



ACE IT!

Quality Enhancement Plan: The ACES Project
The Newsletter for Lamar's Quality Enhancement Plan:
Active & Collaborative Engagement for Students

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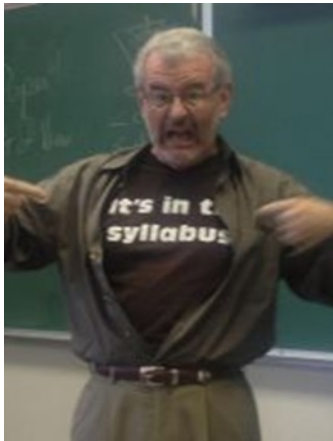
The Learning-Centered Syllabus

by Melissa Hudler

The previous issues of *ACE It!* have provided you with a variety of information relevant to active and collaborative learning. This issue, however, is dedicated to a single and often overlooked aspect: *The Course Syllabus*

I capitalize and emphasize it because the role of this document in your classes warrants such emphasis, as it should not only clarify policies and requirements but should also set the tone for, establish the value of, and encourage student engagement in your classes. To be sure, there is a difference between a syllabus and a *Syllabus*.

A traditional syllabus tends to provide just the most basic information about the course, is policy-centered, and is thus often neglected. Such a syllabus seems to exist only to provide the professor with a reference point for his or her oft-repeated mantra, "It's in the syllabus!" We know there's more value to it than that, but the students don't—until they've attempted to turn in an assignment late or missed one too many classes. We can tell them time and time again that the answers to their questions are "in the syllabus," but the fact is that we say this way too often.



Aren't you tired of saying it? Aren't you weary of dealing with issues that are the direct result of an ignored syllabus? (Say "yes.") Yes, you say? Then you're ready to retreat from the battle and win the war.

Now, I feel, as I'm sure you do, that being aware of course policies is the students' responsibility—that it's fully their responsibility to read the documents we give them. But I'm a bit battle-worn. Aren't you?

So, how do we write a course document that students will actually read—one that doesn't encourage a you've-seen-one-you've-seen-them-all response? How do we compose a syllabus that doesn't beg the subtitle, "50 Ways to Fail This Class"? How do we create a syllabus that welcomes our students into our classes and invites them into the diverse and valuable learning experiences we've created for them? Indeed, how do we transform our syllabus into a *Syllabus*?

This is the question this year's ACES Fellows had the opportunity to address. By reflecting on their teaching and approaching it as an act of scholarship, the members of Cohort 5 have crafted engaging, pedagogically-aware, and learning-centered syllabi. From simple strategies like using first- and second-person, to the more involved work of developing teaching philosophies and course purpose and value statements, each Fellow has achieved a course syllabus that offers their students an introduction to themselves *as teachers* and an inviting entry into the academic landscape to be explored in their classes. In short, they have achieved a *Syllabus*.

On the following pages, you'll read about how some of the members of ACES Cohort 5 accomplished their syllabi make-overs and what they learned from the experience. You can view their syllabi by following the links provided on pgs. 2 and 3 or by visiting the QEP webpage: <http://www.lamar.edu/qep/aces-fellows/index.html>.

ACES FELLOWS

at work

The process of developing a learning-centered syllabus begins with the understanding that a syllabus should offer more than instructor and course information, requirements, and policies. It begins with the recognition that the syllabus should set a student-centered tone for the course and function as an introduction to your class and to you as an educator and as a tool for learning and student success. Adding elements that are not traditionally found in a syllabus will help you achieve a learning-centered syllabus:



Katt Blackwell-Starnes:

ACES helped me create a syllabus that, I think, conveys both my approachability and student responsibility much better than previous iterations. The traditional syllabus always feels clunky and loaded with strict policies that I find can intimidate students. Through the ACES workshops, I had the opportunity to design the syllabus in a format that invites students to read and contains wording that emphasizes specific responsibilities students have in the course. Design may seem a superficial change, but with this change I found the flexibility to speak directly to the individual student reading the syllabus rather than using the distant third person to address a much broader, more vague collection of students. I hope this leads to better student engagement. Including my teaching philosophy makes me feel the syllabus is much more a contract with the student: the philosophy articulates specifically what I will do to help students succeed, while the deadlines and policies now articulate more clearly what they must do to maintain the contract.

<http://www.lamar.edu/gep/files/documents/K.Blackwell-Starnes.ENGL1302.pdf>

1. Teaching philosophy
2. Purpose and value of the course . . .
 - A. department and/or university curriculum
 - B. students' academic, personal, and/or future professional growth
3. Value of your course policies to . . .
 - A. student learning
 - B. the learning environment
4. Students' responsibilities to the course, their learning, and their peers
5. Your responsibilities to the course and to your students
6. Advice on how to succeed in the course, including university resources



Bianca Easterly:

The process of creating a learning-centered syllabus encouraged me to think more intently about what I really want students to learn about American government. Prior to this experience, I thought I needed to do exactly what everyone else is doing, the way everyone else is doing it. Now, instead of concentrating on factors external to the classroom, my learning-centered syllabus will keep me focused on the classroom dynamics, and most importantly, students' learning needs. Is it imperative that they learn everything discussed in each chapter of the textbook, or is it more important for students to understand a few of the major concepts and themes? Overall, I think students will have a better sense of the concepts and ideas that are germane to the course, while allowing more classroom time for active and collaborative learning activities, such as group exercises and class discussions to reinforce crucial information.

<http://www.lamar.edu/gep/files/documents/B.Easterly.POLS2301.pdf>

Theresa Hefner-Babb: While compiling my new syllabus using *The Course Syllabus* book, I have



learned that we need to provide as much information to students as possible about why the course is important to me as a faculty member, to their future careers, and most importantly to their success as a student. Prior to the ACES process, the syllabus was about what I or the department required. I now realize that it is okay to write the syllabus in first person and to make it as detailed as possible, which is important in an online course. It is my hope that the students will appreciate knowing why I teach the course, what objectives and outcomes we will cover each week and that they will find the color coding in the schedule useful. One benefit to organizing my syllabus in this new way is that it makes it easy to copy and paste the information for each module into Blackboard so students have the original to refer to but they will also see it in their content each week with the same organization.

<http://www.lamar.edu/gep/files/documents/Hefner-Babb.LIBR1101.pdf>

Continued on page 3.

ACES Big Deals

Congratulations to . . .

Yasuko Sato (History)

Yasuko was granted a year-long developmental leave to complete her book, tentatively titled *Neither Past Nor Present: The Pursuit of Classical Antiquity in Early Modern and Modern Japan*. Yasuko says that the book is meant to be her version of “I Have a Dream.”


Theresa Hefner-Babb (Library Science, History)

Theresa recently had 5 articles published in *American Civil War: The Definitive Encyclopedia and Document Collection*.

Katt Blackwell-Starnes (English)

Inspired by the Government Shutdown and motivated by Katt’s willingness to discuss the event in class, Katt’s English 1301 students started a scholarship for veterans to attend Lamar University.

ACES FELLOWS AT WORK (continued from page 2)



Mark Mengerink: By participating in ACES and reconfiguring my syllabus I learned that the process of teaching begins long before stepping into the classroom. Of course, I knew this already. I prepared lectures and assignments and PowerPoint presentations and the like, but I never gave my syllabus such serious attention. Whenever someone mandated that I include this or that policy in my syllabus, I complied. But the ACES experience really brought home the point: successful teaching and learning begin with a strong learning-centered syllabus. Serious contemplation about how I structure my syllabus has led to no less than a complete rethinking of how I teach altogether. Two changes to my course syllabus stand out. First, rewriting my rules and policies in a less harsh and disciplinarian tone should encourage students to feel like partners in the educational experience, prompting them to take ownership of their experience in my class. I no longer sound like I’m simply waiting for them to slip up and break a policy so I can fail them. This new tone does not come at the expense of watering down my policies. My policies have not changed, just the explanation of them. Second, the newsletter format provides a more interesting layout, welcoming students to read it from start to finish. I am most proud of my teaching philosophy statement, which admittedly I borrowed heavily from other sources. It conveys to students my passion for teaching and my desire to see them succeed. I believe the students will react positively to this part of my syllabus.

<http://www.lamar.edu/gep/ files/documents/M%20Mengerink.HIST1302.pdf>

Syllabus Tip

In your shift from a policy-centered to a learning-centered syllabus, you will discover the need to reconcile the welcoming and friendly tone needed in a learning-centered syllabus with the authoritative tone required of your policy statements. This may seem a difficult or impossible negotiation. However, you *can* accomplish this necessary balance by conveying the strength of your policies not only through their consequences but also through their **value to student learning and development**.



Yasuko Sato: In the process of creating a new syllabus, I have learned above all to write directly to students in a friendly welcoming manner. Before this, the course syllabus was just a contractual document nobody, including me, really cared about. Now I am keen to breathe life into each paragraph so that every component of my class can be vibrant, exciting, and meaningful. Since I am a visual person (with “subtle humor,” according to one of my current students), my wish is to craft a visually fun and emotionally relatable syllabus students can truly enjoy. They would definitely be willing to participate in active and collaborative learning, if a syllabus serves to nurture warm connections with them. The focal point of my History 1302 syllabus is the theme of “I Have a Dream,” and I will utilize historical education to turn my students into dream builders. My sense is that a learning-centered syllabus itself is like a dream machine, igniting sparks in the hearts and minds of students.

<http://www.lamar.edu/gep/ files/documents/Y%20Sato.HIST1302.pdf>

The Center for Teaching and Learning Enhancement

Welcome to Spring 2014!

Your Center for Teaching and Learning Enhancement

has many exciting projects and seminars available to you in the Spring semester.

Watch your Inbox for . . .

- ◆ Archived Webinars from the Wiley Learning Company
- ◆ Replacement seminars for events canceled due to weather
- ◆ Online video to Disability and Equal Access Training
- ◆ Updates on the Faculty Learning Communities,

and more!

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