any educators see the class syllabus as the most important document in the educational process. In fact, Schoenfeld and Magnan refer to it as a “map” for the teacher’s journey through the semester. If faculty think of themselves as tour guides, then their schedules (or syllabi) should indicate the major sights and activities that will occur along the way.

Exactly what should a syllabus contain? The dictionary defines it as “a concise statement of the main points of a course of study or subject.” This obviously leaves room for personal, departmental, and institutional interpretation. (What constitutes “concise”? And what makes up “the main points”?)

Still, the syllabus is viewed as the official document of the college course. According to Greive, it “should be shared with students and filed as a permanent contribution to the instructional archives of the college.”

Because of individual interpretation, there is a disturbing level of confusion about syllabi. A concise statement to one faculty member may mean simply “Chapter V,” while to another, it may mean citing the major points of Chapter V, and describing each one, using complete sentences. One thing is certain, however: Developing a quality syllabus forces teachers to evaluate the topics and issues they can cover and still remain within the constraints of time, place, available resources, and their students’ limitations.

Building the Syllabus

Developing an acceptable syllabus is almost always a multi-step process. A meaningful syllabus will have several major parts, including the following:

1. The complete name of the course and its number.
2. The name and title of the faculty member.
3. The faculty member’s office hours and telephone numbers(s)—E-mail address, too!
4. The text or tests and outside readings required for the course.

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5. The course objectives.
6. The assignments and projects to be completed by the students.
7. A listing of resources, outside readings, field trips, etc.

Objectives. Listing the course objectives is one of the most important—and difficult—tasks. Although faculty may be tempted to include everything of importance in the course, as a general rule, 10 to 14 objectives will suffice. Teachers should be certain, however, that the objectives are reachable, teachable, and measurable.

Student activities. When we think about teaching, we tend to consider only what takes place within the classroom. But because most student learning occurs outside the classroom, planning how to help students when they are not in class is vital.

Consequently, the syllabus should also describe out-of-class activities that will help students attain the course requirements. This usually means specifying in some detail such items as outside reading, laboratory activities, projects, assignments, etc.

Teachers are wise to give significant attention to the reason for each activity and how it relates to the course. Students will thus recognize that the class is well-planned and there is a purpose for everything they are asked to do.

Course requirements. The syllabus should also include a detailed description of both course and student requirements. As a result, students cannot later legitimately claim to have been unaware of what was expected of them. In fact, this section of the syllabus often lists the
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One final observation: Restraint in detailing every expected outcome should permit a spiritual serendipity of sorts. Teachers cannot “package” the Holy Spirit to perform by their insistence in enlightening the minds of students. But they can encourage students to consider factual content in light of their ethical and religious values. Teachers can arrange for small-group and oral reporting opportunities to help students explore ways to make relational applications.

And, finally, faculty in Christian institutions may ask students how course content informs their faith, and how their faith affects the application of such information. For some classes, the instructor can easily express these goals in the form of objectives leading to assessment strategies, while in other courses such goals may become a part of the unspoken agenda of the teacher. As Faw and Van Brummelen have observed, “The primary purpose of student assessment and evaluation is to furnish evidence of learners’ progress toward certain explicit and implicit goals.”

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