

# A Student's Right to Challenge

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## Abstract

**When a university's syllabus is not clear students may feel they have every right to challenge a final grade and/or often dictate to the professor the terms by which they are to be graded! To avoid issues with final grades that students earn and/or prevent the instructor from losing focus of important content items that need to be taught, a clearly written, explicit syllabus needs to be in place and constructed so that there is a system wide template. This document will present important points to consider when developing a course syllabus and a companion course outline.**

### *Rationale*

A well written syllabus is a contract between the University and the student(s). It is to be considered the "law of the land" during the course and even afterward in case a dispute does arise in regard to a student's final grade. A contract is a "meeting of the minds", in that the instructor explains what the syllabus means, contains, consists of and/or sets specific expectation for student assignments. In turn, the student must follow, to the letter, the contents of the syllabus in order for there to be a successful outcome leading to the student's understanding of his or her grade earned.

### *Theoretical Framework*

A repository for a template of a standard University syllabus and outline is mandatory. National University upholds the philosophy that, "The content of these courses are the intellectual identity of the larger Academic institution...it must be the best it can be... yet where are they, as faculty, to find elements that supplement content in a way that serves the course and its students? (Fawson, nd). Based on this theoretical premise, National University has created a system called NU-FAST in which syllabi, course outlines, sample capstone assignments, forms, power points, and student handbooks are located in an electronic file system. NU-FAST is used for either onsite or online courses and "as faculty have access to training and technology to

which they could create their own videos, AVK activities, narrated lectures, relevant resources, and important material, they would deposit these files into their own folders” (Beyer, nd).

Threaded discussions can take place in NU-FAST, over a particular course, which allow professionals to discuss the pros and cons of any particular subject. This leads to clarification of syllabi, course grading and/or course rubrics found in course outlines to accurately provide student evaluation.

The use of rubrics is vital to the writing of a clear syllabus and outline. When using a capstone assignment as an assessment tool to insure mastery of course content, providing the students with at least a 3 point rubric is essential. Subsequently, it is clear to the student what constitutes an outstanding product, one that is an average product, and one that is unacceptable. ...“rubrics make assessing student work quick and efficient, and they help teachers justify to parents and others the grades that they assign to students” (Andrade, 2005 as cited in Kohn, 2006).

The course outline must be clear and consistent and include course description and learning outcomes that align with subject matter standards. Ideally, the instructor’s contact information is present, plus required readings, which include the appropriate text book and specific edition. One of the most important elements of the course outline includes the instructor’s clearly articulated grading factors that define point values for each assignment. An instructor may wish to include penalties for late work and/or what weight absences play in the student’s grade plus any protocol a student must follow when he/she must be absent. The course outline must clearly present what a student needs to pass the course (National University, nd).

It is a solid practice that not only rubrics be included in a clear syllabus and outline, but when a course is being developed it must meet certain criteria. When a program/course is authored, it must conform to the University’s Institutional Learning Outcomes. For example, National University upholds the following ILO’s (National University, 2010):

1. Apply information literacy skills necessary to support continuous, lifelong learning.
2. Communicate effectively orally and in writing, and through other appropriate modes of expression
3. Display mastery of knowledge and skills in a discipline
4. Demonstrate cultural and global awareness to be responsible citizens in a diverse society
5. Demonstrate professional ethics and practice academic integrity
6. Utilize research and critical thinking to solve problems
7. Use collaboration and group processes to achieve a common goal

Not only must the above Institutional Learning Outcomes be present, each course must align with program learning outcomes and course learning outcomes. When a program/course is

reviewed the University's Program Review Committee and the Academic Affairs Committee several components are carefully considered. Those items are as follows:

1. Program Learning Outcomes, such that, "Upon successful completion of this program, students will be able to (National University, 2010): and the goals for the course are enumerated.
2. Curriculum Maps: The sequence of courses are noted on a matrix with the course numbers at the top with the aligned CLO's (Course Learning Outcomes), PLO's (Program Learning Outcomes) and ILO's (Institutional Learning Outcomes) are noted on the side with I, D, and M noted throughout the matrix under the course where outcomes are I (introduced), D, (developed) and M, where mastery is expected (National University, 2009).
3. Multi-Year Assessment Plan, i.e. there is usually at least one capstone assignment for each course that can translate into how well students grasp the CLO's. The capstone assignments for each course in the program can be translated into a "Task Stream" Assessment tool in order to reflect the Program's effectiveness in relation to a student's mastery of the subject matter.
4. Catalogue Description: in keeping with the clarity and organization for a clear syllabus and outline to inform the student/candidate properly, the catalogue description must be well organized that clearly identifies program specific requirements and expectations which are directly connected to the course syllabus.
5. Course Descriptions: similar to the catalogue description in merits, but pertinent to each course in the program.

### *Presentation Outcomes*

The goal of this proposal and ensuing presentation is to provide a global perspective of key elements that create a clear course syllabus and course outline. Hence, a university professor can succinctly present a graduate level student an explanation of a final grade he/she earned in a particular course plus empower student learning rather than defer course requirements and disposition to student desires.

This author has served nearly three years on a university grade appeal committee and draws from experience as to why students feel privileged to contest their final grade. This paper and subsequent presentation will prove to elaborate upon conditions and circumstances that foster explicit understanding between the professor and the student all elements that led to the final grade the student earned.

### *Students' Rights*

As the title of this paper so aptly states, *A Student's Right to Challenge* (Keough, 2010), it is incumbent upon this author to explain the criteria upon which a student may challenge a grade posted to his/her transcript. According to the University's template, there are five grounds

for a student grade appeal: 1) calculation error, 2) unclear/not prompt criteria, 3) criteria not used, 4) factors other than achievement, and 5) inconsistent/inequitable applied standards. In a recent report by a past grade appeal committee member, a research study was done that reflected the following breakdown of criteria categories by percentages for the 54 grade appeals that were reviewed in one year (Cuniff, 2009):

**14.2% CE - Calculation Error**

**0.0% CNU - Criteria Not Used**

**45.7% FOTA - Factors Other Than Achievement**

**18.6% IIAS - Inconsistent/Inequitable Applied Standards**

**1.0% UNP - Unclear**

**21.4% UNPC - Unclear/Not Prompt Criteria**

Let it be noted that almost one half students' grade appeals fall under the category, "Factors Other Than Achievement". It is this author's hypothesis that the reason for this statistic lies in unclear course syllabi and/or course outlines. Hence, it is incumbent upon institutions of higher education to provide that clear, well written, noting specific outcomes and expectations, especially in regard to grading that conforms to posted rubrics.

#### *Suggested Remedies*

One University professor upholds the use of student journals as a solution to grade appeals. In a power point presentation to the Grade Appeal Committee on May 12, 2010, Dr. D. Cuniff noted: [student journals] "1) Can be used online, 2) Can be used on ground, 3) Improves daily/weekly communication as to what was said, read, and expected in the class, 4) Provides two-way personal communication and answers any lingering questions, 5) Offers NO SURPRISES AT THE END OF THE COURSE REDUCING GRADE APPEALS" (National University, 2010).

Undoubtedly, as this paper has shown, a clear syllabus and outline, plus clear grading standards must be present in all courses that align with program learning outcomes, which in turn align with institutional learning outcomes.

Course coaching has been a successful, especially in regard to online course delivery. According to Dr. S. Schwartz (2010), online supervisor for National University, "This system really helps us improve our delivery of courses!"

Course team discussions are formed and posted on the National University online "filing" system, discussed earlier in this paper and termed, "NU-FAST". Each course has a voluntary group of professors who form a team according to their familiarity with teaching a particular

course. Whenever a course team member makes a comment about the course they've voluntarily subscribed to, the comment is immediately posted to each team member's email. Each member has the opportunity to read and post additional comments that allow for clarification of any items on a course syllabus and/or outline. It also presents a manner in which any inoperable links and/or errors in the course can be noted.

One other remedy in preventing grade appeals is a newly developed and temporarily funded project known as course editing. One professor, appointed by the Online Supervisor and approved by the School of Education Dean, is allowed access to several online courses. After review, not as a content specialist, but as only an editor, a multiple page document is sent to the Course Lead for review and possible implementation. The word "possible" is noted, as corrections/modifications are solely the discretion of the course author.

Other remedies pertinent to supporting students at the outset of a course so that a grade appeal is not eminent at the end of a course would include clear, open and frequent communication with the students through the duration of the course.

Dispositions, although not as concrete as a clearly written syllabus and outline, must have a brief inclusion in *A Student's Right to Challenge*, in that, a student, if given the opportunity, may "vent" as to the professor's personality, ill relatives and/or need to continue with student loans. Sockett (2006), states dispositions are, "Values and experiences that provide a framework for dealing with classroom ethical dilemmas" (nd). Certainly one can point to the dilemma of a student understanding he/she has "entitlement" to challenge a grade that in the grade posted by the instructor was different from that "earned" by the one disputing the grade! Universities must permit the challenges to continue, but recognize that there is factual information that must be adhered to when sifting through emotionality often linked with student dispositions.

### *Conclusion*

Higher education is faced with the challenge of drawing students to private universities, either onsite or online classes, during economic challenge and rising tuition costs. Class syllabi and accompanying outline must reflect rigor and at the same time, encourage student critical thinking and creativity in order to make a difference in a global economic downturn. It is hypothesized that only by creating a clear, well written, explicit course syllabus and outline, will students be able to navigate through the rough terrain of increasing competition for high academic achievement resulting in a prominent place in a troubled global economy.

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