



How to Encourage Student Engagement with a Course Syllabus

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Current research highlights the importance of creating a well-designed syllabus that highlights themes of student belonging, and support, and how these components may lead to higher rates of persistence and retention. Faculty often dedicate hours to crafting a well-balanced and well-designed syllabus that provides relevant information about course content, assignments, grading policies, and more.

Once an instructor crafted a student-centered syllabus document, how can they ensure that students have actively read the document?

Surely most of us have seen the numerous iterations of “[it is in the syllabus](#)” memes posted on social media. While actively reading and navigating a syllabus *may* be easy and commonplace for those working in higher education, navigating the particulars of this genre of writing might not be entirely clear to newly enrolled college students who have not encountered such a document during their high school experience.

For example, faculty include information about “office hours” and when those occur, but many new students may not understand how to best utilize that opportunity and/or why office hours are provided. Additionally, syllabus documents vary in design and content from one course to the next, so that sections of information in one course syllabus may appear in an entirely different part of a syllabus from a different class.

Many creative engagement activities can help make sure students read through the syllabus in a meaningful, active manner. Here is a list of some syllabus engagement assignments to implement:

1. **Syllabus quiz or scavenger hunt:** Create a brief, low-stakes assignment that will help point students towards policies or assignments you wish to reiterate. Students can work in groups when possible, to foster further discussion of the document.
2. **Personal reflection:** Assign a short writing prompt that asks students to review and discuss which assignments/assessments resonate with them the most and why. Students can explore how assignments relate to their major or to their personal experiences. The syllabus becomes a “source” in this short reflection.
3. **Discourse community jargon search/glossary creation:** Have students meet in groups and review the syllabus looking for key terms and vocabulary that may be unfamiliar and thus need to be defined. (Terms could be specific to the field or terms

that relate to higher education). Create a working glossary to share with the class in a collaborative document.

4. **Outcome mapping assignment:** Break students into small groups and have them review 1-2 outcomes for the course. Students must review the syllabus to explain how course content relates to that outcome as well as which assessments connect to that outcome and share their answers with the group.
5. **Top Ten Questions:** Provide an FAQ list of some of the queries and emails you frequently receive about the course i.e., “is there a final exam,” “What major assignments are due,” “What is your late work policy,” etc. Have students use the syllabus to find answers to those questions and fill out a form/worksheet.
6. **Muddiest Point:** Have students review and read the syllabus and then identify which sections were confusing in a short writing assignment. Circulate the documents to other students and have them attempt to answer such questions.
7. **Gamify the syllabus:** Provide a syllabus to students and allow time for them to review it. Create a game based on the syllabus using Kahoot, Poll Everywhere, or a similar application.
8. **Student-led collaborative syllabus creation:** In this model, students work collaboratively with faculty to develop ideas for key assessments and assignments. After reviewing the content and reading assignments, students work together to structure major assessments to be added to the syllabus.

Final thoughts:

Faculty should refer back to the syllabus regularly and frequently over the term. It is advantageous to point toward course learning outcomes when introducing a new unit or assignment and explain how those will help reinforce a particular outcome. Faculty can also create reflective assignments (like short memos or journal entries) that prompt students to use the syllabus in their day-to-day work. Stay tuned for ideas for reflective assignments that incorporate course outcomes into class discussion and work.