



Syllabus Silliness

Editorial

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Editor, Notes

There is a fable about an emperor whose wife died. So heartbroken was he that he ordered the grandest tomb for her that he could imagine, a monument to outshine the Taj Mahal in its opulence of marble, chalcedony, and gold. For years the empress's body lay in the plain black coffin dictated by custom, while the masons and gilders toiled away. The building was not completed until after the emperor's death, and it was every bit as grand as the architects had envisioned. The only thing marring its splendor was the black coffin: so, the tale runs, the new emperor had the coffin removed.

For some time, one of my departmental jobs has been evaluating other universities' courses to see how they correspond to our own, so that the registrar's office can assess what, if any, transfer credit to offer. When I started, this was usually done using the calendar entry from the other university, either via an electronic link or a photocopy that somebody had submitted by mail. This was the official course description, and by reading it we knew about the course what the student knew on the first day of class. Once in a very long time, the entry was too brief or too vague ("some topics of the instructor's choice in modern graph theory") and we had to ask for more information. Often it was enough to find out what textbook had been used.

These days, it seems, every term's offering of every course has a Syllabus. According to the dictionary, this is a listing of the topics covered in the course. (We can't always do that in the calendar anymore, because there's a tight word limit on course descriptions. One might have thought that one advantage of online calendars over the paper calendars of yore would be that any department could use as many words as it needed to describe a course, but apparently this is not so.) To this, however, instructors everywhere are urged (or required) to add large amounts of other information.

First, there's the stuff we used to write on the board at the beginning of the first lecture: name, course name, course number, office number, phone number, email, textbook, and office hours. Fair enough. Including the grading scheme and midterm date seems reasonable. But at many universities this is just the beginning. There are lists of learning objectives: not a bad thing when they stick to the mathematics, but when (as happens in some cases) they stray into professional and spiritual development, I feel the document is getting far from being a "syllabus." I have seen—I kid you not—syllabi claiming (implausibly in each case) that a particular section of a math course will support students' development in Christianity, Islam, or Marxist-Leninist thinking.

Then there are the university policies on everything from harassment to snow days and cheating. Don't get me wrong—these policies are all important, important enough that I hope they're being made available to the students somewhere where they might think to look for them. If instructors are circulating this information in their syllabi so that the administration doesn't have the obligation to do so directly, this is cause for concern. The instructors do not set these policies; they do not vary from course to course; and there's surely a better way to inform people.

As a result, these documents are often several pages long, with little in them fitting the usual meaning of "syllabus." Yet they've become the accepted medium of communication between universities with regard to course content. Last month I was trying to help a frantic student who was applying for a program elsewhere. They hadn't kept and filed the "syllabus" from a course that they'd taken here several years ago; the instructor who wrote that particular syllabus was a part-timer, no longer teaching for us; and the calendar description of the course, though clear and reasonably complete, was unacceptable to the other school because it lacked the magic S-word. I think we found a copy on file.

This reached its height of absurdity recently when I was asked to assess transfer equivalency for a course from a very fine Canadian university. The syllabus (for so it called itself) was eight pages long, long enough to have its own table of contents, and covered everything from textbook to masking policy. The one thing missing was the content of the course, for which the reader was referred to a university web page—to which I, as an outsider, was denied access. The empress had clearly left the building.

And so, of course, I got the information that I needed from their online calendar.

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