Rethinking the Syllabus: A Product of Accreditation

Karen Dunn-Haley, Ph.D.
Laura Martin, Ph.D.
Corinne Townsend

Center for Research on Teaching Excellence
University of California, Merced

Outcomes for this presentation

Familiarity with....

- The context of UC Merced's 'Year of the Syllabus'
- The means used to communicate with faculty
- The rubrics created for student (course) learning outcomes & syllabi
- The Results: Changes in faculty syllabi

"Take Away": The rubrics and recent scholarship on effective syllabi

Why ask faculty to engage in a 'Year of the Syllabus'?

- Undergoing Initial Accreditation Review
- Culture of evidence and assessment require foundation: Course & program learning outcomes aligned to mission.
  - UCM Mission: "the first American student-centered research university of the 21st century"
- Well-developed syllabus is fundamental to student-centered teaching. (Grunert O'Brien et al., 2008)

Why is a developed syllabus particularly important at UC Merced?

The 2008 Freshman class at UCM:

- 53% First-Generation
- 40% Speak English plus another language at home
- 42% Low-income students

Elements of UCM's 'Year of the Syllabus'

- WASC Steering Committee
  - Appointment of Faculty Accreditation Organizers
- Website resources – crte.ucmerced.edu
- Workshops
- Individual consultations
- CRTE newsletter
- Peer Mentor Program

Rethinking the functions of a syllabus

- Contract between faculty and students detailing policies & consequences (Parkes & Harris, and Matejka & Kurke)
- Schedule of topics, assignments and assessments
- Foundational teaching & learning document that organizes, relates, and justifies course components in relation to explicit learning expectations.
  - 'Research document' guiding inquiry into student learning.

'Year of the Syllabus' conveyed key elements of student-centered syllabi

- Learning Outcomes
- Links between Learning Outcomes and
  - Assignments, assessments, scoring criteria and standards, and grading policies
  - Course policies and co-curricular activities that support learning
  - Program learning outcomes

University of California, Merced

Workshops emphasized

- Transparency
  - Transfers responsibility for learning to the student
- Positive Tone
  - A positive, learner-centered tone leads to greater student success (Littlefield, 1999 and Slattery & Carlson, 2005)

University of California, Merced

Provided faculty with two rubrics for development of

- Student learning outcomes
- Student-centered syllabi
  - Handouts provided but can also be found at crte.ucmerced.edu

University of California, Merced

Example workshop activity: Are these syllabi student-oriented teaching documents?

10 minutes:

- Working in small groups (2-3 people), review the syllabus rubric & use it to assess the level of development of the two provided syllabi.

Be prepared to share your assessment.

University of California, Merced

Faculty Asked: How can we get students to use the syllabus?

- Assign the syllabus:
  - Ask students to read and recap in class
  - Ask students to record three skills they hope to learn and compare with syllabus learning outcomes (Nilson, 2007)
  - Assign syllabus as homework & give next day quiz.
- Reference syllabus and outcomes in lectures, activities, homework, assessments, projects, labs, etc.

University of California, Merced

Faculty Asked: Why do this? What are the benefits?

- Asking what do I want students to learn to do, rather than, what should I teach helps..
  - prioritize content
  - develop relevant learning activities and assessments
  - Focus and integrate course content to enable to "close the loop"
- Shifts burden of learning to students
- Generates evidence of 'teaching excellence'

University of California, Merced

EVIDENCE OF CHANGE

Percentage of Syllabi Sample* with Learning Outcomes

School of	Spring 2008	Fall 2008	Spring 2008
Natural Sciences	4%**	83%	90%
Social Sciences, Humanities, & Arts	13%	66%	75%

*30 syllabi per School per semester = ~ 30% of courses offered.
** sample size 27

University of California, Merced

What next?

- We share findings with our campus to support further development of a culture of evidence and a student-centered institution.

University of California, Merced

Select scholarship on syllabi

Nilson, Linda B. (2nd ed., 2007). *Teaching at Its Best: A Research-Based Resource for College Instructors* (San Francisco: Anker Publishing now Jossey-Bass). See chapter 4, "The Complete Syllabus."

Parkes J. and Harris, M.B. (2002) "The Purpose of a Syllabus," *College Teaching* 50(2), 55-61.

Slattery, J. and Carlson, J. (2005). "Preparing An Effective Syllabus: Current Best Practices," *College Teaching,* 53 (4), 159-164.

University of California, Merced

Contact Information

Karen Dunn-Haley, Ph.D.

Faculty Development & Accreditation Coordinator
Center for Research on Teaching Excellence
University of California, Merced
Phone: 831-915-6761
Email: kdunn-haley@ucmerced.edu

Laura E. Martin, Ph.D.

Assessment & WASC Coordinator
Center for Research on Teaching Excellence
University of California, Merced
Phone: 209-228-4629
Email: lmartin@ucmerced.edu

University of California, Merced