The Academic Bulletin
from the Office of the Provost of Calvin College
Friday, April 8, 2016

What’s a Syllabus?

The Chronicle of Higher Education ran a story last week (see the short version) about a battle between a College of Charleston biology professor and his dean over the contents of his syllabus. It seems that the professor thought that a quote from Woodrow Wilson sufficed for a student learning outcome, but the dean expected that the student learning outcomes (SLOs) be about, well, biology. The dean’s real worry was that the syllabus would reflect badly on the college at its next reaffirmation of accreditation. This story came at the same time that I was reading forty or so syllabi from a technical college in Wisconsin as part of their accreditation responsibilities. The two events got me wondering about how accreditors ever became an audience for syllabi.

It seems clear to me that the intended audience for a syllabus is the students in the class. Although these documents can be used to support a case for reaffirmation of accreditation, that’s not what they’re for. They are not intended to prove to deans that we know what SLOs are, or to accreditors that we know what a credit hour is. As the college’s accreditation liaison officer (you didn’t know we had one of those, did you?), I want to make sure we satisfy any peer reviewer who might look at our syllabi, but I have zero interest in telling a faculty member to put something on a syllabus just because the Higher Learning Commission might want to see it. I just hope that our syllabi are communicating effectively to our students (at least those who actually read them).

Having read practically every Calvin syllabus for the past two semesters, I don’t think syllabi are “broken” or in desperate need of reform. But I do think we all could benefit by thinking about what we want to communicate to our students in this document. (The psychology department last year actually had a department-wide review and discussion of syllabi.) A suggestion of Ken Bain’s might be a good place to start that thinking. Bain, whose book I recommend to all new faculty (and anyone else who will listen), found that the best college teachers often have “promising syllabi” that have three components: First, the syllabus “promises” students that they will gain certain knowledge and skills by the end of the semester. Second, it describes the activities that will help students achieve the promise: readings, discussions, assignments. Third, the syllabus “begins a conversation about how the teacher and the student would best come to understand the nature and progress of the student’s learning.” A longer description of the promising syllabus can be found in this article by James Lang, whose book I also recommend to all new faculty. But perhaps an even better place to start is to ask our students what they expect to see. Maybe I’ll go do that.

Mike Stob, dean for academic administration

Faculty Awards, 2016

Congratulations to the recipients of the faculty awards for 2016, to be honored—at the Tributes and Awards Dinner on Friday, May 6:

- Advising and Mentoring: Pre-health advisors Nancy Meyer (Kinesiology), Rich Nyhof (Biology), Kumar Sinniah (Chemistry), Amy Wilstermann (Biology)
- Community-Based Teaching: Ministry Leadership Program, Handlon Campus
- From Every Nation Award for Excellence in Teaching: David Smith (Education)
- Innovative Teaching: Vicki De Vries (French)
- Student-Faculty Research: Carolyn Anderson (Chemistry and Biochemistry)
- Teaching Excellence (for affiliated and adjunct faculty): Pam Plantinga (Mathematics and Statistics)
From the Faculty Activity Reports


Be sure to fill out your Faculty Activity Reports regularly. If you have questions, see the FAQ page. **Note:** FEN activities are now being called Intercultural Competency Professional Development Activities. Beginning April 1, 2016, such activities will be in a new system—not as FARs. A link is coming soon.

First-Year Seminar Instructors

The fall of 2016 will mark the fourth year of the First-Year Seminar (FYS). Consider becoming a paid instructor for this seven-week seminar, which provides students and instructors alike the opportunity to build strong relationships and adjust to college life. Contact Rick DeVries if you have questions or are interested.

Coming Up on Campus

Monday, April 11
- Chapel. Jul Medenblik (Calvin Theological Seminary), Romans 12:9–21. 10:00 a.m., Chapel
- Faculty Senate. 7:00 p.m., Prince Conference Center, Willow Room
- Jellema Lecture. Jennifer Herdt (Yale Divinity School), “Happiness Is the Wrong Kind of Reason.” 7:30 p.m., Meeter Center lecture hall

Tuesday, April 12
- Chapel. Sexual Assault Prevention Team, “Lament, Healing, and Hope.” 10:00 a.m., Chapel
- Jellema Lecture. Jennifer Herdt, “The Call to Responsible Agency.” 3:30 p.m., Meeter Center lecture hall

Wednesday, April 13
- Chapel. Sounds of Korean worship. 10:00 a.m., Chapel
- College master plan presentations. 10:00 a.m. and 12:00 noon, Commons Annex alumni board room
- President’s coffee and master plan presentation. 3:30 p.m., Chapel
- Lecture. Eve Tushnet, “Christian Love and Kinship Outside of Marriage: Thoughts from a Gay Catholic.” 7:30 p.m., CFAC recital hall

Thursday, April 14
- Chapel. Steve Stockman and Fr. Martin Magill, “Peacemaking in Northern Ireland.” 10:00 a.m., Chapel

Friday, April 15
- Chapel. Student worship team. 10:00 a.m., Chapel
- Biology seminar. Darren Moore (Van Andel Inst.), “Mechanisms and Models of Dominant Parkinson’s Disease.” 1:30 p.m., Science Building 010