Creating a well-crafted syllabus is the first step in helping students understand the goals of a course, their responsibilities, and the criteria that will be used to evaluate their performance.

When it was first published in 1997, The Course Syllabus became the gold standard reference for both new and experienced college faculty. Like the first edition, this book is based on a learner-centered approach. Because faculty members are now deeply committed to engaging students in learning, the syllabus has evolved into a useful, if lengthy, document. Today’s syllabus provides details about course objectives, requirements and expectations, and also includes information about teaching philosophies, specific activities and the rationale for their use, and tools essential to student success.

This new and thoroughly revised edition places the syllabus within the context of (1) today’s students, including “millennials” and nontraditionals; (2) current and emerging campus technologies which offer, among other innovations, course management systems for online and hybrid delivery; and (3) contemporary faculty goals to nurture lifelong learners, teach students how to learn, assess learning outcomes, and prepare students for a changing workplace. In addition, The Course Syllabus includes:

- Updated research literature on faculty development and higher education
- A revised resource list and bibliography
- A new selection of syllabus excerpts from campuses across the nation representing a range of disciplines from a variety of institutions

The book’s examples illustrate topics faculty are including in learning-centered syllabi such as civility, academic honesty, safety, and tools to support successful learning.

“I can’t imagine a book more deserving of a second edition. And, I can’t imagine a second edition better than the first, but this one is, thanks to the able efforts of the two new authors.”

— Maryellen Weimer, professor emeritus, Penn State and editor, The Teaching Professor

The Authors

Judith Grunert O’Brien has retired from her work at Syracuse University to focus on sculpture, drawing, and writing. She was a member of the School of Art faculty, College of Visual and Performing Arts, Syracuse University, when she wrote the first edition of a Learning-Centered Syllabus in 1997.

Barbara J. Millis is director of the Excellence in Teaching Program at the University of Nevada-Reno.

Margaret W. Cohen is director and associate provost for professional development at the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

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— Maryellen Weimer, professor emeritus, Penn State and editor, The Teaching Professor
Praise for *The Course Syllabus, Second Edition*

“I can’t imagine how many times I’ve recommended this book—to new faculty, to part-time teachers, to experienced pedagogues, and to faculty finding their way to more learner-centered approaches. I can’t imagine a book more deserving of a second edition. And, I can’t imagine a second edition better than the first, but this one is, thanks to the able efforts of two new authors.” —Maryellen Weimer, professor emeritus, Penn State, and editor, the *Teaching Professor*

“New and veteran college teachers alike, in all types of institutions from the community college to the university level, will benefit from this highly thoughtful, scholarly, and persuasive argument for the critical role of the learning-centered course syllabus. The authors clearly and convincingly demonstrate how to create a learning-centered course syllabus that becomes a dynamic, essential part of a course that encourages student engagement, active learning, and critical thinking. A must-read for anyone committed to teaching today’s college students to maximize their skills and knowledge for a changing world!” —Angela Provitera McGlynn, professor emeritus of psychology and author of *Teaching Today’s College Students* and *Successful Beginnings for College Teaching*

“It’s obvious that Millis and Cohen have extensive backgrounds in college teaching and learning. Their work on the syllabus as a fundamental component of good teaching is supportive, insightful, current, and practical. This is a masterful updating of Grunert’s classic, relevant across all disciplines.” —Nancy Chism, professor of higher education, Indiana University
“All individuals involved in instructing today’s (and tomorrow’s) college students facing twenty-first century academic challenges should read this book for helpful suggestions on how to prepare an enhanced blueprint for learning and academic success—the course syllabus.” —James E. Groccia, director, Biggio Center for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning; associate professor, educational leadership; and past president, POD Network in Higher Education

“...”

“This book is unusually good. Comprehensive, clear, practical, and immediately useful, it should be read by every department chair and faculty member.” —Peter Seldin, Distinguished Professor of Management, Pace University

“...”

“This update of *The Course Syllabus* includes, among other fine features, an excellent review and incorporation of ideas from the literature on college teaching that have been published since the original version.” —L. Dee Fink, national project director, Teaching & Curriculum Assessment Project

“...”

“The syllabus is much more than a course description; it is a working document for both the instructor and the students. In *The Course Syllabus*, Grunert, Millis, and Cohen have provided a well-documented, up-to-date road map for teachers and learners alike to using the syllabus effectively by emphasizing the value of the learning-centered approach.” —Marilla D. Svinicki, professor, Department of Educational Psychology, the University of Texas at Austin
The Course Syllabus
A Learning-Centered Approach

Second Edition

Judith Grunert O’Brien, Barbara J. Millis, Margaret W. Cohen
Foreword by Robert M. Diamond
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This book is dedicated to our college and university colleagues who are teaching students to value the processes of learning as much as they do.
THE RESEARCH ON teaching and learning is consistent: the more information you provide your students about the goals of a course, their responsibilities, and the criteria you will use to evaluate their performance, the more successful they will be as students and the more successful you will be as a teacher. This is no easy task. It requires a great deal of effort on your part and, often, far more work than you originally anticipate.

The first step is to develop a clear set of learning goals or outcomes for each course and for every one of its units. You will then want to ensure that the methods you use to evaluate student success align with the goals of these courses. In addition, students need to understand—and perceive as fair—the criteria you will use to determine their grades and the standards of acceptable performance. After you have determined the goals and the evaluation criteria, you can then focus on the specific activities and assignments that will help students achieve the goals. Students will also need to know what you expect of them academically and socially. Perhaps equally challenging, students must read and use this information once you provide it to them.

Unfortunately, in too many instances your students will enter your course without the study skills and habits necessary to effectively use even the best information. Today’s students need you to reinforce the importance of the material you provide and give them detailed information on how to best use it. Just handing students a quality study guide or syllabus is not enough. You need to introduce the importance of your stated learning goals, show students how these outcome statements are directly related to how they are evaluated, and then reinforce this relationship through quizzes, tests, and assignments early and often.
In addition, technology, changing demographics, distance education, and new ways of thinking about the nature of knowledge in the information age have prompted many changes in teaching that may be unfamiliar to your students. New learning opportunities abound through the Internet, including Web sites (such as MySpace and YouTube), e-mail, and course management systems (such as Blackboard, WebCampus, Angel, and Moodle)—which all allow academic exchanges to occur outside regular class meetings. The significant increase in part-time and adult students (including first-generation students), as well as in internships and extended classroom activities, has affected the nature of what and how we teach. The traditional one- to three-page syllabus is ineffective for helping students understand their expanding role in the learning enterprise. To understand the expectations that you have of them and the plans that have been established for their learning experience, your students need more comprehensive information than the traditional syllabus provides. *The Course Syllabus: A Learning-Centered Approach* addresses student learning and responds to this question: what do students need to know to derive maximum benefit from their educational experience?

Many faculty have already gone far beyond the shorter syllabus. John Lough (1997), in a study of Carnegie Professor of the Year award winners, found important similarities in syllabi designed by these exemplary teachers. Most obvious was the detailed precision. Each contained clearly stated course objectives; a day-by-day schedule identifying specific reading assignments and due dates; and clear statements regarding make-up dates, attendance, and grading standards. These syllabi also provided students with the times when the professor would be available in the office, by e-mail, and by phone at home. Lough observed, “One gets the very clear impression that the Carnegie award winners have extraordinary expectations for their own behavior in and out of the classroom. Perhaps it is not so surprising, therefore, that these professors might impose some of these same standards on the students with whom they share so much.” These high standards are manifest by what such teachers do in the classroom and by what they say in their syllabi.

Robert M. Diamond

Author of *Designing and Assessing Courses and Curricula*
MYRIAD CHALLENGES FACE American colleges and universities today, including serving an increasingly diverse student population and responding to the demands of an information society that is transforming the way we live, work, and learn. This diversity is reflected in how our students select campuses, choose majors, and enroll in courses. Some students base their choices on traditional factors—prestige, financial aid, legacy, program options, reputation—and others base their choices on mundane factors, such as convenience, proximity, and cost. More and more students are delaying college matriculation or going to school part-time. Many are fulfilling dreams to enroll in college after raising families or serving their country. They select courses that synchronize smoothly with their work and family schedules. They are first- and second-generation Americans. They are fluent in more than one language, or they may be learning to speak, read, and write in English as a second language. They travel around the world to attend a college in the United States, and they matriculate from the neighborhoods adjacent to our campuses. The diversity of our students increases the complexity of our instructional lives. Whether they’re in a small seminar or a large lecture hall, our students bring to the classroom different knowledge sets and experiences, different reasons for pursuing degrees, different interests and motives, and different resources and skills for learning.

How do we respond to this heterogeneity? A renewed focus on student learning is one way of meeting these attitudinal and behavioral challenges. A first step is making a habit of applying our inquiry skills to our teaching and asking persistently, “How do I know my students are learning?” and “What’s best for student learning?” Fortunately, we can rely on the extensive research on learning and motivation and consider which learning goals
and teaching priorities will ensure that our students learn in meaningful, purposeful, and effective ways. Listening and watching for answers to questions like “How do I know my students understand this abstraction?” “How do I know everyone can replicate the problem solution?” and “How can I be certain that we’ve clarified misconceptions?” can help us focus creatively on the strategies that will steer the diverse learners in our classes to valuing academic success.

This guide frames the process of developing a comprehensive student syllabus as a reflective exercise that will lead to course improvement. Composing a syllabus that is centered on student learning is a challenging undertaking that requires substantial reflection and analysis. A learning-centered syllabus requires that you shift from what you, the instructor, are going to cover in your course to a concern for what information, tools, assignments, and activities you can provide to promote your students’ learning and intellectual development. It is an evolving process that is enhanced by repeated opportunities to teach the same course to different learners.

Your syllabus represents a significant point of interaction, often the first, between you and your students. When thoughtfully prepared, your syllabus will demonstrate the interplay of your understanding of students’ needs and interests, your beliefs and assumptions about the nature of learning and education, and your values and interests concerning course content and structure. When carefully designed, your syllabus will provide your students with essential information and resources that can help them become effective learners by actively shaping their own learning. It will minimize misunderstandings by providing you and your students with a common plan and set of references.

**Organization**

Part I of this book reflects on the implications of the learning context and adopting a focus on learning for you and your students. We hope it guides you to discover fresh insights and new ways to develop a course syllabus. Included are sections on planning a learning-centered syllabus, composing it to serve a number of functions, and using it as a learning tool throughout a course. In each section, we call attention to integrating various technologies, especially course management systems, to enhance the form, function, and use of the syllabus.

Part II offers excerpts from syllabi developed for courses in many disciplines at colleges and universities across the United States. These examples may not necessarily have been developed within a framework of