

Additional Bureaucratic Mumbo Jumbo for Professor Hagle's Courses

(or Where Professor Hagle Turns the Snark Level up to 8* and Further
Endears Himself to an Assortment of University Bureaucrats)

*This is a revised version of my comments and information. In the original version I had the snark level up to 11 and, sure enough, I got a call from an administrative higher up to come talk about it. Interestingly enough, the conversation was fairly productive. As much as I was told my comments here were inappropriate, I was not ordered to take it down and there did not seem to be anything more to be said about it. (I suppose I might have gone from double secret probation to triple secret probation, but if I had been told that it would not be a secret anymore.) In any case, after considering some of the points made by the person in question I decided to lower the snark level – at least as far as the administration is concerned. It turns out there really are a host of problems with what other faculty members do or do not do with their syllabi that having rules for many things is a relatively sensible response. That said, on to the information.

There was a time when we (faculty) were supposed to keep the information in our course syllabi to the essentials so the university could keep printing costs down. Now that we have moved to digital media (for the most part) there seems to be an explosion in the number of things that bureaucratic require in syllabi. Nearly all of this information is found in other locations which students are responsible for knowing anyway. Some of it is also something that logically will be discussed in class. Nevertheless, the bureaucrats now want it also included in the course syllabus. It is probably a good idea for some of the more important policy items to be repeated and items along those lines are contained in the “policy statements” part of the syllabi for my courses. Other information that is now required borders on the silly. As it seems the powers that be, particularly at the department level, are now willing to harass those who do not include this information in their syllabi I have put together this additional section of my syllabus. The list below is taken from the relevant webpage (<http://clas.uiowa.edu/faculty/teaching-policies-resources-required-syllabus>) and is followed in italics by the information relevant to my courses (along with some commentary by me).

Let me make one additional point before proceeding. In my courses (particularly in my Public Administration course) I speak of the government's inclination to “do something.” In the area of public administration this usually translates to “make a rule.” This inclination does not always result in positive results or better government. Below I will make the point several times that rather than have another requirement for syllabi, the relevant administrators should talk to the faculty member about whatever the problem is (or is perceived to be). One problem here is that faculty may resist

additional requirements unless they are in writing. This is understandable if faculty do not trust administrators to make good and fair decisions, and vice versa. The result can end up being an excessive set of rules. This can occur at any level of government, but tends to get worse the higher the level (local to state to federal).

1. The number and title of the course as listed on ISIS. Include all cross-listed numbers and the departmental home of the course. Include any changes in information about the course from that which appears in official University notices.

Seriously? Who does not put the number and title of the course in the syllabus? Okay, if someone is so unfamiliar with the basics of a syllabus the Department's Executive Officer (or someone higher up the food chain) should tell him or her to include it. Apparently that is too difficult so we must have a rule (or requirement in this case) to include it in the syllabus. The we-have-to-have-a-rule impulse is common to public administrators who do not like to deal with individual situations. (That said, it is not always their fault. This is something I discuss in my Public Administration course, if anyone is interested.) One has to wonder what problem the rule is intended to prevent. Is there a fear that an instructor will come into a course and start teaching a different course? (That said, I must admit that I sometimes come into the first class and say "You're all here for Advanced Calculus, right?" That tends to shake up many Pol Sci students.)

The "changes" requirement makes a certain amount of sense. On the other hand, the assumption of many of these requirements seems to be that those affected are not reading the other sources anyway.

Despite my prior comments, some of these requirements make more sense in the context of cross-listed courses.

One other aspect to this is that we are changing over to new course numbers. This is going to be a major headache and it is probably a good idea to put both course numbers on syllabi and such to help keep track of courses and requirements during the transition.

I have this info in my syllabi, but I think it silly to make it a requirement.

2. The instructor's name, office address, office hours, phone number, email address, and DEO contact information. Teaching assistants must also provide the course supervisor's name, office address, office hours, and directory information.

I have always put all this info in my syllabi, except for the DEO contact info. Oddly enough, it is probably less important to have all this info in a syllabus now that so much information is online in one or more places. When I first started teaching I wanted to have this information in the syllabus so that it would be readily available for students. Now the same info can usually be found in one or more online locations and it is often easier to access in those locations than finding the online version of the syllabus.

The one unnecessary bit of information concerns the DEO contact info. If a student has a problem with a course he or she is supposed to contact the course instructor (or supervisor if taught by a grad student) first and then the department DEO if the issue is not “resolved.” No problem there, but that does not mean the DEO contact info should be part of the syllabus. This is especially true given that the info is located on the department’s webpage (it is for Political Science, anyway, and I assume for all other departments – or is that not a requirement?!) and is also listed on ISIS. I do not have a problem with this particular bit of information as such, but it is not something that needs to be in the syllabus.

Those wishing to contact the Political Science DEO can do so by calling the department office at 335-2358.

3. A minimum of three office hours per week. Include days, times, place and “by appointment” since the College requires instructors to be available for a reasonable amount of time by appointment.

It used to be that only two office hours were required. A few years ago there was concern expressed by some (parents or Regents) about the unavailability of faculty so it was increased to three hours. Of course, that did not really address the problem. I sometimes get the impression that some faculty do not actually keep their office hours. I say this because on a regular basis a student will ask if I will be in during my office hours. This strikes me as a silly question, but perhaps that is because I actually show up for my office hours.

The requirement of “place” is a little odd, but I did have one situation when I was a grad student where I held office hours in a location other than my office. I was teaching a class in a dorm and many of the students in the class lived in that building or nearby dorms, so it seemed logical to have my office hours in that building. I also know of a few other instructors who hold office hours in other locations for a variety of reasons. That being the case, it would seem that the way to handle this would be to require the place if it is something other than the instructor’s office. (Of course, that would seem the logical thing to do anyway, but if you have to have a requirement. . . .)

The one thing here that does not make as much sense is the “by appointment.” If we have to be available at times other than our office hours anyway, and everyone understands that, then why do we have to include it on the syllabus. Of course, if an instructor is not keeping office hours, he or she could just as easily not be available at other times. If so, the student can always complain to the department DEO (unless, of course, the instructor has not put that information in the syllabus either!). If it is a problem, the powers that be should be talking to the individual instructor(s) rather than giving in to the urge to “make a rule.”

For my part, I always talk about this the first day of class anyway. I talk about my office hours and other times I am most likely to be around and tell them to just come by, no appointment necessary. Still, for the administrators, “by appointment.”

4. A brief course description with topics covered. If the course is approved for General Education, this should be included in the course description. State the GE category fulfilled and how the GE outcomes are met.

Again, this strikes me as odd. What would one put in a syllabus if not a brief description and list of topics? Even the most poorly trained instructor should have seen enough syllabi to have a basic understanding of what ought to go in them. That said, I know some instructors can be pretty clueless, but if that is the problem the powers that be should take the person aside to explain what goes into a proper syllabus rather than making a rule.

My courses are not approved to satisfy General Education requirements, so this does not apply to me, but it, again, seems to be something that is already listed on ISIS, can be discussed in class, and does not need to be in the basic syllabus.

5. A description of course goals and objectives. If the course is approved for General Education, these goals should be incorporated into the syllabus.

This is not something that needs to go in the syllabus. For it to be complete, it would probably be far too long for a syllabus. I always put a short description of the course in my syllabus, but that is more by way of introduction. A fuller description would be better placed on ISIS or, as I do, on my webpages for my courses. In fact, the description I put on ISIS contains the link to my webpages so that students wishing to know more about the course can find it there – the course description, of course, but also other information about the course including the most recent syllabus as well as teaching evaluations from past

semesters. (Making this information available to prospective students is, by the way, one reason I do not put as much material on ICON as some other instructors.) Aside from putting such information on ISIS or on a course webpage, this is something that the instructor should be talking about the first day of class!

To the extent this information is required for my syllabus, those interested can find it on my website on the page for the particular course in question.

6. Texts and other course materials and where they may be found, including the use of any electronic sites (such as ICON).

This seems to be getting a little ridiculous. What would a person put in a syllabus if not information such as this?! That said, I do recall a couple of instructors I had as a math undergrad who were, shall we say, a little lax about providing a lot of initial information about the course. Even so, they usually discussed it in class. As I have said before, if some instructor is not putting necessary information into his or her syllabi then the powers that be should talk to that person rather than making it a bureaucratic requirement.

7. Grading procedures, including the role of plus/minus grading. If an instructor chooses to modify the plus/minus system by not using the grade of A+ and/or D+ and/or D-, it is important to state this omission and its rationale on the syllabus. The College and EPC recommends that the A+ grade be used only to indicate rare and extraordinary academic achievement or that the A+ grade be omitted altogether.

I have always included a grading scale in my syllabi, in addition to specifying the graded assignments and their weights relative to the scale. That strikes me as a bit different, however, from "grading procedures." This also seems to be something that would likely be too long to properly fit into a syllabus or which should be discussed at greater length in class. For example, I devote the greater part of an entire class period to how I will be grading the papers (instructions to follow, substantive and stylistic requirements, etc.). In fact, I have written a lengthy (19 or so pages) guide for students to follow when writing papers for my courses. I would consider this part of the "grading procedures" for the course. Clearly it is not something that should go in a syllabus.

8. Expectations for attendance, assignments, and examinations, including any expectations for electronic means of participation. View [Student Workload Guidelines](#). All instructors are encouraged to define academic excellence, especially

in terms of attendance, assignment completion, and examinations since many students have very unclear or varied definitions of what constitutes "excellent" work.

This item is a bit repetitive, as is my comment on it. Specifically, for the information asked for here to be complete it would be far too long to include in a syllabus.

Unfortunately, I have to agree with the point about "excellence" to the extent that some students often do not understand the amount of work necessary to master more difficult topics. This is something I talk about the first day of class. It is not something that can easily be included in a syllabus. Even if you put a grading scale in your syllabus (as I do) it will not necessarily be clear as to what a student must do to get a certain number of points on any particular assignment.

I have run afoul of the powers that be on the "attendance" item. Like the university as a whole, I do not have an attendance policy, meaning that attendance is not "required" in my courses. (There is one exception and I do make clear in the syllabus for that course that students must attend.) As with several other items, I do talk about this the first day of class and suggest that students need to attend if they expect to get the most out of the course. In addition, for a course that has a graded discussion component, you cannot discuss if you are not there, so logic suggests they need to attend.

Given that logic is apparently not enough, here is my attendance policy: come to class. Anything more specific will be indicated in the specific syllabus for a course or discussed in class (usually during the first class period).

New for 2014: I hadn't commented on the workload item before, but it seems that now I should. I say this not because the powers that be are insisting on it, but because it seems necessary these days. After seeing some articles on it, and my own experiences in a few classes, it appears that some students have incorrect expectations about how much work a course will take. There have always been students who feel that if they work hard they should receive an A regardless of actual performance. It seems, however, that more such students are popping up. Regardless of why this is occurring more frequently, students should be prepared to spend on average about 10 hours a week per three-credit course (including class time). For easier courses it may be less, for harder ones more, and the amount each week will likely vary as well. Other factors will include how quickly a student reads or absorbs the material. Thus, even if I think a student should do well spending 10 hours a week on a course, a particular student might need to spend more than that if the material does not come

easily to him or her. Beyond the rough estimate of 10 hours per week, I speak to this issue the first day in each of my courses.

9. Please include a short statement about the role of collaboration in the class. Specify if collaboration is allowed on assignments and, if so, your expectations for a student's individual performance. If collaboration is not allowed or is considered academic misconduct, this should be emphasized. The student's responsibility for understanding these boundaries and for asking for clarification should be stressed.

This is new for 2013. Like most other items this is something that should be discussed in class. Also like many other items in this list it seems to be something that students should know, either because of standard classwork norms, prior experience, or the fact that such things are mentioned in other university policy statements. Having said that, it seems that part of the problem is the lack of norms and expectations that are being passed along to students these days. (I'm in "old fogey" mode right now.) Another problem is the increased desire to make the syllabus a legal document. Aside from the bureaucratic inclination to do so, part of the problem is an increasing willingness to challenge such norms and requirements unless they are explicitly stated. (Students should do their own work? Not unless it is explicitly stated in the syllabus!)

Here is a version of one of the suggested statements to include in the syllabus: For my courses, students are not allowed to collaborate with others on homework, labs, and other graded assignments. Do not share your work with others or ask others to see their completed assignments because both are considered academic misconduct. If you need help, please meet with me or my TA (if I have one). Students are responsible for understanding this policy; if you have questions, ask for clarification. Students should do their own work on all assignments. Violations are considered academic misconduct and will be dealt with accordingly. Any exceptions to this policy will be noted in class.

10. Dates and times of midterms.

Well, of course, these should be included (and I do). I can see, however, instances when there is a certain flexibility to the course that might make specifying the date at the start of the semester a bit problematic. A course that is built around outside events (political events for example) or speakers whose schedule might change might make it difficult to specify the date in the syllabus. Aside from that, what if the instructor gets behind on the material and has to push the date back or if a class is cancelled because of the weather? Indicating the date in the syllabus does not mean it is set in stone. Instructors certainly have an obligation to inform

students of the dates of tests, but doing so does not mean it cannot be changed and students should not take such information as a license to not come to class to get current information. (These days, of course, instructors can easily send out updates via email to all their students, so it should not be a problem to keep everyone informed.)

On a related point, what about “pop quizzes” and such? These can be given more weight than a midterm (or even be a replacement), but if you have to specify the date and time it takes away a major reason for giving the pop quiz.

11. Dates and times of the final exam should **no longer be included on the syllabus** since these will be announced by the Registrar around the fifth week of the semester. Watch for updates from the Registrar. Once exam times and schedules are announced please share them with your class.

This is a little silly as even instructors do not know the date and time of the final exams anymore, so we could not put them in the syllabus even if we wanted to – and I do want to! Quite frankly, as an undergrad I would always check to see when the final exam was before signing up for a class. The chances of my taking a course that had a Friday final exam were pretty much nil unless it was a required course.

I am amused by the “please share them” line. So many other things are requirements and yet they actually say please here? Also, what would the alternative be, to keep them a secret? (I suppose that would certainly make grading the exams easier!) In a more serious vein, students are emailed their final exam schedule by the university once it is determined. That means that they already have the information regardless of whether it is announced in class. So, if instructors are not required to inform students of the information because it is provided to them from another source, it begs the question of why several of the items in this list must be in the syllabus given that they can also be found in other locations. (On the other hand, although students are emailed their final exam schedule I’ve had several students ask me about it because they deleted the email. Some of whom even asked me about it after I had announced it in class one or more times!)

12. For off-cycle courses, please include a reminder of significant deadlines, as stated on the official deadline calendar.

Another one of those things that would seem to be basic for a syllabus.

13. Information about resources for students as appropriate. The Writing Center and the Campus Information Center's Tutor Referral Service at the IMU are excellent examples of such resources.

Again, not really something that should be required in a syllabus for the vast majority of courses. Instead, it could be included in a separate webpage (as I do for resources related to my courses) or discussed individually with students who may need specific help in a particular area.

Following this list is another section labeled “Additional Required UI and CLAS Policy and Procedures.” This section then has a link to eight additional items. I *think* these are all included in the policy statements that I’ve labeled Part 2 of the syllabus. Just in case they are not, here’s the link again and the “Additional” items are at the bottom of the page: <http://clas.uiowa.edu/faculty/teaching-policies-resources-required-syllabus>.