“An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure”

Suggestions on how one can design successful courses and construct effective syllabi

July 2017
The College of Liberal Arts’ policy on syllabi can be found on pages 22-26 of the 2016 College of Liberal Arts Faculty Handbook. Before designing your syllabus you should consult with your chair to see if your home department has special policies and procedures which you should take into consideration.

In your syllabus you should explain in some detail each of the criteria by which you will be evaluating the academic performance of your students. Among the most common evaluative criteria at Mercer are:

- Attendance
- Class Participation
- Quizzes
- Tests
- Lab Work
- Group Work
- Presentations
- Written Assignments (essays; journals; etc)

You should avoid “bundling” grading criteria in your grading policy. For example, the following description:

Attendance .................. 5%
Class Participation ............. 8%
Quizzes ........................ 12%

is much more acceptable and defensible than:

Attendance, Class Participation, Quizzes ............... 25%

The latter description suggests strongly that each of the three criteria will be worth 8.33% when the final grade is being calculated. Unless that is your intention, it is highly advisable to describe each grading criterion on a separate line.

**Grading System**

The College does not endorse or promote any particular grading system, but you should consult with your chair to see if there are any recommendations that the department has for its courses. The University uses only alphabetical grades for its record keeping; University policy does not allow for "minus" grades. Ultimately, you are limited to A, B+, B, C+, C, D, F, S, U.

Your syllabus must clearly define the numerical range that an alphabetical grade signifies or describe the qualities that distinguish, for example, “A”-level work from “C+”-level work. It is strongly advisable to indicate how you deal with fractional grades. If the grade of “C” begins at “70%”, then does a “69.55%” qualify as a “C” or as a “D”?

**Pass / Fail Option**

Students have the option of taking a course on an “S/U” basis; you have the option of determining whether you wish to make this option available to students. Any student desiring this grading option must submit a formal request during the DROP/ADD period at the beginning of the semester. No exceptions are granted after this deadline, and the decision cannot be reversed later in the semester.
Incompletes

As the end of the semester approaches some students may ask you to grant them a grade of "Incomplete" for the course. The “IC” grade indicates that the student, for some legitimate reason, was unable to complete all course assignments by the end of the semester and that the instructor is granting the student a grace period to meet all course requirements.

If you are inclined to give the student the benefit of the doubt, you should state clearly in writing (1) what assignments need to be completed, (2) by which date the work must be submitted, and (3) what kind of penalty will be assessed if the deadline is not met. If the work is not completed by the mid-term of the following semester, the grade of "IC" will automatically change into an "F."

"Incompletes" are arrangements made exclusively between the student and the instructor. It is not necessarily to consult with the Dean's Office or request permission from the Dean's Office for such arrangements.

On occasion, family emergencies or urgent medical care make it impossible for a student to take the final exam at the scheduled date and time. In such cases it is appropriate to assign the grade “ABX” (“all but final exam”). The instructor and student will need to find a mutually convenient time to complete the final exam before the midterm of the next semester.

Attendance

Neither Mercer University nor the College of Liberal Arts recommends any particular policy for attendance. You should consult with your chair to see if your departmental culture encourages or requires any particular policy.

Generally speaking, you should decide whether there is a maximum number of absences you will tolerate before you begin to impose penalties. If so, state clearly in the syllabus the number of absences you will accept and the nature of penalty that will be imposed for each excessive absence. For example,

- Some colleagues deduct one or two points from the final course grade for each excessive absence;
- Some colleagues drop the final course grade an entire letter grade for each excessive absence (e.g. an “A” becomes a “B+” for one excessive absence; it becomes a “C+” for three excessive absences);
- Some colleagues assign a failing grade once the maximum number of absences has been exceeded.

Some students (e.g. athletes, musicians, debaters) are granted excused absences for university-related activities. You will receive written confirmation from the Dean’s Office well in advance of such events.

These students may be excused absences from as many as nine classes meeting on a MWF schedule, and six excused absences for classes meeting on a TR schedule. For courses that have four or five weekly meetings, the student may not be absent for more than 20% of the total number of class meetings.
The Dean's Office does not issue excused absences for students unless they can provide compelling documentation (e.g. obituaries, physician notes) in a timely manner. Requests made without documentation will be denied. Please note that the campus infirmary does not issue physician notes. You may, at your discretion, excuse students from classes, labs, or exams even if they have no such documentation.

Class Participation

Many faculty members include a grade for class participation to ensure that students are actively engaged in class activities. If you wish to evaluate class participation, keep these questions in mind:

How does a student get a high grade for class participation: Frequent oral contributions? Prolific note-taking? Looking interested or attentive? Occasional nodding? Is your evaluative policy biased towards those who are more vocal and extroverted, and against those who are rather reticent and introverted? Clearly state in your syllabus what your expectations are for this criterion.

Is this grade based holistically on your subjective assessment of a student’s contribution during the entire semester? Or do you chart your evaluations on a week-by-week or on a day-by-day account?

How frequently can students find out how well (or how poorly) you consider their class participation to be?

Written Assignments

Your syllabus should indicate the number of written assignments you expect students to complete by the end of the semester as well as the criteria you will use to evaluate their work. You should also remind your students frequently of the Honor Code and the attendant penalties for plagiarism—intentional or unintentional.

Do you grade written assignments holistically or intuitively (e.g. a paper "looks like" an "A" or a "C+")? Or do you expect students to demonstrate excellence in discrete skills (e.g. exposition of thesis, exploration of merits and limitations of thesis, documentation from secondary literature, well-reasoned conclusion, organizational clarity, stylistic sophistication, punctuation, etc)?

If there are such discrete features, you should describe these in some detail in the syllabus or separately in a document distributed later to the entire class. In other words, let the students know up front precisely what you are expecting of them.

If you permit students to submit written assignments electronically, it is wise to specify the formats (e.g. Word, Word Perfect, Pages, RTF) and styles (e.g. MLA, Chicago, APA, ASA) you will accept. Which grading penalties, if any, do you impose if a student fails to submit work in the desired format or style?

With electronic submissions, students should also be encouraged to request a return receipt so that there is incontrovertible proof that the assignment was submitted by the deadline. After all, technological glitches are inevitable despite the best of intentions and expectations.
Peer Evaluation of Group Projects or Class Presentations

Some colleagues want their students to demonstrate that they can collaborate with others in designing and presenting a project on a given topic. If you wish to evaluate group projects or group presentations, keep these questions in mind:

- How much weight does student evaluation of peers carry when the grade for peer evaluation is ultimately determined?
- How much weight does instructor evaluation of student work in groups carry?
- Is the student-student evaluation purely advisory to the instructor, or does it actually constitute some percentage of the final grade?

Extra-Credit Work

It is not unusual for students, especially weaker students, to request extra-credit work as the semester nears its end. It’s wise to include a statement on extra-credit work in your syllabus so that no misunderstandings arise.

Do students have the opportunity to request work for extra-credit in your course? If so …

- Are there deadlines by which such requests have to be made?
- How much weight does such extra-credit work carry in calculating the final course grade?
- Is it a “fudge factor” added in after all other grades have been calculated? Is it subsumed under one of the criteria on the grading policy (e.g. class participation? quizzes? lab work?)

Activities Outside Normal Class Meeting Times

It is not uncommon for instructors to require students to attend films, lectures, concerts and other activities of academic interest that take place at times during which the class does not normally meet. It is also not uncommon for students to have conflicts with such required activities, due to regular-scheduled evening courses, work schedules, obligatory athletic events or training sessions, and the like. Illnesses, accidents, and a variety of unanticipated misfortunes can make it impossible for the student to participate in the activity.

If you wish to require such activities, please make sure that these are highlighted prominently on your syllabus and discussed in detail during the first week of classes. Your syllabus should also describe what you expect of a student who, for legitimate and verifiable reasons, is unable to participate in these events. It is appropriate to allow this student to participate in the activity at a later date or time, or to suggest a reasonably equivalent assignment for the student to complete.
Course Withdrawals

By the eleventh week of each semester students have the opportunity to withdraw from any course without penalty. Their transcript will reflect the grade of “W,” which does not in any way affect their grade point average. A high frequency of “W”s, however, may have adverse consequences for a student’s financial aid package or for his/her future employment opportunities.

Students should discuss the desirability of a course withdrawal with both their professor and their advisor before making this weighty decision. In order to help students and advisors make the most informed decision on this matter, faculty should make every effort to have graded roughly 30%-60% of the work required for the course prior to the withdrawal deadline. For this reason many faculty require their students to write a major exam or submit a major project in the week prior to midterm break.

For Fall Semester 2017 the deadline for submitting midterm deficiency reports on students is tentatively Thursday, 19 October, but earlier submissions are most welcome. The deadline for course withdrawal is Friday, 27 October. Please be sure to include this deadline in your syllabus.

I will not honor any request for withdrawal after 28 October unless it is accompanied by a persuasive written recommendation from the instructor OR if the student suffers from some medically- or family-related crisis that warrants a complete term withdrawal.

Changing the syllabus

Occasionally, situations arise that make small adjustments to the syllabus desirable or advisable. No such changes should be made unless the faculty member discusses the nature of and reason for the changes with the entire class, and distributes a printed copy of the revised syllabus to both the entire class, the department chair or program director, and the Dean’s Office.

Generally speaking, any such change should provide an advantage to the students, rather than escalating criteria or increasing the number of assignments. For example, it might be reasonable in some cases to reduce the minimum length for a research paper, but it would not be reasonable to add a major paper to the requirements listed in the syllabus.

Final Exams

It is generally accepted practice in the College of Liberal Arts to refrain from administering tests or quizzes in the final week of classes, so that students have sufficient time to prepare for their final exams or work on their final papers/projects. Please try to manage your course as carefully as possible so that students are not placed under any additional stress during this most nerve-wracking time of the semester.

Occasionally, students find themselves in a predicament when three final exams are scheduled officially on the very same day. Under such circumstances University policy encourages the student to discuss this situation with his/her three professors, one of whom will agree to reschedule the exam at a mutually-convenient time.

If you require a final exam in your course, you must administer this exam at the time published in the official Schedule of Classes or on the homepage of the Registrar’s Office. Any exceptions must be approved well in advance (e.g. early November) by the
Dean’s Office. The date and time of your final exam should be highlighted on your syllabus. The deadline for submission of all final papers or projects should also be the published time of the final exam.

Occasionally, and especially in Fall Semester, students will ask to take the final exam at an earlier date. You are not obligated to honor these requests; it’s best to remain firm. However, if you make special accommodations for a student, you should—after notifying the Associate Dean—have him/her sign a written disclaimer stating that they have requested permission to take the final exam at a time other than that officially published, and that they assume full responsibility for their performance on the exam.

*Caveat magister* — If you grant one student a special accommodation, you are likely to have others requesting the same “deal”

**Violations of the Honor Code**

Students are obligated to abide by the terms of the Honor Code which prohibits any form of cheating or plagiarism. If you suspect that a student has violated the Honor Code, please report your suspicion immediately to the Honor Council, a student-run appeals board that will investigate the allegations. During the hearing the accuser will explain the reasons for the accusation; the accused has an opportunity to challenge or accept the charge(s). If the student is found responsible for violating the Code, the Council will determine unilaterally what kind of penalty will be imposed.

All information pertaining to an Honor Council case must be kept confidential between the accuser, the accused, and the Council justices.

**Grievances**

The College of Liberal Arts’ Academic Grievance Procedure is published on pages 29-30 of the *2016 College of Liberal Arts Faculty Handbook*.

Students have the right to bring grievances against faculty members concerning academic or behavioral matters. Since most grievances are ultimately based on poorly written syllabi, it is imperative that these documents be written as clearly and as accurately as possible. It is also important to abide by the policies and procedures described in the syllabus; any emendations to this document which affect the final course grade must be discussed with the students and communicated to the Dean's Office.

*Edward Weintraut*

*Associate Dean, CLA*

*6 July 2017*