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## Teaching the Syllabus at the Community College

### Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank Dean Jen Daniels for her superb guidance, support, and feedback throughout the project. I also thank my colleagues Susanna Ferrara for allowing me to use her “Three Appeals” assignment and Nicole Tong and Ray Orkwis for sharing their syllabi; Randa Gray, Ray Orkwis, Sarah Jacobson, Cathy Gaiser, Steven Lessener, Bryan L. Peters, Amy Flessert, Jane F. Friedmann, and Sophia A. Sexton for helping conduct the questionnaire; Hector Revollo for technical support; and our emeritus professors Reva A. Savkar and Robert C. Loser and the college Loser-Savkar Fellowship Selection Committee for research time support. Last but most importantly, I am grateful to our students for their valuable responses. This work is for them.

## TEACHING THE SYLLABUS AT THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

YUEMIN HE, PH.D.

### ABSTRACT

Reacting directly to the fact that even the best syllabus is worthless to the student who does not read it, this essay draws inspiration from research of the past decade, especially from the learning-focused syllabus concept that was introduced by three researchers at the University of Virginia, and uses a questionnaire to gauge our community college students' needs. It suggests specific methods to build the bridge between course content instruction and syllabus teaching. Ultimately, it contributes to the discussion of several important syllabus-related questions: How can instructors use the syllabus as a pedagogical tool to build a strong student rapport? How can instructors balance the syllabus to build a positive academic atmosphere and fulfill course requirements? What are the ways to make the syllabus exemplary for student learning? What standard practices can be established in college syllabus education? The essay aims to increase student autonomy and community and student success, which is the goal of community college education.

### INTRODUCTION

As community college instructors, we have some routine practices regarding the syllabus: Before a semester unfolds, we spend days crafting the assignments, updating the schedules, and tweaking our policies. We post the document in our Learning Management Systems and distribute hard copies on the first day of class. Some call the first day of class the *syllabus day* because of

the time and effort dedicated to getting students to read and absorb the vital information included. We use quizzes, games, group discussions, etc., to ensure that the document is read and remembered all semester long, and yet, how many times do we repeat what is in the syllabus? Students ask where to find us outside of class, when our office hours are, when assignments are due, and sometimes in the division offices, we have even overheard them asking what our names are. Despite the great importance we put on the syllabus, and our efforts to make it accessible and memorable, it is often neglected or undervalued.

It is no wonder scholars have conducted vigorous studies, striving to make the syllabus and its use more efficacious. In their article “Syllabus Detail and Students' Perceptions of Teacher Effectiveness,” Bryan K. Saville and his co-authors (2010) asserted that a very detailed syllabus may generate more positive responses from the students (p. 188). When writing about student plagiarism, Sara Staats and Julie M. Hupp (2012) reported in “An Examination of Academic Misconduct Intentions and the Ineffectiveness of Syllabus Statements” that the syllabus as a statement itself, even if cognitively processed, is not a deterrent to student malpractice. They called for more innovative approaches to enhance the effectiveness of the statement in curtailing dishonesty (p. 244). While emphasizing close attention to details in syllabus construction, Jade S. Jenkins and her co-authors (2014) suggested in “More Content or More Policy? A Closer Look at Syllabus Detail, Instructor Gender, and Perceptions of Instructor Effectiveness” that gender differences of the instructors do not affect the effectiveness of restrictive boundary details (i.e., restrictive policies and expectations) in the syllabus; instead, it is the way the information is presented rather than the information itself that is relevant to students' perceived instructor support and effectiveness (p. 133). Later Claudia Stanny (2015), the director of the Center for University Teaching, Learning, and Assessment of the University of West Florida, published “Assessing the

Culture of Teaching and Learning through a Syllabus Review” to advocate aligning the syllabus construction and teaching with the 21st century skills of both the instructors and students (i.e., aligning institutional syllabus review measures with activities and assignments designed to cultivate student skills in information literacy and digital communication). When it comes to the syllabus, “a few compulsive sorts may pore over every letter. Others may refer to it only when there is a problem. Many may never look at it at all” (p. 37). Therefore, Mark Canada (2013) prompted his fellow instructors in his essay, “The Syllabus: A Place to Engage Students' Egos,” to put themselves in their students’ shoes, and ask the question that their students would ask about the syllabus: “what’s in it for me?” (p. 42).

These studies provide instructors with valuable tools to employ and paradigms to rethink our practices in teaching and using the syllabus. In 2016, University of Virginia (hereafter UVA) researchers--Michael S. Palmer, Lindsay B. Wheeler, and Itiya Aneece--transformed that question into a more provocative one: Does the syllabus matter? In their article, “Does the Document Matter: The Evolving Role of Syllabi in Higher Education,” they answered that question with a qualified “yes” and promoted what they call the *learning-focused* syllabus. They pointed out that the traditional content-based syllabus has become increasingly authoritative and rule-infested; it stifles student motivation and hinders student learning. In contrast, the learning-focused syllabus is characterized by “question-driven course descriptions,” “long-ranging, multi-faceted learning goals,” clear and measurable learning objectives, detailed course schedules, and an approachable and inviting tone (p. 36). In other words, the learning-focused syllabus is student-centered and designed to engage students actively with the document and the course.

After surveying 100 students on their perceptions of a traditional syllabus and a learning-focused syllabus for the same course, the three researchers concluded that both types of syllabi

were useful to students but the learning-focused syllabus created more positive perceptions of the syllabus itself, the course and the instructor. They reported that the UVA students in the study “viewed the learning-focused syllabus as a useful, organizing document, the course as an interesting, relevant, and rigorous learning experience, and the instructor as a caring and supportive individual integral to the learning process” (p. 46). Since student engagement impacts retention and student success, I wanted to figure out if the learning-focused syllabus had the same positive impacts on the very diverse, frequently multi-lingual learners in my community college classrooms.

Our students come from over 180 different countries; 60 percent of this student body is ethnic or racial minorities. Many come from countries where syllabi are literally non-existent. I taught more than a decade in a college in China without seeing a Western syllabus; some sort of teaching plan was routinely used by the instructors, but it was never given to the students, nor was the plan a full-fledged and systematically developed syllabus. Just last year, I met two Chinese graduate students at an international conference in Indonesia. When speaking of syllabus, the students reported that their professor, who had returned from Ph.D. study in the United States, was just in the process of distributing to the class a document that bore resemblance to the American syllabus.

To do this, I collaborated with Dean Jen Daniels and developed a questionnaire that asked questions in the spirit of the above research. Ultimately, we wanted to increase student engagement and find specific ways to educate our students about the usefulness of the syllabus and the connection between syllabus teaching and our daily course content instruction.

## **USING A QUESTIONNAIRE TO IDENTIFY COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS’ NEEDS**

Titled “Syllabus for You,” the questionnaire (see Appendix D) includes nine multiple answer questions: The first five questions gather information on student use of the syllabus and their knowledge of common syllabus conventions. The final four questions ask students to review sample policies following traditional syllabus conventions (third-person, boilerplate policies) versus the learning-focused ones. In other words, the questionnaire examines how much respondents know about the syllabus, where their challenges lie in understanding the syllabus, what common practices they adopt in terms of syllabus use, etc. It leads to answers that can help gauge receptiveness to the characteristics of a learning-focused syllabus as well.

We conducted two rounds of the questionnaire within the English Department at Northern Virginia Community College (hereafter NOVA), Annandale Campus: first with 180 students from ENF 3-ENG 111 (Preparing for College English III & College Composition I) and ENG 111 (College Composition I) classes in fall 2018, and then with 241 students from ENF 3-ENG 111 and ENG 111 classes in spring 2019. A total of 421 students participated in the survey, and both rounds ended up with more than a 50 percent student response rate. Both ENF 3 and ENG 111 were selected because they are gateway courses in which most students enroll; their success in college is often predicated on performance in gateway courses like ENF 3 and ENG 111. Below is a brief analysis of the student responses.

Question 1: For the question “When did you first understand what a syllabus was,” at least twice the number of students in ENF 3-ENG 111 than in ENG 111 answered “After I came to NOVA (or another college).” ENF 3-ENG 111 students were more likely to have been introduced to the concept of the syllabus in college rather than in high school or earlier. The survey result thus points to the need for instructors to adopt different strategies in using the aforementioned Syllabus Day: In teaching students in the first-semester, gateway courses in all disciplines, we need to be more

explicit about the use and importance of the syllabus. For that purpose, systematic syllabus training activities, such as the one introduced later in this essay, may be adopted. Whereas, we can refresh and reinforce the knowledge that our more prepared students have about the syllabus by “flipping the classroom,” such as arranging diagnostic assessment activities creatively. Appendix B is an example of such activities, and I will discuss the example in detail.

Question 2: More than 20 percent of students from each group believed “the syllabus is important ONLY at the beginning of the class because I need it to figure out what the semester will be like at the start.” Nearly 80 percent of students from each group responded that “the syllabus is important every day because it contains information about due dates, attendance policies, office hours, and I can find information I need without having to ask the instructor.” This is good news for those of us who sometimes despair that no one reads the syllabus. The question becomes how to reach the 20% who do not understand the holistic functions of the syllabus. One solution I suggest is to teach the syllabus itself as a work model, which will make it necessary for our students to pore over the whole document early in the semester, assess its long-term functions, and integrate the document into their daily learning habits. In the last part of this essay I will offer one concrete example while discussing this model approach.

Question 3: More than 10 percent of the students from both groups could not read the office hours provided. The results from the two rounds of research echoed each other. Slightly more (some 3 percent) ENF 3-ENG 111 students than ENG 111 students could not read the office hours by appointment correctly. The results from the two rounds of survey concurred as well. Our takeaway is that what instructors consider to be clear as day may not be that clear to the students at all. Community college faculty play an important role in helping first-generation and other new-to-college students decode the academic jargon and abbreviations in which we are immersed. The

students who often solicit confirmation from us may just need some education about what the different types of office hours are, what they entail, and what the commonly used abbreviations in the syllabus are (ex. R = Thursday).

Question 4: To the question, “How do you feel if your class syllabus states ‘Office Hours: Before and After Class’,” slightly more than 10 percent of the students from each group considered “the office hours not written in a student-friendly manner” while at least a quarter of the students from both groups felt “the professor is quite flexible with the office hours.” It seems that more students trusted that the professor was well-intentioned than believed that the professor failed to write the syllabus in a student-friendly manner. The statement sounds friendly; however, the underlying ambiguity in the statement can lead to confusion (ex. How early before class? How long after?).

Question 5: While more than 70 percent of the students knew the importance of reading both the Course Description and Course Objectives in a syllabus, neither group of the students seemed to perceive the connections between the two sections, let alone see much value in thinking much about either section. Apparently instructors need to illuminate the students about the necessity for, and purposes of, these two sections, individually and in conjunction with each other. The students’ lack of understanding of the interconnection between different sections of the syllabus also behooves us instructors to be creative in writing course syllabus. For example, the UVA researchers advocated the “question-driven course descriptions,” which Ben Kain (2004), author of *What the Best College Teachers Do*, dubbed as “beautiful questions.” This type of descriptions emphasizes framing the course content as questions to be explored and answered by students (p. 37). They are inviting, treating the students as fellow scholars or engaged competent learners. For example, in my ENG 125 (Introduction to Literature) syllabus, instead of a traditional course

description, I borrowed some ideas from *The Hatred of Literature*, a book by William Marx (20015/2018), and wrote:

Book writer William Marx says that literature does not start with Homer or *Gilgamesh*, but with Plato driving the poets out of the city, like God casting Adam and Eve out of Paradise. That is literature's genesis (p. 24). Literature survived and has been thriving. Why literature has the power to defy all the anti-literary discourses? Why without literature human life saps? What is literature anyways? This course introduces a range of literary genres to help contemplate these questions as it continues to develop our college writing ability.

Question 6: To the question "Which statement or statements on attendance do you prefer," the questionnaire lists four choices, two of which are

a) If you are ill or can't make it, let me know, ahead of time if possible, or by email, so that I can mark you as excused. But bear in mind that an excused absence still counts as an absence. Even though I post your assignments on Blackboard, there is no way to learn what you would have gotten in class by merely asking me, "What did I miss?" The truth is that you missed 75 minutes of learning.

b) **Send me an email** at XXXX@nvcc.edu to notify me that you will not be there. I do not need the reason, only the statement that you will be absent.

**Check Blackboard**, but do not expect that everything we did in class will be available there.

**Contact another student** prior to the next class to find out what you missed.

Ask me for clarification, not for what you missed.

More students in ENG 111 than in ENF3-ENG 111 chose the student-friendly statement a), rather than the traditional statement b) that uses bolding, underlining, and an imperative tone. The difference in student responses confirms the UVA researchers' discovery that the syllabus should

not be authoritarian, cold, and alienating. It demonstrates that the learning-focused syllabus is more supportive and warmer, and students are more likely to perceive the syllabus positively.

Question 7: As one of the choices for question 7, the more traditional statement “Students wishing to speak with a professor should...” was selected by only 10 percent of the students from both groups. Narrating in the third person and using “students” as the subject does not invite engagement: It demands that the students take the initiative to open a dialogue with their professor, rather than warmly welcoming the students to seek the professor’s help. The responses to this question further attest to the importance of adopting a caring tone in syllabus construction.

Question 8: To the question “What do you like to see in a syllabus in terms of how your professor presents information?” The reactions from both groups were similar. They overwhelmingly chose the presentations that used colors, tables, charts, and/or with interactive components and avoided their more static-looking, text-heavy versions.

Question 9: Among all the students who responded to the questionnaire, slightly more than 20 percent of the ENG 111 students noted that they did not care which style the syllabus was written in. Only 3 percent more students in ENG 111 than in ENF 3-ENG 111 chose the learning-focused syllabus course over the traditional syllabus one. This result is interesting; it can either mean the differences in style may not be that decisive in affecting student learning experiences, or we need to figure out who those 20 percent of students were: Were they so seasoned learners that they could stay unaffected by the style differences in their learning, or were they learners who were yet to be sensitive to the implication of the differences to their learning experiences? In addition, how many were “primed” about the question? There is still so much for us to figure out.

However, the results from the first five questions are not surprising considering that our community college student body is very diverse. Many of our students are the first in a family to

attend a college or are returning to college after years of not reading or writing in academic genres. In this case, the syllabus, that key academic genre, can be a roadblock to student success if it is not carefully crafted and explicitly taught to students.

Also, inherent in our act of delivering the syllabus to our students are the assumptions that our students can read the language used in the syllabus (while the fact is that many cannot understand the abbreviations, the conventions that govern a specific discipline's writing, and an individual instructor's writing style); that they can detect patterns, implications, and imbrications embedded in the syllabus (such as the correlation between the hard copy syllabus and its online portion); that they know the paralegal nature of the document; and that they know the afterlife of a syllabus in the long term (such as its later impact on student college transfer).

We recognize that this questionnaire is by no means exhaustive or flawless, and that it may not reflect what syllabus across the disciplines demands of our students. Nevertheless, it confirmed that aspects of the learning-focused syllabus are important: audience awareness is imperative; a student friendly tone matters; proactive interaction is crucial to positive student learning experience; visuals are expected of a contemporary syllabus; and humor generates oxytocin, which the research of scholars such as Meg Daley Olmert (2010) shows is critical to positive communication between all creatures.

Eventually, based on the literature review, the results of the questionnaire, and empirical analyses, we have developed four methods to engage our students in syllabus reading, and for each method we provide one concrete example. During the conferences at which I presented with Dean Daniels in the past three years, we had many requests for specific examples that employ the learning-focused concepts in specific class activities and assignments, and prompts were much sought-after by the teaching community. We are glad to share.

## **BUILDING A REPERTOIRE OF ASSIGNMENTS TO TEACH THE SYLLABUS**

### **A. Proactive Syllabus Training Activity**

Based on the student responses to the questionnaire, we developed a script for interactive online training that can be plugged into some teaching platform, such as Blackboard or Canvas, to educate students about the syllabus so that they can be prepared early on in their college study. The script includes multiple answer questions that introduce the concept, purpose, and different types of the syllabus as well as exposes students to common abbreviations used in the syllabus and tips for effective use of the syllabus (See Appendix A). At present, two of our faculty members are using this script to develop a short training course to plug in our newly adopted Canvas platform to help their students. Individual faculty or schools are welcome to adapt this script in whatever form conducive to their student education.

### **B. Creative Use of the First Day Diagnostic Assessment**

The NOVA English Discipline Group recommends conducting a diagnostic assessment on the first day of class so that the English instructors can understand their students' particular needs and so they can recommend support services if students seem to need remediation. Accordingly, instructors usually give a diagnostic assessment on the first day of class (such as asking the students to read a short article and then write a short essay) and cover the syllabus and course introduction on the second day. Keeping the syllabus teaching in the foreground of thinking, I designed a short essay assignment for ENG 111 (See Appendix B).

Besides fully functioning as a diagnostic writing assignment, this prompt incorporates the syllabus teaching in an effective manner by requiring that students read the syllabus and write in response to it rather than to an article. Instead of postponing the task of reading the syllabus until

the second class, it places the syllabus right in front of the students on the first day, which is when most students expect to see it anyway. It also allows the students a chance to engage with the syllabus on their own terms before their instructor “sells” it. Hence it cultivates student proactive behavior or habit. It virtually leaves the second class for the instructor to focus on specific questions or knowledge gaps that the students may have about the syllabus.

In terms of adaptability, the assignment can easily be modified to suit whatever course depending on the course level, student readiness, the instructor’s expectations, etc. Indeed, I tested it in my spring 2020 ENG 112 (College Composition II) classes by asking my students to decide if our class’s syllabus is a traditional or learning-focused one. First, my students were surprised to learn that syllabi can be categorized in such a manner. Then they applied the distinction between the two types to evaluate our course syllabus. As it can be imagined, the answers were varied: Most decided it was a learning-focused one; some regarded it as a traditional one; still some discovered that it is a mixture of both types. I was particularly amused and amazed by one student response, not because it deemed my syllabus a learning-focused one (I was pleased to hear that, of course) but because it gave evidence that suggested thorough digestion of the characteristics of a learning-focused syllabus that I had just taught the class. In other words, I saw a response that was “primed.” Meanwhile, I was ensured of the student’s thorough familiarity with all the details in the syllabus as well his adroitness in composing an excellent thesis-driven text in a brief period of time. I drew the conclusion that the student was properly placed in the class. Later he did prove he was a very strong writer in the class. The diagnostic writing assignment that incorporated the syllabus teaching in it certainly served its purpose well.

### C. Syllabi as Area of Study

Our colleague Susanna Ferrara developed an assignment titled “Exploratory Argument: Rhetorical Appeals in NOVA Course Syllabi.” The assignment asks the students to analyze multiple syllabi by their own professors by identifying specific examples of ethos, logos, and pathos, and then make a claim about how the students see faculty using rhetorical appeals in the syllabus documents (See Appendix C). The assignment cleverly develops the students’ knowledge of rhetorical appeals by treating the syllabus/syllabi as a very strong *kairos*, that is, a strong occasion for writing about arguable issues in a context that is relevant to the students’ educational success. It also makes the syllabus instrumental in teaching one of the most important types of argumentative writing, that is, the exploratory or inquiry argument. By braiding the study of the syllabus, rhetorical skills, and argument writing into one strand, it enables the students’ hands-on exploratory research, analysis, and writing. Our colleague graciously shares this ingenious assignment, so more students will be better served.

#### D. Syllabus as a Work Model

Imitation builds on existing styles, subject matters, or forms, and redirects them to generate new creative expressions of ideas, views, and sentiments. The syllabus is a written document, so we find instructors can also design an assignment to ask the students to imitate a certain section in the syllabus depending on the course. For example, in an English class almost all syllabi contain a course description and course objectives. The two sections can be used as a writing model. These two sections contain essentially the same information that the students need to know, but they sound very differently and serve different purposes: Course description is written from the current temporal and spatial point of view and allows the students to see what will happen or unfold gradually during the semester. It provides a forward look. Whereas, the course objectives section invites the students to imagine standing at the end of a semester and taking a backward look at

what they should have accomplished by then. Course description induces mental preparation for work while the course objectives section helps evoke a strong sense of achievement. Therefore, asking the students to write about how they plan to act out what is described in the course description and where they imagine him- or herself to be in knowledge and skills towards the end of the semester by imitating/using the forward and backward looks, the students will not only become familiar with the syllabus per se but also learn to write with repetition but not repetitively.

Since we are from the English discipline, the methods introduced here may or may not work for all disciplines in the community college classroom. But in the heart of all these methods is what compositionist Anne Curzan (2017) recommends with two rhetorical questions: “If we are going to expect students to write in class, for example, why not use a short, engaging writing prompt at some point on the first day? If students are going to be solving problems in groups, why not do so on the first day?” (para. 6). Indeed, students often have not mastered any of the specific course content yet, but self-contained activities often can welcome them to our classroom and showcase what we plan to do more than any course description or schedule can. It is with this belief that this essay can stimulate more exemplary pedagogical tools for teaching and learning.

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## APPENDIX A: STUDENT SYLLABUS TRAINING SCRIPT

### 1. What is a syllabus?

A syllabus is your guide to a course and what will be expected of you in the course. A syllabus generally includes course policies, required texts, rules and regulations, and a schedule of assignments. A syllabus can tell you nearly everything you need to know about how a course will be run and what will be expected of you.

### 2. What is the purpose of a syllabus?

The purposes of a syllabus are almost as varied as the possible contents but can be grouped into several categories. A syllabus serves three major roles: as a contract, as a permanent academic record, and most importantly, as a learning tool.

### 3. What makes the learning-focused syllabi student-friendly?

There are two kinds of syllabi: the traditional syllabi and the learning-focused ones. If you don't know what the learning-focused syllabi are, here are some of their defining characteristics:

- A focus on student success
- Engaging, question-driven course descriptions
- Long-ranging, multi-faceted learning goals
- Clear, measurable learning objectives
- Robust and transparent assessment and activity descriptions
- Detailed course schedules
- An inviting, approachable tone

**4. What are the common abbreviations for the days of the week?**

While constructing syllabi, instructors often use abbreviations for the days of the week to keep their syllabi short. Here are the common abbreviation forms:

- Monday – M., Mon.
- Tuesday – T., Tu., Tue., or Tues.
- Wednesday – W., Wed.
- Thursday – R., Th., Thu., Thur., or Thurs.
- Friday – F., Fri.
- Saturday – S., Sat.
- Sunday – U., Sun.

**5. What are office hours?**

In their syllabi, instructors normally list their office hours, during which you can meet your instructors. There are two types of office hours: walk-in/drop-in office hours and office hours by appointment. The differences between the two types are:

- walk-in office hours are available for you to meet with your instructors on a first-come, first-served basis.
- office hours by appointment require you to first schedule an appointment with your instructors and then meet your instructors at the scheduled time.

**6. What do you think of “Office hours: Before and After Class”? Check all that apply.**

- For readers who do not know or remember the class time, it is meaningless.
- Even for readers who know how to find the class time, it is not the most convenient to use.

- Even for readers who know the class time, it is not specific as to how much time is under discussion.
- It leaves much flexibility to the students.
- It leaves much flexibility to the instructor.

#### **7. Why are Course Objectives important?**

- You are more cognizant of the selected learning materials and instructional approach to the course when you understand course expectations from the beginning.
- You make more connections with the content as you move through the course when you know the sequence of how and why the course was designed.
- The course material will resonate with you more when you are fully aware of the course objectives targeting specific skills, concepts, or knowledge.
- As you are taking the course, you are more likely to ask questions if something doesn't make sense, especially content directly relating to a particular course objective.
- You are mindful of your own abilities when completing assignments. You are more apt to assess your own work in the course, checking to see firsthand if your performance is meeting those course objectives.

#### **8. What are the tips that can help you use the syllabus to navigate your semester?**

- At the beginning of the semester, carefully read the whole syllabus and take note of the important dates when exams, assignments, and papers are due.
- Just as you check a map or directions for various intersections along your trip, check the syllabus before each class for reading and other assignments and to gain an idea of the day's topic.

- If you have used Google Maps, you know directions and maps can sometimes be confusing or even mistaken. When something in the syllabus is unclear, talk to the instructor. Ask the instructor to help you understand an assignment, or why a certain topic is being covered at a given time.
- Your instructors put a lot of time planning their syllabi, and nothing disgruntles them more than students who do poorly because the students failed to consult the syllabi. Just as you often try to find an answer by reading the FAQ section of a website, try to find an answer by reading a syllabus first.

## APPENDIX B: ENG 111 DIAGNOSTIC WRITING - A RESPONSE TO THE COURSE SYLLABUS

**Purpose:** One of the keys to success in college composition is to ensure that you are properly placed from the start of the semester. As you can understand, both being “overplaced” and “underplaced” can have negative consequences for student success. The essay you are writing now will be used to determine what your individual writing needs are and whether this is the right class for you.

**Directions:** Read through our class syllabus. Then identify and evaluate all the requirements, expectations, rules, and policies by annotating the syllabus fully. To annotate you need to write notes about your thinking and questioning on the provided paper with easy to track reminders, such as page number, section title, specific sentence, etc.

Next, write a response essay to point out what you don’t understand in the syllabus, what might become challenges to you during the semester, and how you plan to deal with those challenges. Your essay should be at least two paragraphs, but you may write more if you wish. Be sure to write a separate concluding paragraph at the end of the essay. When you have finished, reread your essay so that you can check for any errors.

**Assessment:** I will return your writing with brief comments and suggestions. There will also be a grade, but the grade will not be counted into the final course grade.

## APPENDIX C: ENG 112 - ESSAY 1: EXPLORATORY ARGUMENT

### RHETORICAL APPEALS IN NOVA COURSE SYLLABI

**Purpose:** The purpose of this assignment is to develop your knowledge of rhetorical appeals, ethos, logos, and pathos by writing about them in a context that is relevant to your educational success.

**Task:** Write a short exploratory argument essay (2-3 pages) that explores how different NOVA course syllabi use rhetorical appeals (ethos, logos, and pathos). To develop your argument, you will need to analyze multiple syllabi, identify specific examples of ethos, logos, and pathos, and make a claim about how you see faculty using rhetorical appeals (intentionally or unintentionally) in syllabus documents.

Be sure to include the following elements in your exploratory argument essay:

- An introduction that sets up the subject, context, and purpose for your essay.
- A thesis statement that answers the question: How do you see faculty using rhetorical appeals in their course syllabi?
- The thesis statement is located at the end of the introduction.
- Use of specific examples from at least two syllabi: your ENG 112 syllabus for this class, and one other from the shared folder. You may include examples from more than two different syllabi if you wish.
- A separate conclusion at the end of the essay to offer wrap up and closure.
- MLA style citations for each syllabus in-text and on a separate Works Cited page.

- Clear definitions of each rhetorical appeal.
- Specific examples of each appeal as you see them in the syllabi you analyze.

**Assessment:** I will use the Composition Assessment Rubric to evaluate your work during a grading.

#### **APPENDIX D: SYLLABUS SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE**

Read each question and then check ALL the answers that apply to you.

1. *When did you first understand what a syllabus was?*
  - a) In high school or middle school
  - b) After I came to NOVA (or another college)
  - c) I am still confused by what it is
  
2. *If you are from another country, were you introduced to a syllabus there?*
  - a) **Yes**
  - b) **No**
  
3. *How important is the syllabus to you?*
  - a) It is not very important because the professor will tell me what to do for each class in person anyway.
  - b) It is important only at the beginning of the class because I need it to figure out what the semester will be like at the start.
  - c) It is important only if I need to see a dean or other authority if I am not happy with my grade.
  - d) It is important every day because it contains includes information about due dates, attendance policies, office hours, and I can find information I need without having to ask the teacher.

4. *When can you count on your professor being in the office if the syllabus states, “Drop-in Office Hours: M/W 10:30-11:15 AM; T/R 2:00-2:30 PM”?*
- a) **Mondays at 10:45 in the morning**
  - b) **Tuesdays in the afternoon between 2:00 to 2:30**
  - c) **Fridays in the afternoon between 2:00 and 2:30**
  - d) **Thursdays at 2:15 in the afternoon**
5. *Which of the following would be applicable to you if your class syllabus states, “Office Hours by Appointment: T/Th: 8:30-9:30am & Friday morning”?*
- a) **You can walk into your professor’s office on any Thursday at 9:15 in the morning and the professor will be there.**
  - b) **Your professor will be there if you have made an appointment for a Tuesday at 8:50 in the morning.**
  - c) **Your professor will not be available on Friday morning unless you have made an appointment for that day.**
  - d) **You can walk into your professor’s office on any Tuesday at 9:00 in the morning and your professor will be there.**
6. *How do you feel if your class syllabus states, “Office hours: Before and After Class”?*
- a) **I feel I need to ask my professor to clarify how long before and after my class that my professor will be in the office.**
  - b) **I feel that I know exactly when to find my professor.**
  - c) **I feel the office hours are not written in a student-friendly manner.**
  - d) **I feel the professor is quite flexible with the office hours.**

7. *How do you read the “course description” and “course objective”?*

- a) I need to read them only once; that’s enough.
- b) I can ignore or skip them when I read the syllabus.
- c) I need to read only one of them.
- d) I read them carefully since they convey a different perspective about the course.

8. *Which statement or statements on attendance do you prefer?*

- c) When you are absent, you do not need to email me, but you may. Please refrain from asking, “What did I miss?” We do so much in a class session, and I won’t sum it up on email for you. I will send occasional updates and recaps on Blackboard. Use your resources: Blackboard, your classmates, and my office hours, to compensate for what you missed on your own time. If you’re sleepy or sick with a fever or something contagious, please stay home.
- d) If you are ill or can’t make it, let me know, ahead of time if possible, or by email, so that I can mark you as excused. But bear in mind that an excused absence still counts as an absence. Even though I post your assignments on Blackboard, there is no way to learn what you would have gotten in class by merely asking me, “What did I miss?” The truth is that you missed 75 minutes of learning.
- e) **Send me an email** at XXXX@nvcc.edu to notify me that you will not be there. I do not need the reason, only the statement that you will be absent.  
**Check Blackboard**, but do not expect that everything we did in class will be available there.  
**Contact another student** prior to the next class to find out what you missed. Ask me for clarification, not for what you missed.
- f) The above three statements send the same message and I do not care which the professor adopts to deliver the message.

9. *Which tone do you prefer your professor to write in?*
- a) “I welcome you to contact me....”
  - b) “If you need to contact me....”
  - c) “Students can contact me....”
  - d) “Students wishing to speak with a professor should....”
10. *Below are excerpts from two syllabi. Which class would you take?*
- a) The first one
  - b) The second one
  - c) Both
  - d) Neither

**U.S. History since 1865**

Course Requirements

Each student in the course will be expected to complete three exams and one essay during the semester.

**Exams** - Each exam will consist of three sections: an identification section, a short answer section, and an essay section. Review sheets will be distributed before the exams to assist students in their preparation. Review sheets will only be distributed in class and will not be sent out electronically to students. All students are required to bring an unmarked Blue Book to each exam. These Blue Books will be collected in class on the day of the test and redistributed before the exam begins. The final exam will not be cumulative.

**Quizzes** - Students are required to take a short reading quiz at the start of each class period. Quizzes can only be taken in class and cannot be made up regardless of reason.

**Essay** - Students are required to write one 3-4 page double-spaced essay based on *Making Freedom: African Americans in U.S. History*. The assignment is not a research paper and should be based on the book alone. The essay is due when we will be discussing the 1960's in class. Students should come ready to discuss the book when they turn in their papers.

## **U.S. History since 1865**

### **How you'll know you're learning**

Throughout the course, you will have multiple opportunities to explore a variety of historical events, engage in historical thinking, form and develop arguments, and share what you learn through discussion and writing. We will, for example, have frequent in-class discussions, debates, small group activities, and other similar exercises. In addition, the following activities will help guide you through the learning process and help you measure your progress as you move toward deeper understanding.

**Reading Checks.** Every week, you will be given a short out-of-class writing assignment based on the scheduled readings for the upcoming class period, no more than one (1) page, to help you more fully analyze the readings and prepare for class. As already mentioned above, this course is built on the expectation that students want to be active learners, and keeping up with the reading empowers you to take full advantage of class discussions and lectures.

**Oral History Project.** The entire class will conduct an oral history project in partnership with the Hawfields Presbyterian Home (HPH). This oral history project is a priority of HPH, which is eager to preserve the history of elders in the community. It is also essential to our course because it will allow you to practice what historians do—gather, evaluate, and make sense of new historical sources. Doing this project, and doing it well, matters not only for the success of our course, but also to our local community.

You will work in pairs throughout the semester both in- and out-of-class (see the Schedule for details and due dates) to complete the oral history project. Each pair will research relevant local and personal history, develop interview questions, interview one person from the HPH community, accurately and fully transcribe that interview, analyze the interview for the class, and present a complete audio recording and written transcript of the interview to the HPH community...

11. *What do you like to see in a syllabus in terms of how your professor presents information?*

- a) Color blocked
- b) Tables, pies, charts
- c) Bold or underlined for emphasis

- d) Interactive components, e.g. directions to Blackboard, links, websites, sources (Oral Communications Center; Tutoring Center; Language Center; Reading and Writing Center; Computer Lab; Testing Center)

**12. Which describes your status?**

- a) **International student at NOVA**
- b) **First in the family to attend a college**
- c) **Returning to college after being away for years**
- d) **None of the above**

**REFERENCE**

Palmer, Michael S., et al. "Does the Document Matter? The Evolving Role of Syllabi in Higher Education." *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, vol. 48, no.4, 2016, pp. 36-47, doi: 10.1080/00091383.2016.1198186.

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