REVIEW

Best Practices in Syllabus Design

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Submitted December 14, 2021; accepted April 27, 2022; published March 2023.

The syllabus is the cornerstone for directing faculty and student interaction within the didactic and experiential settings. Within each syllabus is both essential and optional information to guide students, faculty, and administration in course expectations as well as to explain how the course aligns within current curricular requirements to maintain program accreditation. Most syllabi contain a plethora of information that continues to grow each year, warranting concerns of syllabus bloat combined with dwindling student attention to syllabus detail. This paper summarizes best practices related to designing effective course syllabi and recommendations to promote clear and concise communication between students, faculty, and administrators involved in pharmacy education.

Keywords: student pharmacists, curriculum, pharmacy education, syllabus, course design

INTRODUCTION

A course syllabus is the first point of interaction between faculty and students. The primary goal of a syllabus is to communicate information about a course. Students are likely interested in what topics will be covered in the course, how those topics will be taught, and how performance in the course will be assessed. Faculty teaching in the course will use a syllabus to outline the plan for the course, set expectations for how students are to communicate with the faculty, how the covered topics fit into the larger curriculum, and how students will be expected to interact with the course material. Unfortunately, this has led to the expansion of the syllabus from one to two pages in the 1990s to more than 20 pages today. 1 Additionally, administrators may view the syllabus as an agreement 2 between students and faculty for the delivery of course content, include information on how disputes will be resolved, and provide evidence for granting or maintaining program accreditation. 3 This has led many faculty to include verbiage in the syllabus to account for every “what if” scenario that might be challenged in court. 1 The syllabus can set the tone for a course, for better or worse.

Taking time to intentionally develop a syllabus can demonstrate one’s commitment to the course contents as well as to one’s students. In this review, we seek to summarize best practices in syllabus design to promote clear and concise communication between students, faculty, and administrators involved in pharmacy education while not falling into the trap of syllabus bloat.

A keyword search was conducted in PubMed and Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) for terms including syllabus and syllabi. Articles were excluded if the terms referred to a curriculum rather than a course document or were not published in English. Additionally, keyword searches were conducted in common pharmacy education journals to ensure pharmacy-related articles were included. After analyzing the articles, recommendations for syllabi construction were put into the categories described throughout the rest of the paper.

Traditional Structural Elements

While there are multiple perspectives on the use of syllabi in education, there are several elements of syllabi that must, or should, be included. Table 1 outlines what is required in syllabi compared to what is optional. By focusing on only what must be included in syllabi instead of in other locations, such as the course management system, faculty can help combat syllabus bloat. The traditional...
Table 1. Required Versus Optional Syllabus Elements to Avoid Bloat

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structural elements of syllabi, each of which will be described below, are baseline course information, faculty information, course goals and objectives, course calendar, course materials, expectations about attendance and professional behaviors, and grading.

Baseline course information includes the course name and number, term and year, credit hours, course description, and location and time of class meetings. This information can help situate the course within degree, departmental, or institutional requirements, can assist in tracking requirements for accreditation, and can help students understand the general approach to the course. This assists students, faculty, teaching assistants, and administrators in tracking progress toward degree requirements and engaging with the course. Additionally, students may benefit from a course description that provides an overview of the course and explains how it fits into the curriculum (including how preceding courses laid the foundation for this course and how subsequent courses build upon it). Not only can this information be used by administrators and other faculty in accreditation and curricular improvement efforts, but it can also serve to excite and motivate students about the course. Lastly, a simple statement that allows for syllabus amendments or a disclaimer that the syllabus can change will give some flexibility to the course, provided the students are also made aware of any changes that do happen.

Complete faculty information must also be included on an effective syllabus. A study of nursing students and faculty indicated that both groups found this information important to include on syllabi. Faculty information should include faculty name, credentials, title, contact information, office location, and office hours (or how to schedule appointments). It is important to include contact information for other instructors within the course as well. Including multiple contact methods for students to reach instructors can aide in creating a more inclusive course, as there may be students that prefer a certain method of communication, and can help facilitate open communication with all enrolled students. Faculty may also wish to include some biographical information that details their training and credentials that detail their qualifications to teach the course. Disappointingly, student evaluations of faculty who are female, non-English speaking, and Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) are disproportionately low due to potential biases. One bias discussed in the literature is students’ perception that these faculty are less qualified than male, English-speaking and/or White faculty. Describing training and credentials in syllabi, therefore, may address this potential bias. In addition to including information about the instructors, including information regarding the teaching style and philosophy for the course can help students identify how this course will help them grow and understand the rationale for the design of the course.

Course goals and objectives are widely considered to be important elements of an effective syllabus by both students and, particularly, faculty. Course goals are often broader, less specific statements about the course. These goals help students understand the expectations of the course, what they will learn, how they will develop, and how the course fits into the broader curriculum (ie, becoming a pharmacist). Additionally, syllabi should include specific, measurable course objectives that detail how students should develop in cognitive, affective, and/or psychomotor domains. Faculty need to consider not only what knowledge or skills students will learn during the course, but also how in depth they will need to learn that information to be able to demonstrate mastery. In addition to helping the students have clear expectations for the course, this information can help faculty who teach the preceding and subsequent courses align courses to optimize student learning and can help administrators track student progression toward degree and institutional learning objectives or competencies.

Students find the course calendar, or course schedule, to be one of the most critical elements of the syllabus, especially due dates for assignments. While preparing a course calendar might seem straightforward, there are a number of elements to include that can maximize the effectiveness to students. In addition to including dates and times of class meetings, assignments, and assessments, faculty could include recommended preparation for each session and how holidays or professional or university events affect class meetings. The calendar could also include information about specific teaching methods, such as team-based learning (TBL) or problem-based learning (PBL), for sessions that may require a different preparation approach for the session(s). Explicit, detailed information regarding learning activities and preparation can be more learner centric by providing the information students need to develop a plan for their successful completion of the course and reduce uncertainty, which can also improve student grades in the course.

Information about the course materials, such as information about the resources students need to successfully complete the course, also need to be included. Information regarding textbooks should include the titles, author names, editions, links to purchase online, and other ways to access the materials (such as at the library, including number of copies available). Faculty should also include links to other resources that may be beneficial for learning yet not required, such as the institution’s learning management system, other readings/videos needed for
A course syllabus should also contain expectations about attendance and professional behaviors. Attendance usually is measured by excused and/or unexcused absences as well as tardies. This attendance policy should be stated in a way that encourages students to be responsible for their own learning through attending class. One way to accomplish this is to consider a flexible absence policy, which can reduce stress in a possibly already stressful situation, such as being stuck in traffic or having a sick child. An example of a flexible policy is, “I understand that there are times when something will prevent your attendance (illness, emergencies, participating in a university event; sleeping in or blowing off class doesn’t count, sorry). If an absence is unavoidable, you should ….” If flexibility is not an option, explaining why attendance is mandatory can help students come to terms with showing up to class and can encourage attentiveness within class.

Expected behavior within the classroom or on virtual platforms should be outlined for students and include guidance for the use of technology (eg, cellular phones, laptops, clickers) during class. When setting expectations for classroom behavior, consider how students can translate the expectations into the professional environment. Additionally, check with the university to determine whether there are detailed professionalism expectations within the classroom that include not only behavior but also dress code.

Some of the most important information in the syllabus, per students, relates to grading, specifically about assignments, examinations, quizzes, and grading criteria. Activities that can contribute toward a course grade include class participation, group work, attendance, homework, quizzes, and examinations. Once an instructor has determined what activities will be included in the course grade, it is imperative that the grading scheme for each activity is clearly explained. The course grading scheme should go beyond the typical university outline for a letter grade (eg, 89.5%-100% = A) to address issues such as the points available for each activity, opportunities for extra credit, and whether there will be any score rounding or dropping.

Additionally, providing a description, the purpose, the outcome expected, and the rubric for each assignment will give clarity in interpreting the grade and can reduce grade challenges. However, as grade challenges may still occur, language regarding a procedure for handling these could prove useful.

Students will frequently use this grading information in the syllabus to help them determine how much time and energy to contribute to each course assignment, especially if they know how much each activity will impact their course grade. Despite their best efforts, inevitably, students will turn an assignment in late or miss turning in an assignment altogether. When addressing missed or late assignments, quizzes, or examinations, there are several aspects to consider including in the syllabus. Some ways to address missed or late items include the ability to retake or make them up, the time frame to make them up, and any percentage reduction for time late in making them up. A key perspective to consider is to give students a similar flexibility in turning things in that would have in a career, as well as not jumping to conclusions about why the student turned an assignment in late or did not turn one in at all.

Lastly, despite best efforts, some students will not be successful in a course. Including information on additional support for students who are failing or at risk of failing the course and information on how a failing grade is handled can demonstrate to students that the instructor values their efforts and wants to help them succeed.

Recent Structural Elements

Other structural elements included in syllabi are more recent and include required institutional language as well as optional information.

Regarding required institutional language, most institutions have policies that must be in every syllabus and can include information on academic misconduct/academic integrity, inclusivity, accessibility, and harassment (eg, Title IX). These policies may be quite lengthy, so consider examining the potential of paraphrasing the policy while concomitantly referring the student to the appropriate policy or document (eg, student handbook, student catalog).

While the reflex language for outlining academic misconduct/academic integrity is typically negative, consider using statements that are more focused toward equity and the importance of integrity and credibility to the students’ future professional careers. Additionally, language inviting an openness to questions regarding what is and is not allowed (eg, plagiarism and cheating) may help prevent accidental violations.

The syllabus should invariably have a statement regarding embracing diversity, equity, and inclusion in the classroom; however, it is up to the individual instructor to demonstrate this throughout the syllabus. Some ways to accomplish this include having diversity in the required
textbooks and journal articles, including trigger warnings for potentially sensitive content, and including statements on the benefits of a diverse classroom experience. Furthermore, students need to feel that they matter to the instructor, and including statements that address use of pronouns and religious absences are but a few examples of how to accomplish this.

Many universities have disability statements; however, this terminology can be extremely exclusionary. Instead, consider using the word accessibility, and reframe this section in a way that defines what diverse learning looks like that encompasses the entire class and creates a more inviting environment. Some additional information to include is the contact information for the resource center through which students can apply for accessibility assistance and other accommodations within the classroom.

The last point on required institutional language is that every syllabus needs to identify that harassment in any form will not be tolerated in the classroom due to Title IX. Students should feel supported and safe within the classroom and need to be provided with a way to contact someone if they do not.

Optional information to be included in syllabi can introduce language that counters the negative tone that syllabi tend to have, as most syllabi are phrased in a way that assume students will try to break all the rules. Ways to embed more positive language throughout the syllabus include providing students with information on mental health resources, mentioning how the class and the instructor are safe spaces for students, inserting empathy and sympathy statements that demonstrate the instructor is giving the student the benefit of the doubt, and giving motivational messages that spur students to go beyond the classroom and embrace lifelong learning. Students will also appreciate any advice on how to be successful in the course, such as proposed study habits, time management, and prior areas of struggles and how to overcome those.

Additional Considerations for Syllabus Construction

Additional resources available for supporting syllabus design include a syllabus template, the curriculum committee or administrator, and self-reflection. A syllabus template may be provided by a department or a college for use by faculty. A benefit of syllabi templates include consistency across courses, thus making it easy for students to find important information and for faculty to hold students to similar standards across courses. The curriculum committee is often responsible for reviewing courses delivered on a rolling basis (eg, every three years). Since curriculum committee members will be familiar with the aspects of the syllabi examined during course reviews and with the curriculum, asking for a review of changes made to a syllabus between formal curriculum committee reviews can be helpful. The dean of curriculum or dean of assessment at an institution is often the author of a syllabus template and is another good person to ask for feedback about specific elements to be included in a syllabus. Finally, at the conclusion of a course, consider reflecting on the aspects of the syllabus that could be changed for the next delivery of the course. Minimally, syllabi should be updated annually to include new policies and accurate information. Overall, however, the syllabus should be viewed as a living document that can and should be adjusted from year to year as needed to meet the needs of the students, faculty, and administration. That said, faculty must also balance the need for adding new information to the syllabus by removing information that is no longer relevant. Most syllabi contain a plethora of information that continues to grow each year, warranting concerns of syllabus bloat combined with dwindling student attention to syllabus detail.

Despite the available resources for creating syllabi, faculty need to be aware of potential pitfalls when developing course syllabi. One pitfall is when faculty use vague language in their syllabus related to course expectations, such as “Students are encouraged to regularly attend class.” Not only is the language in this expectation vague, but it also lacks specific consequences for missing one or more classes. It is important for faculty to document specific expectations for student attendance, content, activities, assessments, academic integrity, and policies related to the course as well as consequences for failing to meet those expectations. The inclusion of specific consequences can assist faculty with enforcing the consequences more consistently. For instance, a more specific expectation and consequence could be stated as, “Students will receive one point per class session for attendance, which will be taken using a seating chart. If a student is late to class or is absent, they will receive zero points for that class session. Students who miss more than three classes risk receiving an F in the course.” It is important to note that courts will not uphold syllabi as legal documents. While syllabi have been historically regarded as legally binding contracts between students and professors, legal precedents reveal that syllabi are not considered contracts “because the courts have refused to recognize educational malpractice or breach of contract as a cause of action.” However, they may be binding in student grade appeal and grievance proceedings and are used in judicial hearings.

When moving forward with design, a syllabus should not be seen as a contract but rather as a guide for how the
course and potential disputes will be handled. Administrators often encourage having college or university syllabi templates to assure that university policies and key curricular review and accreditation content are documented. An assessment or academic affairs dean or designate could review all faculty members’ syllabi each year to ensure consistency. Faculty development and/or curriculum committee workshops could also be offered focusing on syllabi development for all faculty members as a way for institutions to make sure that all faculty are aware of institutional processes for syllabi. However, the ability to tailor a syllabus related to course delivery and assessment should be up to the instructor at hand.

CONCLUSION
Just as teaching approaches have changed, so have the ways in which instructors communicate with students using syllabi. By evaluating syllabi yearly, we can more quickly identify the occurrence of syllabus bloat and make strides to correct this. Additionally, as we embrace technology, we may see more standard links being added as quick response (QR) codes or embedded links that can change as universities/colleges update documents to help combat bloat.

REFERENCES