Tips for an Effective Syllabus

Benefits of a Syllabus

1. **A Syllabus is a Contract** - Though not in the legal sense, it allows you to spell out course expectations and assignments early in the semester. As a written document, a syllabus presents fewer ambiguities than a spoken presentation would (and you can refer students who missed early classes to the syllabus).

2. **Central Reference for Students** - Students like to refer to a central document containing detailed assignments, readings and schedules throughout a semester in order to keep themselves on track.

3. **Effective Planning Document** - A detailed syllabus stating course goals and methods can help instructors better plan the most effective presentation of course content. A poorly-written syllabus can affect student attitude, performance, civility, and may cause legal complications.

4. **Repository for Other Instructors** - A strong syllabus can be used by other instructors to plan similar courses they may be teaching.

General Tips

1. **Be specific** - Specify specific details about upcoming assignments, readings, grading policies, attendance, course goals and other information and expectations. This can include due dates, page length, samples and more. In some cases, it may be more sensible to provide some details later, but even specifying that details are coming in the syllabus can ease student anxieties.

2. **Maintain a Friendly Tone** - A syllabus should not frighten a student with excessive warnings or threats. A syllabus which clearly lays out policy but maintains a friendly tone will make students more comfortable from the beginning.

3. **Review the syllabus on the first day of class** - During your first class, you should discuss the syllabus. Even though your policies are carefully stated, they will often need clarification, and students appreciate your openness in discussing the rationale behind them. In some cases their questions may lead to a beneficial exchange about course goals and philosophies.

4. **Announce Changes in E-Mail** - If for some reason, a date or other item in the syllabus must be changed, you may want to consider a general e-mail message to your students so that have a "written" record, as well as announcing it in class.