SLOs and the Syllabus

The principle purpose of a syllabus is to inform students in a formal and timely way of the nature and content of the course, expectations, policies, and procedures that will apply, and the logistics involved in participating in the course. In addition to being informative, however, a syllabus is also a promise that is both explicit in what it states will be a part of the course and implicit in what it infers will not be a part of the course. The syllabus needs to be consistent with the latest approved curriculum action and everything done or required in the class at any time throughout the term should be in agreement with what the syllabus states or does not state.

Each course syllabus should include student learning outcomes (SLOs) that describe the knowledge, skills, and/or abilities that students can expect to attain during the course. The syllabus provides basic information about the course content, activities, and assignments planned for the term, which should correlate with what will be taught and what should be learned at the end of the course. A well-organized syllabus sends students the message that the instructor is organized, cares about student learning, and will create effective learning experiences. Faculty also benefit from a well-constructed syllabus. If students are given clear and explicit information about expectations for the course and the consequences of failing to adhere to course procedures, faculty will be spared the problems with student grievances that can arise when faculty alter their courses mid-term to solve problems “on the fly.”

The 2002 Accreditation Standards and Eligibility Requirements place an increased emphasis on the assessment of student learning as a means of evaluating and improving the educational effectiveness of institutions. The standard that deals with learning outcomes and the syllabus is:

Standard II.A.6: In every class section students receive a course syllabus that specifies learning outcomes consistent with those in the institution’s officially approved course outline.

The LBCC Catalog (2013-14, p. 32) states in part that “all faculty members are required to publish and keep on file in the division office a course information sheet (syllabus) for each course for each semester and distribute them at the first class meeting or no later than the end of the second week of class. The syllabus must align to the content of the course that is in the course outline, contain grading standards for the class, a description of the means by which the course is to be taught (lecture, laboratory, outside assignments, etc.), attendance requirements, and office location and office hours. Other recommended items are: examination dates, text assignments, an outline of topics to be covered in the course, and student learning outcomes.”

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The LBCC Faculty Handbook (2013-14, p. 10), syllabus section, states in part that “the syllabus is the road map the students will use to keep pace with you and will make your job and theirs much easier. A typical syllabus must include…Student Learning Outcomes. Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) are statements that describe what students will be able to know, do, or value as a result of their educational experience. SLOs should be written in language that clearly implies a measurable behavior or quality of student work. SLOs should be written so that students and individuals who do not share an instructor’s disciplinary expertise will understand the knowledge, skills, abilities, and values they can expect to attain in a course.”

Faculty have three options available in regards to publishing their course SLOs on their syllabus. They could: 1) publish the SLOs on the syllabus; 2) give each student an addendum to the syllabus with the SLOs published on the addendum; 3) publish the SLOs on the department and/or school webpage and provide a link to the website on the syllabus. Any combination of the above options can also work. For example, SLOs could be published on both an addendum and on the course website.

It is recommended that faculty provide a definition of SLOs for students and discuss this expected learning to avoid any confusion when the syllabus is presented. A nice alignment might be to identify the course SLOs and correlate that information with the course assignments. In that way, the instructor expresses the expected student learning for a course and then identifies how the course assignments will assist students in developing that learning. Such clarity of purpose assists students and faculty with the learning process.