Printed with the permission of the publisher

**Scope of the Problem**

Robert Diamond, Research Professor and Director of the Center for Instructional Development, Syracuse University, surveys the literature relating individual courses and institutional curricula in higher education and arrives at some unsettling conclusions. Specifically, Diamond decries the prevalence of courses designed with “little or no relationship to the curriculum that is in place or to the critical skills students need to acquire,” courses of study that are “more serendipitous than planned,” and higher education curricula that “do not produce the results we intend.” (Diamond, 1998, p. 2). Syracuse University’s Center for Instructional Development received the 1996 Theodore Hesburgh Award for “Faculty Development to Enhance Undergraduate Teaching and Learning,” which is given annually by TIAA-CREF ($30,000).

I believe that one of the tools vital for attacking the problems cited by Professor Diamond is a rigorous course syllabus. Just as the last thing a fish would notice is water, academics generally overlook the value of a comprehensive syllabus. Indicative of the low status generally accorded to the syllabus in academe, no substantial body of literature exists on the subject. It is just too prosaic for sustained inquiry. But students, professors, and curricular integrity would all benefit if institutions were to exploit the latent potential of the syllabus by blending it into the very architecture of their curricula. The bloodless course outline often passing as a syllabus is no more than a caricature of the genuine article.

The inadequacy of standard-operating-procedure concerning syllabi received unusual attention in a 1985 piece that appeared in the Chronicle of Higher Education. Professor Sharon Rubin’s report on the findings of a course-approval committee at the University of Maryland drew attention to this invisible phenomenon. Her faculty committee found a series of pivotal questions typically un-answered by most of the course syllabi that students received from their professors, such as: Why should a student want to take this course? Why do the parts of the course come in this particular order? Will it consist mostly of lecture, discussion, or group work? What skills or knowledge will the tests test? Why have these specific books been chosen? Rubin paints a very bleak portrait of her close encounter with scores of weak course syllabi. She says that the worst ones fell into two groups: the “listers”—those whose bare-bones outlines tell what is to be read and done, but without any hint of the principles behind the course; and, the “scolders”—those whose prose reads more like caveats from a defense lawyer than heuristic tips from a professor, by detailing the consequences of any possible misbehavior. The scolders seem intent on practicing defensive pedagogy in a litigious age. Overall, Rubin concludes that “the pervasiveness of inadequate syllabi symbolizes an unhealthy deterioration of communication between teachers and students.” (Rubin, 1985, p. 56). Such poor communication must seem worrisome to Howard Altman and William Cashin, who write elsewhere that the primary purpose of a syllabus is “to communicate to one’s students what the course is about, why it is taught, where it’s going, and what will be required of them to complete it successfully.” (Altman and Cashin, 1992, p. 3).

The good things accompanying the metamorphosis from scrawny two-pagers to dense, thoughtful ten-pagers, remain well-kept secrets. Faculty rarely champion the value of the course syllabus. After all, is it not destined for student eyes only? Academic freedom also exacerbates the problem, shielding against unsolicited interference into the sanctity of one’s classroom. When this happens, faculty isolation and resistance to change naturally result. Another contributing factor is denial on the part of many professors. I have heard some colleagues remark that a ten-page syllabus qualifies as an exercise in futility. Why? Because it is supposedly too long for students to read. But I disagree, because we routinely assign students 1,000 pages to read during a semester. Many students are savvy enough to recognize the syllabus’ ten pages as the most important ten pages of the entire course; those students less savvy, we can enlighten didactically by explaining how milking the syllabus for all it’s worth serves their best interests. I give a syllabus quiz on the second day of class in my introductory social science course to get students’ attention, and, to highlight the status of the syllabus. Other ideas for making students conversant with the syllabus are: placing them periodically in small-groups to discuss certain parts of it; asking them to write brief reaction papers analyzing the syllabus; or, having them evaluate the syllabus by specifying what they like, dislike, and what changes they recommend.

**Essential Elements of Sophisticated Syllabi**

In the most comprehensive work to date on syllabi, Judith Grunert, Syracuse University Center for Instructional Improvement, offers many useful suggestions, all of which behoove professors to think through the content, as well as the process, before constructing their syllabi. She envisions a “reflective exercise” powerful enough to improve courses by clarifying hidden beliefs and assumptions as part of a well-developed rationale (philosophy) for the course. The professor’s academic soul should shine through here. Students also need to glean from the syllabus what it is that professors want them to be able to do, and exactly how they will be assessed when they do it. Only by carefully planning a course can these objectives come to fruition. What Grunert advocates might better be called a “course manual” rather than a standard course syllabus. She looks with disfavor on documents skimmed over during the first class meeting, and then filed away. Rather, she prefers dog-eared learning tools, utilized frequently as reference documents, giving more than mere information. Students should literally get into the habit of using these tools. Stripped to bare essentials, Grunert’s ideal syllabus seeks to:  
Describe the course content, including its goals, and objectives.  
Describe the structure of the course and its significance within the general program of study.  
Discuss what mutual obligations students and instructors share.  
Provide logistical, and procedural information about what will happen, when, and where.

Another useful model providing the nuts-and-bolts required to construct exemplary syllabi can be summarized succinctly. It identifies eleven specific segments needed for a serious syllabus: (1) Course Information: title, number, credits, prerequisites, location, meeting time; (2) Instructor Information: name, title, office number, hours, phone, e-mail; (3) Readings: textbook author, publisher, cost, including why it was chosen and how extensively it will be used; supplementary readings, and whether required or recommended; (4) Course Goals (more general) and Objectives (more specific); (5) Course Description: content of the course and how it fits into the broader curriculum; (6) Instructional Methods: the relative weight of respective pedagogical techniques (e.g., lecture, case study, small group discussion, values clarification, games, journal writing) should be explicated; (7) Course Calendar: a schedule (daily or weekly) of time structuring identifying substance as well as dates for all assignments; (8) Course Policies: specific rules of the game concerning issues like attendance, tardiness, class participation, make-up exams, and plagiarism; (9) Grading: how students will be evaluated, what factors will be included, their relative value, and how they will be tabulated into grades all resonate in the student psyche; (10) Checklist: listing of all course assignments at the end of document helps students keep track of what must be done and when; (11) Support Services: in what ways can the library, learning center, tutoring service, advising center, or computer center help students to succeed in this course? (Altman and Cashin, 1992, pp. 3-4).

**Heuristic Benefits of Sophisticated Syllabi**

First and foremost, fine syllabi serve to enhance student learning. Since college courses vary greatly, and since professors bring their uniqueness with them when they enter the classroom door, students don’t really know what to expect during the pivotal first class session. Marie Birdsall cites research suggesting that the “fear of the unknown” produces anxious students on the first day of class. She argues that a thorough syllabus represents the best means of reducing such student anxiety, thus launching the course in the right direction. (Birdsall, 1989, p. 12).

A creative syllabus can also work wonders in a variety of other, more subtle, ways: as a window revealing the philosophical disposition of the instructor; as a cognitive map showing why the intellectual terrain covered is important; as a model conveying to students the belief that planning has pedagogical value; as a contract binding the parties together; as a message that good teaching is important, and is facilitated by a model syllabus; as an antidote to the deterioration of communication between professor and student criticized by Sharon Rubin; as testimony that excellent teachers have high expectations for themselves, as well as for their students; as a resource germane to the faculty evaluation process; and, as the only substantive link between individual courses and the mission pursued by the wider curriculum. Robert Diamond’s book includes quotations taken from various professors who have reflected on the benefits flowing from their shifting to a comprehensive syllabus. In the words of one instructor: “It helped a great deal. Faculty colleagues from other institutions have been able to easily adapt and adopt the course with limited guidance. In addition, I have very few requests for clarification of course requirements, time lines, grading criteria or standards, or weekly assignments. Perhaps some faculty look forward to such repeated discussions—I prefer to teach.” (Diamond, 1998, p. 195).

And where is the course syllabus particularly under-utilized? One place is in the evaluation of teaching. Too seldom do academic administrators conceptualize the syllabus as germane to assessing faculty performance. No department head would consider evaluating an untenured instructor without a class visit, and rightly so. But sometimes a sole visit becomes a pivotal event in evaluating an instructor, even though that session is not necessarily representative of the rest of the course. Administrators also ought to identify model syllabi and encourage faculty to develop complex documents. A good one can operate as a nexus linking a class visit to the instructor’s course objectives, readings, exams, and pedagogical techniques (which may differ from those of the evaluator). By discussing atypical techniques—such as group inquiry activities, writing across the curriculum, or peer grading—the instructor can use the syllabus to explain why these methods make sense for this course.

Most experienced professors sense intuitively that when they plan ahead, organize their work well, and inform students exactly what they want, their teaching produces better learning. These hunches are confirmed in a recent study examining commonalities found among Carnegie Professors of the Year recognized by the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE). University of Georgia Management Professor John Lough, who spawned the idea of dissecting the behavior of Carnegie Professors of the Year to see what makes them tick, was after what in business is referred to as “best-practices benchmarking”: in this case, behaviors associated with superior teaching. One universal characteristic cited by Lough is that great teachers are very well-organized, and their syllabi reflect this fact. “The syllabi are written with rather detailed precision. Clearly stated course objectives and requirements are a hallmark. Typically, there is a precisely laid-out day-by-day schedule showing specific reading assignments as well as other significant requirements and due dates.” (Lough, in Roth, ed., 1996, p. 220). The editor of this fine volume, John Roth, Professor of Holocaust Studies at Claremont McKenna College, reinforces Professor Lough’s conclusion that great teachers are organized: “they focus their concentration.” Roth also concludes that a broad, inter-disciplinary curiosity characterizes Carnegie Professors of the Year, as does a love of research, dispelling the myth that teaching and research are mutually exclusive. “Outstanding teachers do not regard teaching and research as two separate activities. One informs the other.” (Roth, ed., 1996, p. 227).

The solid planning endemic to exemplary syllabi can also yield dividends for the departmental and institutional curricula. This insight is driven home in one of the articles contributed to the Roth volume by 1994 Carnegie Professor of the Year Anthony Lisska, Professor of Philosophy and Director of the Honors Program at Denison University. Lisska emphasizes that curricular structures matter because they impact the learning process in profound ways. While neither as overt, nor as exciting, as the performance dimension to teaching, curriculum as academic structure affects our pedagogical successes, and Lisska cites the Honors Program at Dension as illustrative. “We don’t immediately see the connections among curriculum, what curriculum structures enable us to do pedagogically, and how these structures assist in the development of the craft of teaching.” (Lisska, in Roth, ed., 1996, p. 90). Professor Lisska’s intriguing admonition that curricular structures matter should not be dismissed as too abstract to operationalize.

The potential exists for the course syllabus to forge substantive links between the three curricular levels of the academy that Robert Diamond suggests often proceed in random directions: 1) the demonstration of quality teaching/learning in specific courses; 2) coherent and consistent programs of integrity at the departmental level; and, 3) institution-wide general studies requirements, all of which should contribute to the general mission statements of colleges and universities. Only by institutionalizing the sophisticated course syllabus can we aspire to connect individual courses to departmental programs to general studies to mission statements. Only comprehensive course syllabi provide detailed snapshots of what actually takes place inside the four walls of college classrooms. Only substantial course syllabi enable us to intelligently link the three different levels of curricular modernization now taking place in U.S. higher education. And only dense course syllabi provide the raw materials needed to satisfy contemporary demands for curricular accountability emanating from oversight bodies.

**Model Syllabi and Other Resources**

Fortunately, many educational organizations have begun taking the course syllabus more seriously. The West Virginia Consortium for Faculty and Course Development in International Studies (FACDIS) consists of 375 faculty members representing more than 15 disciplines and coming from all 20 institutions of higher education in West Virginia—public- and private-sector colleges, community colleges, and universities. For the past 19 years, the FACDIS statewide consortium has conducted numerous projects internationalizing the content of extant courses and creating new courses. FACDIS believes that sophisticated course syllabi not only improve specific courses, but also energize innovation in the general curriculum, and provide the mechanisms to make curricular reform accountable. Consequently, the consortium has overseen the transformation of scores of sterile two-pagers into far more dynamic documents. While length alone may not constitute a sufficient condition for improving course syllabi, it is nevertheless a necessary condition for doing so.  
Funded by the Institute for Shipboard Education, and based since 1980 at the University of Pittsburgh, the Semester at Sea Program (SAS) circles the globe twice annually with 600 students and 50 faculty and administrators aboard this sailing university. Academic courses are taught during 50 days at sea, and course-relevant field trips occur while in port. When I taught for SAS, professors had to submit detailed and defensible syllabi, since this unique program is routinely challenged to demonstrate the academic rigor of a floating college visiting a dozen countries in four months. All syllabi required the approval of the host department at the University of Pittsburgh before professors’ courses were accepted into that semester’s academic program.

Another organization that recognizes how excellent syllabi improve the curriculum is the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE). During 1990-92 FIPSE funded a model syllabus program with the American Political Science Association (APSA), resulting in eleven monographs of 100-plus pages covering the discipline’s key courses. Exemplary syllabi are solicited, veteran scholars select a few of the best ones, the editor writes a synthesis citing common themes among the elite syllabi, and the top syllabi are described and analyzed. The collection of syllabi for International Relations, edited by Emory University’s Linda Brady, notes that those selected all present alternative theoretical perspectives, make theories concrete by using historical examples or case studies, keep students informed about contemporary affairs, and treat the course as a vehicle to develop research or writing skills. All of these APSA model syllabi collections can be found on the APSA web-site. Similarly, The American Sociological Association’s web-site makes model syllabi readily available to faculty. Countless syllabi spanning both the humanities and social sciences can be easily accessed at Humanities-Net, and college and university syllabi from around the world are available at Global Syllabi. Operating under the name of World Lecture Hall, an extensive site, based at the University of Texas-Austin, includes syllabi covering all academic disciplines. (web-sites cited below).

A few creative syllabi caught my eye in one look around the Internet. The syllabus for U.S. Diplomatic History taught by Ernest Bolt at the University of Richmond is clear, concise, includes detailed assignments, encourages students to schedule conferences with him, and introduces each topic with pithy questions like: Why was Billy Joel interested in this subject? Did Harry Truman overreact in the Truman Doctrine speech? Would John Kennedy have pulled out of Vietnam, had he lived longer? A rigorous, innovative, interdisciplinary undergraduate seminar is traced in Alix Cooper’s Harvard University syllabus for Nature in Early Modern Europe and America. It begins by asking this intriguing question: What connection exists between the ways people have thought about nature and the way they have actually behaved towards it? An impressive reading list is given for each class period; activities for the last class are chosen by the students. While I have heard about courses taught completely online, I had no idea how one would be organized, until I read the syllabus for Charles Keyes’ introductory philosophy course at Duquesne University. I was impressed by the inductive method allowing students to formulate their own answers to philosophical questions. Hand-written notebooks (substance) and journals (reactions) are submitted electronically, along with a term paper. Students have a chat-line to communicate with each other, and technical computer assistance is provided by trained course monitors. The final syllabus I selected because it illustrates something that administrators everywhere are now nudging faculty to introduce: capstone courses intended to tie together academic majors. A capstone sociology course at Duke University taught by Kenneth Spenner explains the capstone concept, employs a case study project, places students in teams for other projects, and uses current events to as a way to engagingly relate concepts learned in prior courses to real world occurrences.

**Conclusion**

An authority on American higher education, Robert Diamond, points to cracks in the integrity of the curricular foundation at three levels of the academy. It is argued here that the sophisticated course syllabus, a squandered resource in academia, represents a vital tool needed to restore curricular integrity. Not only can model syllabi improve teaching and learning in individual courses, they can also enlist all three levels of the curriculum in furthering the mission statements that constitute higher education’s blueprint. If conceptualized more complexly, the lowly course syllabus possesses the synergistic potential to satisfy the demands for curricular accountability at the heart of the assessment movement currently occupying center stage of the higher education drama in the U.S.

**References**

Howard Altman and William Cashin, “Writing a Syllabus,” (Center for Faculty Evaluation and Development, Kansas State University, September 1992).

Marie Birdsall, “Writing, Designing, and Using a Course Syllabus,” (Office for Effective Teaching, Northeastern University, 1989).

Linda Brady, ed. Political Science Course Syllabi Collection: International Relations (American Political Science Association, 1991).

Robert Diamond, Designing and Assessing Courses and Curricula: A Practical Guide (Jossey-Bass, 1998).

Judith Grunert. The Course Syllabus: A Learning-Centered Approach (Anker, 1997).

John K. Roth, ed. Inspiring Teaching: Carnegie Professors of the Year Speak (Anker, 1996).

Sharon Rubin, “Professors, Students, and the Syllabus,” Chronicle of Higher Education (7 August 1985),

**Internet** (These sources were current at the time the article was written.)

The Humanities (H-net)  
<http://www.h-net2.msu.edu/~aseh/syllabi>

World Lecture Hall  
<http://www.vcu.edu/mdcweb/english/>

American Political Science Association Model Syllabi Project  
<http://www.apsanet.org/teaching/syllabi/APSA/>

American Sociological Association  
<http://www.asanet.org/pubs/syl.html>

The Global Campus  
<http://www.csulb.edu/gc/>

Courseware for Higher Education on the World Wide Web  
[http://www.philae.sas.upenn.edu](http://www.philae.sas.upenn.edu/)

AskERIC  
<http://ericir.syr.edu/>

Syllabus Web  
[http://www.syllabus.com](http://www.syllabus.com/)

Ernest Bolt Syllabus  
<http://www.richmond.edu/~ebolt/syll327.html>

Alix Cooper Syllabus  
<http://www.h-net2.msu.edu/~aseh/syllabi/cooper.htm>

Charles Keyes Syllabus  
<http://www.duq.edu/~keyes/bpq/syllabus.html>