ambiguous and confusing processes, give students access to the language of the institution, and improve their chances for success (Collins, 1997).

- o Examples of items that are usually unclear in syllabi: Details about effective work and study habits, definitions of terms such as 'office hours, and locations of important places, such as the bookstore and tutoring center.

- Content and style choices tell students whether or not instructors expect them to be successful and clarify how they can achieve this success (Collins, 1997; Slattery et al., 2005).

- Syllabi styles and practices that are effective and ineffective include:
  - o Effective
    - Being warm and welcoming by including diversity-focused statements that invite students to interact with faculty (Slattery et al., 2005).
    - Affirming students' beliefs that instructors expect them to succeed (Dowd et al., 2015; Slattery et al., 2005).

  - o Less effective (Rubin, 1985)
    - 'listers': specify the books and chapters that students must read each week with no rationale about why they were selected.
    - 'scolders': provide brief course content and extensive details about the different types of infractions that can result in loss of points and other forms of punishment.
    - Students perceive the less effective styles and practices as mistrustful; they prompt learners to believe that the instructor does not expect them to succeed (Collins, 1997).

EXAMPLES OF WELCOMING AND UNWELCOMING SYLLABUS LANGUAGE

Amidst the discussions about syllabi that are welcoming or effective and unwelcoming and less effective, we thought it would be useful to include examples of both types to serve as a guide during the process of redesigning course syllabi.

	Welcoming	Unwelcoming
Office Hours	Office Hours: 233 Jones Hall MWF 10:00-10:50 AM; TR 9:30-10:30 AM jsmith@hotmail.com I welcome you to contact me outside of class and student hours. You may email me, call my office, or contact the department and leave a message.	Office Hours: 233 Jones Hall MWF 10:00-10:50 AM; TR 9:30-10:30 AM jsmith@hotmail.com If you need to contact me outside of office hours, you may email me, call my office, or contact the department and leave a message.
Course Goals	Some of the specific skills I hope you will obtain in this course are listed below. Being a critical consumer of information about mental processes and behavior is important; all of these activities will help you become one, and it is my hope that you will use the skills in your daily life.	Some of the specific skills you should obtain in this course are listed below. Because you are not yet a critical consumer of information about mental processes and behavior, all of these activities will help you become one, and if you are motivated enough, use the skills in your daily life.
Attendance	You should attend every class but extenuating circumstances arise that can make this difficult. If you cannot attend a class, please let me know. If circumstances make you miss more than 3 classes during the semester, you may be overextended. I ask that you come see me to discuss your options.	I expect you to attend every class. If you cannot attend a class, please let me know. If circumstances make you miss more than 3 classes during the semester, I will drop you from the class roster in accordance with the college's attendance policy.
Class Participation	All of us in the class, you, me, your peers, have a responsibility to create an environment in which we can all learn from each other. I expect everyone to participate in class so that we can all benefit from the insights and experiences that each person brings.	Come prepared to actively participate in this course. This is the best way to engage you in learning the material (and it makes the lectures more interesting).
Adapted from Harnish et al. (2011)		

CONCLUSION

The course syllabus can be perceived solely as a means for sharing information about the course and rules for academic success. However, syllabi are an important form of communication with students that foster or impede their academic progress and success. As we consider practices that can be used to improve educational outcomes, particularly for students of color, effective redesign of the syllabus is one action that can be considered. With this physical document, we can shape the ways students view their instructors, the course and its material, their actions when they face academic difficulties, and overall, their course experience.

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