

Course Syllabi at PLU

PLU does not have a university-wide template for all course syllabi. A few departments and schools have adopted a shared template for content and structure of syllabi. Many units have agreements that all syllabi will address particular topics and some have unit statements of content on those topics. Shared content or structure is not intended to circumscribe a faculty member's professional responsibility for a course or academic freedom. The use of common content or a consistent structure are strategies that units use to assist students to grasp a particular class in relation to a major program or a department's learning objectives for general education. This helps to communicate the coherence of a curricular program and to support students' learning.

As you construct your syllabus, consider how and what your syllabus teaches. A well constructed syllabus not only provides the "what" of a course, it also offers a map of the "how" and the "why." Organization and guidance related to content of a course is basic to a syllabus. So too, however, is orientation to the strategies or procedures chosen for a course, including the nature of assignments, activities, evaluation of learning, including grading, policies on accepting late work, etc. An effective syllabus usually also includes a rationale—a statement of why the professor thinks the course matters and the opportunities for learning the course provides. An effectively constructed syllabus is an integral component in composing a course with the artful balance of challenge and support that maximizes students' opportunities to learn.

Suggested Syllabi Statements

The course syllabus functions as a contract between students and faculty members. In addition to providing a map to the content of the course and procedures for learning in the course, the syllabus is the place to identify issues that may arise in the life of the group. The Center for Teaching Effectiveness (CTE) at the University of Delaware suggests that faculty anticipate issues that might develop in their classrooms and have a plan of action ready to implement. Discussing these procedures at the beginning of the semester and including them on the course syllabus are both preventative ways of addressing these issues at the outset. Issues that you should address in your syllabi include academic dishonesty, disruptive classroom behavior, attendance requirements and absenteeism, an academic emergency plan, and grading, including procedures for handling grade disputes.

Academic Dishonesty

PLU has an Academic Integrity Policy that you can find at: <http://www.plu.edu/academics/integ.html>. All faculty members at PLU share responsibility for educating our students about the importance of academic integrity to everyone in a university community and, most specifically, the practices of academic integrity in each particular discipline.

A common statement about academic dishonesty that is frequently used at PLU is as follows:

"PLU's expectation is that students will not cheat or plagiarize, and that they will not condone these behaviors or assist others who plagiarize. Academic misconduct not only jeopardizes the career of the individual student involved, but also undermines the scholastic achievements of all PLU students and attacks the mission of this institution. Students are inherently responsible to do their own work, thereby insuring the integrity of their academic records.

The most common forms of dishonesty are cheating and plagiarism. Cheating includes, but is not limited to:

- Submitting material that is not yours as part of your course performance, such as copying from another student's exam, allowing another student to copy from your exam; or

- Using information or devices not allowed by the faculty; such as formulas or a computer program or data, or unauthorized materials, such as a copy of an examination before it is given; or
- Fabricating information, such as data for a lab report; or
- Violating procedures prescribed to protect the integrity of an assignment, test, or other evaluation; or
- Collaborating with others on assignments without the instructor's consent; or
- Cooperating with or helping another student to cheat; or
- Other forms of dishonest behavior, such as having another person take an exam for you, altering exam answers and requesting the exam be re-graded; or, communicating with anyone other than a proctor or instructor during an exam.

Plagiarism includes, but is not limited to:

- Directly quoting the words of others without using quotation marks or indented format to identify them; or
- Using altered wording, materials or ideas of others without properly identifying their source; or
- Representing an idea or strategy that is significant in one's own work as one's own when it comes from someone else.

If you are unsure about something that you want to do or the proper use of materials, then ask your instructor for clarification.”

Excerpt from PLU Faculty Handbook, Academic Integrity Policies, pp. 72-72E

Some faculty members choose to provide specific examples of what is acceptable or unacceptable for a specific course. Others develop specific expectations that are shared in narrative on the course syllabus. Some devote a class session to the topic, using examples or cases to help students learn. Others refer students to on-line tutorials that walk students through situations in which they must judge what is and is not plagiarism. Still others refer students to tutoring services offered through the Academic Assistance Center or refer them to the Writing Center to seek guidance on issues related to citing the ideas or actual words from published works.

Disruptive Classroom Behavior

Disruptive classroom behavior is present in classrooms at any level and can cause frustration for faculty and students alike. It is critical that course instructors use preventative techniques to address these behavioral disruptions before they become a pattern that negatively impacts the classroom environment. At PLU some faculty members work with students to establish norms for a course, generally building them during the first week and then providing them in written form. Other faculty members include their expectations for appropriate behavior in the course in the initial syllabus. Stating expectations for appropriate classroom behavior in the syllabus helps orient students to the norms for your course and provides an external reference in situations in which inappropriate behavior arises. Consider guidelines such as these, recommended for syllabi at the University of Oregon:

1. Questions and comments must be relevant to the topic at hand.
2. You should be in your seat and ready to begin class on time.
3. Packing up your belongings prior to the end of class is disruptive to others around you and the instructor.
4. Classroom discussions should be civilized and respectful to everyone and relevant to the topic we are discussing.
5. Any discussion from class that continues on the listserv or class discussion list should adhere to these same rules and expectations.

You may also want to include in your guidelines a statement to the effect that inappropriate behavior in a class that is does not improve after you have discussed the issue with the student, that is

egregious, or that is blatantly in violation of the *Code of Student Conduct* may be referred to PLU's Student Conduct System. (See <http://www.plu.edu/student-involvement/Student-Conduct/home.php> for more information about the conduct system.)

Absenteeism

Making students aware of classroom expectations and consequences for absences is critical and putting those expectations in writing at the beginning of the course appropriate. The PLU catalog (under Academic Procedures) states: "The university assumes that all registered students have freely accepted personal responsibility for regular class attendance. Course grades reflect the quality of students' academic performance as a whole, which normally includes regular participation in the total class experience and is evaluated accordingly. Absences may lead to a reduction of a student's final grade. In the event of unavoidable absence, students are expected to inform the instructor. Assignments of make-up work, if any, are at the discretion of the instructor."

It is important for you to make clear what your absence policy will be, including the impact of absences from your class for athletic or artistic performances. Some students may presume these are "automatically excused" absences, which they are not.

Academic Emergency Plan

The PLU faculty adopted an academic emergency plan policy. This policy states that each faculty member will have a plan for how a course either will be completed or final grades for the course determined in the case of an emergency, e.g., natural disaster, epidemic, etc., that would necessitate closing the university during term. The policy for pandemic and evacuation emergencies can be found at <http://www.plu.edu/~provost/doc/pandemic-emergencies.pdf>.

Grading Policy, Including Grade Disputes

The university catalog provides the general policies on grading. As with almost all other dimensions of teaching, PLU leaves the system of grading to the professional judgment of faculty. You should consult your chair or dean to learn what shared agreements and practices exist, if any, about grading in your unit.

Include in your syllabus the grading scale and system that you use. You may also want to include your rationale for it. Ideally your syllabus also will include some description of what counts as "A" level work, "B" level work, etc. Providing this information in the syllabus contributes to students' ability to incorporate appropriate disciplinary standards as you establish them for a course. It assists in your helping students with questions understand your evaluation of their work. It is a resource when questions about a grade arise. (If you can't include it in your syllabus, try to provide it before the first major exam or the submission of the first graded assignment.) As one experienced department chair has noted: "a clear grading policy serves as a preventative measure that can lessen the increasing number of grade disputes." The chair continues, "it pushes faculty to think through their grading criteria and it lets students know that there is no hidden agenda in the grading procedures."

Each division of the College of Arts and Sciences, each professional school, and each interdisciplinary program at PLU has a procedure for handling grade disputes. While you may not want to put that procedure on your syllabus, you should know what it is for your unit and where a student can find it, should an issue arise.

PLU protects the academic freedom of faculty and trusts faculty members' professional judgment. Stating your grading policy and standards for work clearly contributes to university-wide understanding of both.

Specific Recommendations from PLU Administration

Weather Conditions

The Provost's Office recommends including a statement regarding weather related school closures. Sample text: "Make sure to call ahead to confirm whether class is meeting if you have any concerns about snow accumulations or icy roads that would make travel to campus unsafe. You can call the University's hotline after 6 a.m. (535-7100) or access the PLU website (www.plu.edu) to see if school has been cancelled."

Special Needs and Circumstances

The following text was recommended several years ago. "Students with medically recognized and documented disabilities and who are in need of special accommodation have an obligation to notify the University of their needs. Students in need of accommodation should contact the Office of Disability Support Services (x7206). If you need course adaptations or accommodations because of a disability, if you have emergency medical information, or if you need special arrangements in case the building must be evacuated, please make an appointment with me as soon as possible."

Registrar's Deadlines

The Registrar's Office has recommended including the following dates in your syllabi:

- the last day to add/drop without a fee,
- the last day to withdraw, and
- the pass/fail submittal deadline.

Contact Information

Include your email address (PLU only), office hours, office location, and extension.

Student Contact Information

The university requests that you require students to activate their PLU e-mail accounts and that you contact them electronically through that account only. Important communications are sent to students only via e-mail and when faculty members also insist on communicating with students electronically through their PLU e-mail addresses it reinforces this system of university-wide communication.