THE JOHN WILLIAM
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Opening Up the Classroom:
Greater Transparency through Better, More Accessible Course Information

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report, "Opening Up the Classroom: Greater Transparency through Better, More Accessible Course Information," by Jay Schalin, proposes a way to improve the transparency and accountability of colleges and universities. It recommends that faculty be required to post their course syllabi—the descriptions that go beyond the sketchy catalog summaries—on the Internet, with access open to the public.

The report also recommends that posting should occur when registration opens for the next term's classes, typically two to five months before that term begins, so that students can use the information for course selection. It proposes that the syllabi for all courses be available at a single Web site.

The syllabi need not be the full documents, with complete schedules, that are used in class. But at the very least each syllabus should offer a detailed class description and a full list of reading selections. Currently, the University of North Carolina does not require such descriptions.

There are four important reasons for posting such documents on the Web. These are: to aid students as they register for courses, to expose a professor's deviation from normal expectations or acceptable academic standards, to aid in pedagogical research and information sharing, and to make comparisons between classes at different universities easier for the determination of transfer credits.

This report explores these reasons and responds to objections. It discusses two posting systems, one at the University of Washington and one at Duke University, that go a long way to informing students and the public of what really goes on in the classroom.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jay Schalin joined the John William Pope Center for Higher Education Policy in August 2007. As a senior writer, he researches and writes about higher education issues, primarily in North Carolina, and oversees the center's Web site.

A Philadelphia native, Schalin began writing as a freelance journalist for the *Asbury Park Press* in New Jersey in 1994 and has also written for several other papers in New Jersey and Delaware. In 1998, he returned to school to complete his education, graduating from Richard Stockton College in New Jersey with a B.S. in computer science in 2001. After graduation, he was employed as a software engineer for Computer Sciences Corporation. He recently completed the requirements for an M.A. in economics at the University of Delaware.

Opening Up the Classroom:
Greater Transparency through Better, More Accessible Course Information

By Jay Schalin

Greater transparency and accountability are coming to higher education, one way or the other. Students, their parents, and government officials want to know whether their money is purchasing a quality education or merely financing an expensive system of meaningless paper credentials.

In that spirit, this report proposes a major step toward improving transparency and accountability, one that cuts to the very core of academia's purpose: making knowledge about the subject material taught in classes more readily available to students and the general public.

The Pope Center recommends posting course syllabi—the descriptions that go beyond the sketchy catalog summaries—on the Internet, with access open to the public. The posting should occur at the time registration opens for the next term's classes, typically two to five months before that term begins, and the syllabi for all courses should be available at a single Web site.

The syllabi need not be the full documents with schedules used in class. But at the very least each should offer a detailed class description and a full list of all reading selections.

There are four important reasons for posting such documents on the Web. These are: to aid students as they register for courses, to expose a professor's deviation from normal expectations or acceptable academic standards, to aid in pedagogical research and information sharing, and to make comparisons between classes at different universities easier for the determination of transfer credits. These reasons will be discussed below.

Syllabi vs. Course Descriptions

A syllabus is a detailed description of a course prepared by the individual professor teaching a class. It usually provides the class schedule, including test dates, and organizes the course material in a meaningful way, either chronologically or according to the importance of various topics. It also indicates reading material and other assignments and recommendations.

Because of this detail, syllabi more accurately reflect what is actually taught in classrooms than do the brief course descriptions published in the catalogs that most North Carolina college students use to register for classes. These catalog course descriptions are frequently vague and general. They often have to be that way, since faculty members frequently individualize their class sections to reflect their specific interests or the material they feel is most important. The descriptions are usually broad enough so that they do not change much over time. Sometimes they are no more than a single line; generally, they are about one paragraph in length.

Syllabi more accurately reflect what is actually taught in classrooms than do the brief course descriptions published in the catalogs that most North Carolina college students use to register for classes.

Below are two representative catalog-style descriptions used for registration at UNC-Chapel Hill:

- ENGL 124 [24] Contemporary Literature (3). Freshman and sophomore elective, open to juniors and seniors. The literature of the present generation. Late afternoon section, four days per week.
- ECON 420 [132] Intermediate Theory: Money, Income, and Employment (3). Prerequisite, ECON 101 [10]. An introduction to contemporary macroeconomic concepts and analysis. Topics include the level, fluctuations, and growth of national income, and monetary and fiscal policies designed to achieve economic goals. Students may not receive credit for both ECON 320 [130] and 420 [132].

Most students at UNC-Chapel Hill must select their courses on the basis of such bland and broad generalizations. The students who sign up for Contemporary Literature are unlikely to know which books will be taught until they arrive in the classroom. Economics students

may have difficulty choosing between Econ 320 and this course, Econ 420.

UNC-Wilmington, UNC-Greensboro, and East Carolina University were also contacted, and they, too, rely on brief course descriptions to inform students about classes during registration.

Students at UNC-Chapel Hill must select courses from bland, broad generalizations. Students who sign up for Contemporary Literature are unlikely to know which books are taught until they arrive in the classroom.

Current Policies

UNC schools vary in their regulation of syllabi. Most (perhaps all) faculty members provide syllabi for students, but they usually do not provide them until the beginning of classes.

N.C. State's Division of Undergraduate Programs has a rule stipulating that: "[F]aculty are required to provide students with a written course syllabus. …on the first day of class." Professors are expected to adhere to extensive and explicit guidelines when writing syllabi.

At UNC-Chapel Hill, the attitude about syllabi is much looser. Steve Allred, executive associate provost, said there never has been a school-wide policy "that I know of." He said the individual schools of the university might have such policies. But that is not the case at the College of Arts and Sciences, according to communications director Dee Reid, who said that individual departments may have policies about syllabi.

History professors at Chapel Hill, for example, are required to provide their department with syllabi for archival purposes, said office assistant Latissa Davis, though she did not say whether the professors had to turn them in by a specific date. "We let professors decide for themselves whether to hand them out or post them online," she added.

At UNC-Wilmington, university registrar Gilbert Bowen also said there were no "college-wide" regulations governing syllabi, and that department chairs have traditionally employed rules about syllabi "in different ways."

Bowen said there is a rule that faculty have to inform students about the class if they are already enrolled in the class. He also said that perhaps 40 percent of professors use an online "blackboard" system for getting information to their students. He added that the blackboard information about a class is "only available after registration."

Taking the Guesswork Out of Registration

A very important reason for requiring posting of syllabi online and early is to help students deciding how to register for classes. "I have dropped courses in the past because I was completely unaware of what they entailed when I signed up for them," said Jessica Kearns, a journalism major at UNC-Chapel Hill who was interviewed for this report. "It's hard enough to find a description of the courses, let alone a syllabus, before actually signing up for a class."

With syllabi available at the time of registration, scheduling decisions would become easier for students. In addition, parents would be able to better decide whether their tuition payments are going for a good cause or are being wasted on mental pablum. There would be less confusion at the beginning of each semester as students would no longer have as many reasons to drop or add classes.

A hypothetical example of the need for greater information is a survey course in American literature. A common level of detail for catalog descriptions would suggest that the course includes an unspecified reading selection from the Southern Gothic genre. The works of both Erskine Caldwell and William Faulkner fall into this category, yet there is a great difference in the depth and complexity of their work. Non-literature majors looking for an easy class to meet a general requirement would likely choose the course featuring Caldwell, a sensationalist writer, while more serious students with an interest in literature would opt for Faulkner.

Online publication of syllabi ahead of time might enable students to avoid redundancy and eliminate intellectual "holes" in their education. Humanities students could plan out which texts they would read over the entire course of their college careers. Or computer science majors could better guarantee some exposure to the key concepts, algorithms, and technologies they hope to apply in their chosen specialties.

Students' Views

One of the side effects of the lack of accurate and detailed descriptions of specific class sections is a marked increase in the numbers of students who must drop or add courses at the beginning of each term. There is a wide divergence of opinions between professors and students

on the drop/add procedure. This is partly because the current system imposes extra work on students and very little on professors. Teachers tend to see the drop/add process as a simple matter; they merely write their signatures on a few forms at the beginning of each term. All three of the professors who offered their opinions for this report indicated that the drop/add process does not inconvenience them.

For many students, the drop/add process is a wasteful but necessary ordeal, due to the lack of information about a class's particulars. Many students have adopted the practice of registering for one more course than they actually plan to take each term. After the syllabi are handed out on the first day, they are better able to determine which course to drop.

Basil Yap, a civil engineering student at N.C. State, said, "I register for the maximum course load I can take without a waiver. Then I drop the one that's the biggest burden on my schedule—usually not the hardest one, though. …sometimes you realize what you expected isn't going to be in the class."

Sean Brown, who will be a sophomore next fall at N.C. State, also registers for an additional class each semester. As a communications major, he is required to take many English classes with extensive reading assignments. "It would be really nice if I knew what was on the reading lists ahead of time…. If I knew that a course I signed up for assigned four Dickens novels, I could get a head start by reading one over the break," he said.

Making the syllabi available before the end of registration instead of on the first day of class might put an end to this sort of maneuvering. Kearns, Yap, and Brown strongly affirmed that having syllabi available at registration would eliminate the need to register for extra classes.

Teachers' Views

Two professors interviewed did acknowledge that the current process might pose some difficulties for students. One agreed that there was some likelihood that an occasional student could be blocked out of an important class by over-enrollment due to the drop/add process. Another said that he routinely sets the capacity for his classes at 110 percent of the real capacity to ensure enough room for all the students who want to attend after the drop/add period is over.

But an economics professor at UNC-Chapel Hill said that such a system "seems like a pretty pointless 'make work' rule." He cited other objections: "It would require a lot of resources to implement and enforce and it would be little used. The students are well aware of the course requirements for current faculty and courses. The 'grapevine' functions very well. Many faculty members already have this kind of information available on their Web sites."

Two professors said they have no problem with making the syllabi available online to the public once the term begins—only the advanced timing would cause problems. The head of the N.C. State economics department, Douglas K. Pearce, said that the two-to-five month period between registration and the start of classes is necessary for personnel changes and course preparation, making early posting of syllabi unfeasible.

"Faculty departures and new hires are sometimes not known at registration time," said Pearce, "and faculty teaching new courses will often not have had time to prepare the syllabus for a course they will teach five months in the future.… Faculty often want to change their syllabi for established courses and view the summer as the period when such changes are best made."

While Pearce raises valid objections, they are not insurmountable. N.C. State computer science professor Edward Gehringer also felt that the full syllabi would be difficult to have ready by registration. But he offered suggestions around the problem. For existing courses, he said that previous syllabi could be posted, explaining that "what was previously taught is usually a good predictor of what will be taught in a coming semester."

Making syllabi available during registration will put an end to this sort of maneuvering. Interviewed students strongly affirmed that having syllabi available at registration would eliminate the need to register for extra classes.

And there is no reason why the online syllabi cannot be works in progress—with professors noting that changes are likely to be made. Every detail that will be on the final syllabus is not necessary, and even professors designing new courses have a general idea what they are going to teach and what material they will assign for reading.

Gehringer suggested that posting a limited version of the syllabi online during registration might be feasible. In fact, various systems that approximate online posting of syllabi already exist: voluntary systems at the University of Washington and Duke University, which are discussed later in this paper.

Truth in Advertising, Academy-Style

Another reason for mandatory syllabus posting is to help students and the public know what a faculty member actually intends to teach. The concept of academic freedom gives professors considerable leeway in choosing the specific subject matter of a course. Deviations from the original design, or even the current description, of a course are commonplace. Often, it is a harmless matter of minor preferences—one teacher assigns Hemingway, another Steinbeck.

Yet academic freedom has a dark side. Sometimes the deviation from the course description goes far beyond acceptable boundaries. Professors use their classrooms as their personal soapboxes, instead of teaching an academic subject; in some disciplines it is hard to get a degree without heavy exposure to radical indoctrination. Other professors use their positions to introduce material that is shocking, immoral, and offensive to extremes—in recent years, professors at major U.S. universities have offered defenses of racial genocide,[1] Islamic Jihad,[2] and bestiality.[3]

One place where information about a teacher's true intentions can be discovered is in the list of reading assignments—for example, radical professors tend to assign the works of radical writers.

Students should know beforehand if they are going to encounter such a professor. The public should know as well. The very purpose of academia is to condition the minds of the young, and the ideas the young are taught will affect society. If a professor teaches something abominable or untrue, it should be made known. One place where information about a teacher's true intentions can be discovered is in the list of reading assignments—for example, radical professors tend to assign the works of radical writers.

A course taught during an abbreviated summer term in 2007 at UNC-Chapel Hill illustrates how reading lists can reveal the true nature of a course when a catalog course description does not. The description in the course catalog for "Geographical Issues in the Developing World (GEOG 130)," focused on three themes. The first was about population trends, including growth, health, and migration patterns. The second concerned the sustenance of populations, including water supplies and the transition from traditional self-sufficient communities to technically advanced market economies. The third involved issues concerning urbanization and poverty. There was no hint of any political orientation or agenda.

Instructor Jason Moore's syllabus showed something quite different—that Moore's course was not so much about the study of geography as an objective social science, as it appeared to be in the catalog. Instead, it seemed intended to plant seeds of doubt about, or even hostility to, free markets, international trade, and the United States. The actual readings confirm this impression—the reading list was dominated by contributors to the Marxist journal *Monthly Review*, including Moore himself. Other reading selections were from writers well-known in extreme anti-capitalist circles, like Naomi Wolf, whose selection offered passionate praise for the violent 1999 Seattle World Trade Conference riots.

Having reading lists and detailed course descriptions ahead of time would help interested parties expose what is being taught, and stop uninterested or offended students from signing up for these courses based on the false impression they will learn something entirely different. Many faculty members claim that the concept of academic freedom entitles professors to teach whatever they wish. If that is so, then they should be required to fully disclose what ideas they are teaching.

Joining the Information Age: A Boon to Research and Pedagogy

A third major reason for publishing syllabi is to provide researchers and teaching professionals with critical information about curricula. In the fall of 2007, the Pope Center conducted a study of how many colleges in North Carolina require English majors to study Shakespeare. The information was generally available online, making the research far easier than in earlier times, when gathering the information would have required many phone calls, getting schools to mail catalogues, and possibly some actual trips to schools.

But many questions of possible value to researchers are currently too time-consuming to answer. For example, it would be difficult to determine how many courses in the state assigned de Toqueville's *Democracy in America* as a reading selection in 1998 and to compare that number with how many assign it today. Such information could be easily compiled if all reading lists were accessible online, with a search engine to help answer queries.

The same principle would apply if a hi-tech employer wanted to search for computer science departments that use a specific programming language in their artificial intelligence classes.

Another application of online syllabi is to aid in teaching. With syllabi available to all, professors and department heads could better judge their courses against the courses of their peers in other schools. Such "open-sourcing" of teaching materials might have the same effect on the teaching of subjects as it does on research in general—it makes it easier to learn from others involved in the same pursuit.

Making the syllabi available online might even add a measure of competition to pedagogy. If the top programs and the most highly acclaimed teachers reveal what they are doing in the classroom, other schools and professors might feel compelled to emulate them.

Transfer Credits

Another important area where having syllabi available online is the determination of transfer credits between schools. It is not always easy to judge how two courses at two different schools match, particularly with limited information. With syllabi easily accessed on the internet, school officials could more rapidly compare the content of courses at their school with the content of courses already taken by students attempting to transfer.

North Carolina State University handles the determination of transfer credits in two different ways, according to Laura McLean, a senior associate director of admissions at N.C. State, one for the state's public schools (community colleges and the UNC system) and another for schools outside the system.

McLean said that most of the time the admissions office is able to make a determination for courses from schools outside the system, particularly those at the introductory level. She said that the course catalogues are "usually adequate to cover what we need to know…we can always contact the school for a syllabus if necessary, but very rarely do we have to go that far."

She said that upper-level courses often are sent to the specific colleges that make up N.C. State, such as the engineering school or the school for the humanities. The colleges will either make the determination or, if the determination requires more specific expertise, refer the course to the specific department to decide. She added that the course description level was usually deemed adequate for making the decision.

Community college courses are evaluated by the UNC system as a whole, rather than by individual campuses. "All of the system schools have their courses evaluated by the Transfer Advisory Committee," McLean explained. Community college courses accepted for transfer to the state's four-year institutions are listed in the Common Articulation Agreement, a common storehouse for all transferable courses, and McLean said system schools can easily determine the transfer credits for incoming students.

With syllabi available to all, professors and department heads could better judge their courses against the courses of their peers in other schools.

The Common Articulation Agreement is part of an ongoing effort to provide a "seamless transition" between UNC schools and the community colleges. UNC system president Erskine Bowles favors using the community colleges to handle much of the anticipated increase in demand for higher education from population growth, which will in turn cause a very likely surge in the number of transfers from 2-year schools to 4-year schools.

Harry Williams, the university system's interim senior associate vice president for academic and student affairs, whose department oversees the Transfer Advisory Committee, said community college courses intended for transfer for specific majors throughout the system are reviewed at the syllabus level, "since that gives a more detailed picture of the course." Other courses, to be considered only as free electives, are sometimes, but not always, judged according to less stringent criteria.

Yet there are signs that the transfer articulation process is not doing a good job of matching up courses according to their degree of difficulty. A recent report by N. C. State graduate student Leslie Hawkins, "The Experiences of Community College Transfer Students to North Carolina State University," suggests that students who transfer from community colleges are often woefully unprepared for State's history classes.[4]

While the UNC system already uses syllabi for transfer determination at times, having them published online makes them more easily available. Another important consideration is that the community college academic departments would have easy and immediate access to the four-year schools' syllabi, so that they could see exactly how their courses differ from those of the four-year schools and strive to decrease the disparities between them.

Existing Syllabi Systems

"I find the University of Washington's way of registering students to be far superior to the system at Carolina, and think students have the right to know exactly what they are signing up for before enrolling in courses," said Amanda Anderson, a political science graduate of UNC-Chapel Hill who transferred from Washington.

Not all systems are as unaccommodating as the University of North Carolina's, and a careful look at two that provide more information will underscore the benefits of mandatory early publication of syllabi. What made Washington's registry better, according to Anderson, was the "Instructor Class Description" (or ICD). The ICD is a Web site linked to the school's online registration system that gives students more detailed information about the course than that provided by other sources like catalogs.

Not all systems are as unaccommodating as the University of North Carolina's, and a careful look at two that provide more information will underscore the benefits of mandatory early publication of syllabi.

The Instructor Course Description at the University of Washington

The Instructor Course Description System was initially implemented in 1998. University of Washington associate registrar Robert Jansson said in an interview that the school began the program partly to offer students better information when making registration choices and as an alternative to mandatory faculty advice and approval of students' course schedules. He said there was also concern at that time about the growing number of drops and adds.

The technical requirements of the system are straightforward; the programming could easily be handled by a talented student intern. Each class entry is merely a page of text—this is far simpler than many "blackboard" systems used by professors to communicate the syllabus, test answers, assignments, and lecture notes to students while the course is underway.

Jansson said, "We provide a Web form for instructors to expand on their general catalog course description and include information on student learning goals, general method of instruction, recommended preparation, and class assignments and grading." Washington political science professor Jon Mercer succinctly stated that the school's "ICD system is so easy" for professors to use. Jansson added that there have been few difficulties with the system; his department has made "some minor modifications to it since it was first released, but none relating to problems."

How much detail is provided is up to the individual teachers—some professors post most of the class's syllabus plus some additional information, while others merely write a paragraph or two (if they choose to use the ICD system at all).

Faculty comply with the ICD system at a rate of 21 percent for undergraduate classes, says Jansson. Compliance varies widely between departments; professors in the natural sciences or technical fields tend not to use the system because of the objective nature of their courses and because textbooks and topics tend to be standardized for the whole department. For the spring of 2008 semester, in computer science there were only two ICD forms filed for the 37 computer science classes, no math classes had ICDs, and the biology department only had 10 ICDs for well over 100 classes.

Compliance was much more common in the humanities, where the material is more subjective and individual professors tend to use different reading selections. Every regular history class offered in the spring of 2008 had an ICD filed, as did 28 out of 43 philosophy classes.

Because of the low level of compliance, it is impossible to tell what effect the ICD system has on the number of drops and adds. Jansson said that there have been 49 percent increases in both procedures between 1997 and 2007.

The ICD entries for English 242, Reading Fiction, reveal why a brief summary of a course is often insufficient for students to make scheduling decisions. The course catalogue description reads only "[C]ritical interpretation and meaning in fiction. Different examples of fiction representing a variety of types from the medieval to modern periods."

For the Spring 2008 semester, there are six sections of the course. Four of the professors posted ICDs, and they seem to describe completely different classes:

- Deborah Kimmey subtitled her course Sex, Freedom, and Constraint and uses the gay leftist philosopher Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* as the primary text. Other reading selections are *The Coquette*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Awakening*, *Passing*, *Another Country*,

No Telephone to Heaven, *Bastard Out of Carolina* and possibly *Middlesex*. She said that students "should be prepared to read and discuss roughly a novel a week" and to write 1-2 pages on each novel, as well as completing a 6-8 page paper.

- Curtis Hisayasu wrote in his description: "In this class we will train our critical lens towards the various historical incarnations of one of popular fiction's most resilient genres: the detective narrative. From Sherlock Holmes, to Batman, to Veronica Mars, detective stories are a ubiquitous cultural force." He adds that the course will require two papers from 5-7 pages each, and that students should expect to read 150 pages per week.
- Joan Kelley's class is based on 19th century British fiction. She listed William Godwin's *Caleb Williams*, Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth*, Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*, and Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* as required reading, but gave no indication about course load or writing assignments.
- "For this unit, we will be examining a selection of fairy tales written or collected by Hans Christian Andersen, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, Charles Perrault, Ludwig Tieck, and Andrew Lang; as well as Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, an American "fairy tale" whose content has been altered in a variety of ways in response to the controversy of its content," wrote Paige Courtney Morgan. She said the class also included a reading of Emily Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, which would be read as a traditional novel and in an illustrated "graphic novel" version. She said students were required to "compose weekly responses to the readings," and write two papers, one 3-4 pages and the other 5-7 pages.

As these selections show, further description by individual professors provides a clearer picture than the one presented in course catalogs. Without descriptions by the individual teachers, students would have to guess which section matched their beliefs, skills, interests, and abilities. A fully informed student seeking a traditional literature course could select Kelley's class, while others could choose specific alternatives dealing with sexuality, fairy tales, or the detective genre.

Another University of Washington example is CSE 415: Introduction to Artificial Intelligence. The course catalog says students will perform programming exercises in the LISP language. Yet Steven L. Tanimoto, the only instructor who used the ICD system for the course, said he would use Python, another language commonly used for AI development. A student with a heavy course load who already knew LISP might not wish to invest the additional time in learning Python, as neither language is currently used very often outside of academia or highly specialized research projects.

Washington's ICD system is far from perfect. Jansson admitted that there are still some shortcomings that need to be addressed. Clearly, the voluntary nature of the system is a major drawback. The low compliance rate at Washington reduces the system's effectiveness. While making compliance immediately mandatory might cause some faculty to rebel, participation could be encouraged over time with minor incentives and disincentives. Once participation becomes commonplace, stricter methods can be employed to make compliance universal, or very nearly so.

A fully informed student seeking a traditional literature course could select Joanne Kelley's class, based on 19th century British fiction, while others could choose alternatives dealing with sexuality, fairy tales, or the detective genre.

The Washington system also suffers from a lack of standardization. Three of the English 242 sections describe the workload of the course, while Joanne Kelley's does not. Many other ICDs cite several reading selections, but fail to say whether they comprise a complete list. Some ICDs simply say that a packet of reading selections will be provided. Some professors add merely a line or two to the course description, while others offer a detailed narrative of the class from start to finish.

Duke University's Online Course Synopsis Handbook

"It's really, really helpful. I can't imagine registering without it—it would be impossible to make a good decision about a class," said Abby Alger, a public policy major at Duke University discussing the Online Course Synopsis Handbook.

Duke's University's Online Course Synopsis Handbook approaches an ideal system for posting syllabi on the web. Although it is still voluntary, professors' compliance reaches 80 percent, according to Rob Hirtz, who is responsible for the Handbook's online publication as the coordinating editor of university bulletins. He said the Handbook is now "viewed by instructors as less of a chore and more of an opportunity."

"This way, instructors can market their courses more effectively, and they no longer have to fend off endless questions from interested students trying to make out their schedules," Hirtz added.

Another advantage the Duke system has over Washington's is a more standard format. Each synopsis begins with the brief course description from the university's Bulletin of Undergraduate Instruction, followed by the following categories of information:

Synopsis of Course Content (1-3 paragraphs)
Textbooks
Assignments (general information, not specifics)
Exams (general information, not specifics)
Term Papers (general information, not specifics)
Grade to be based on: (specific percentages)

Duke's online Course Synopsis Handbook is now "viewed by instructors as less of a chore and more of an opportunity," said Rob Hirtz, the coordinating editor of university bulletins.

Not every synopsis follows the format precisely—professors are only required to complete the Synopsis of Course Content section. Some, like English 90AS-03, Realism, Reality and the Novel, taught by Cathy Shuman in the spring of 2008, offer only the bare minimum beyond the Bulletin description, with just one paragraph written in the Synopsis of Course Content section, and nothing else.

Most synopses, even those that do not complete every section, provide far more information than the one for Realism, Reality and the Novel. For example, the entry for English 26S-02, The Dystopian Novel, taught by Brian Valentyn in the spring of 2008, has three paragraphs of description, a list of reading and film selections, and a few "course requirements," all in the Synopsis of Course Content section. Valentyn's synopsis gives, at the very least, the minimal amount of information necessary to provide students with sufficient understanding of the course to make a good decision about enrollment. The inclusion of the reading selections makes the synopsis for English 26S-02 adequate for many research purposes as well.

In another minor deviation, Edward Balleisen, who will teach History 195S-06, Regulating American Business, in the fall of 2008, found it more efficient to include the class's reading selections within the explanation of assignments.

Most entries, however, conform closely to the format. This is optimal for both student registration and research purposes. Sometimes the entries for Assignments, Exams and Term Papers are brief: as in "approximately 100-150 pp. reading/week," "final exam," "none." But professors generally complete all sections, and this manages to give not just a detailed and accurate description of the class, but some insight into the professor's viewpoints as well.

A space is allotted for professors to add links to their classes' homepages, which have even more information than is provided in the individual synopsis.

Hirtz said the Online Synopsis Handbook was the brainchild, about fifteen years ago, of some Duke students trying to get better course descriptions than the ones offered by the school bulletin. The system received a large boost seven or eight years later, when the dean of Trinity College, Robert J. Thompson, encouraged departments to try it. "Once they did, they found it was really worth the effort," said Hirtz.

Hirtz added that compliance rates by professors in technical subjects were still lower, but rapidly improving.

Conclusion

Mandatory posting of syllabi in a timely fashion would significantly improve the accountability and transparency of colleges and universities. The existence of the Duke and Washington systems dispenses with any criticism that publishing syllabi is unfeasible or would drain resources. The logistics and resources required of an online syllabi system are quite simple: a database of text pages with each page password-protected to permit entry only by the instructor. University information services handle many tasks more demanding than that. The actual amount of work required of instructors is minimal—the difficulty is a matter of timing, not effort, since teachers must eventually produce a syllabus for the start of the new term.

The comments by the students above also belie the UNC economics professor's suggestion that "the 'grapevine' functions very well" in distributing the necessary course information to interested students. It also makes sense to have this information contained within a single, easily accessed repository, rather than spread out across individual professors' Web sites.

Some Duke students expressed a desire to see the compliance rates even higher than the Online Course Synopsis Handbook's 80 percent. This would suggest that such a system must eventually cease to be voluntary and become mandatory.

For new courses, and for new instructors of old classes, the extended course descriptions could be works in progress. Professors creating a new course have at least

some idea of what they intend to teach and what texts they intend to use. Many courses taught by graduate students and adjunct professors are likely to be introductory or survey classes, with basic materials, that have been taught for a long time, often with only slight modifications from year to year. Using previous syllabi at the time of registration would be acceptable in such cases, if they are updated appropriately as any changes become known.

Students are not the only ones who will potentially benefit. The online publishing of syllabi should improve the intellectual dialogue on how courses should be taught, since professors can readily make themselves more aware of what their colleagues in other institutions are doing. The science of teaching might benefit from this "open sourcing" just as scientific research has.

Departments looking to add new courses can search around on the Internet for classes that mirror their goals and at the very least glean some ideas. Anybody who has ever researched a topic knows that it is easier to start with some established framework, rather than from the very beginning. Professors can compare their courses with others to see how they match or differ and to look for trends and innovations.

Accrediting agencies, admissions personnel, and publications like *U.S. News & World Report* and *Peterson's* that rate colleges would have more specific details on what actually gets taught at a particular school. Publication writers could review the assigned reading material and be able to tell which schools of thought a particular college adheres to and in what fields of study it offers the best education. Reading lists and course loads might offer insight into the relative degree of difficulty between programs at different schools.

Higher education analysts would be able to track, quantify, and evaluate the growing or waning popularity of particular books, authors, ideas, and philosophies. Having reading lists and other specific information available would also allow administrators, higher education watchdogs, and public officials to better root out which schools, departments, and professors are using the classroom to further their own political agendas, instead of providing academic learning. Taxpayers and politicians should also be made aware that they are subsidizing such courses if they are taught at public universities.

Making the course materials readily available online allows the entire world to observe, analyze, and make recommendations. This would enable higher education to gain from the same sort of cooperation and give-and-take that have pushed science and technology to unlimited new discoveries. Easier access to information makes for better decisions, deeper understanding, and greater ethical standards. The benefits of such a system are many, and the costs few. In time, such a system will prove to be feasible, efficient, and valuable.

Notes

[1] Sister Toldjah. 2005. Former Visiting Prof Calls for Extermination of White People. Oct. 21. Online: http://sistertoldjah.com/archives/2005/10/21/formerncsuprofcallsforexterminationofwhitepeople.

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ABOUT THE POPE CENTER

The John William Pope Center for Higher Education Policy is a nonprofit institute dedicated to improving higher education in North Carolina and the nation. Located in Raleigh, North Carolina, it is named for the late John William Pope, who served on the Board of Trustees of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

The center aims to increase the diversity of ideas taught, debated, and discussed on campus, and especially to include respect for the institutions that underlie economic prosperity and freedom of action and conscience. A key goal is increasing the quality of teaching, so that students will graduate with strong literacy, good knowledge of the nation's history and institutions, and the fundamentals of mathematics and science. We also want to increase students' commitment to learning and to encourage cost-effective administration and governance of higher education institutions.

To accomplish these goals, we inform parents, students, trustees, alumni, and administrators about actual learning on campus and how it can be improved. We inform taxpayers about the use and impact of their funds, and we seek ways to help students become acquainted with ideas that are dismissed or marginalized on campuses today.

More information about the Pope Center, as well as most of our studies and articles, can be found on our Web site at www.popecenter.org. Donations to the center are tax-deductible.

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Opening Up the Classroom: Greater Transparency through Better, More Accessible Course Information

A simple policy change by university administrators would go a long way to improve transparency and accountability in higher education. This Pope Center report, "Opening Up the Classroom: Greater Transparency through Better, More Accessible Course Information," recommends that faculty be required to post their course syllabi—descriptions that go beyond the sketchy catalog summaries—on the Internet, with access open to the public.

Author Jay Schalin argues that to be of value to students, this posting should occur when registration opens for the next term's classes, typically two to five months before the term begins. He proposes that the syllabi for all courses be available at a single Web site.

The syllabi need not be the full documents, with complete schedules, that are used in class. But at the very least each syllabus should offer a detailed class description and a full list of reading selections.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jay Schalin joined the John William Pope Center for Higher Education Policy in August 2007. As a senior writer, he researches and writes about higher education issues, primarily in North Carolina, and oversees the center's Web site.

A Philadelphia native, Schalin began writing as a freelance journalist for the *Asbury Park Press* in New Jersey in 1994 and has also written for several other papers in New Jersey and Delaware. In 1998, he returned to school to complete his education, graduating from Richard Stockton College in New Jersey with a B.S. in computer science in 2001. After graduation, he was employed as a software engineer for Computer Sciences Corporation. He recently completed the requirements for an M.A. in economics at the University of Delaware.