

Rutgers University Senate
Instruction, Curricula & Advising Committee

Implementation of 2006 Senate Recommendations on Availability of Syllabi

S-0808A: Implementation of 2006 Senate Recommendations on Availability of Syllabi: Consider and report on the [Proposal](#) submitted by Senator Candice Greaux, and the [related resolution from the Rutgers University Student Assembly](#), regarding implementation of the Senate's recommendations on availability of syllabi, contained in the 2006 Instruction, Curricula and Advising Committee's [Response to Charge S-0313, Availability of Syllabi during Add/Drop](#). Also consider how new technologies, and emphasis on learning goals and assessment objectives for courses, have changed the definition of "syllabus."

Background

In October 2006, the University Senate approved the Instruction, Curricula, and Advising Committee's *Report and Recommendations on the Availability of Syllabi* <<http://senate.rutgers.edu/icacsyllabiavailability1006.html>>. This short report had three recommendations:

1. It is reasonable to expect that every instructor would have at least a draft syllabus available, either as a handout or online, by the first class meeting.
2. Departments should maintain current course descriptions, including information on expected work and grading structure (assignments, papers, projects, exams and other methods of evaluation) on their departmental web sites and then make those descriptions available via the Course Synopsis System.
3. The Office of Scheduling and Space Management should be charged with developing a process by which departments would provide the URL with their linked course descriptions that could then automatically be attached to that department's course listings in the Course Synopsis System. This should then be submitted to the IT Project Governance Committee for prioritization and implementation.

In December 2006, President McCormick responded to the recommendations and indicated his support, stating:

“Giving Rutgers students the information they need to decide whether to continue in a course or withdraw during add/drop is in everyone's best interests, and therefore I support the Senate's recommendations. Executive Vice President Philip Furmanski and his staff will work with the relevant deans, departments, and offices, including the Office of Scheduling and Space Management, to implement the recommendations.”¹

Despite administrative support for the Senate recommendations, there seemed to be no significant progress in this area. In the Spring of 2008, the Rutgers Student Assembly

¹ <http://senate.rutgers.edu/rlmacksyllabiavailability.html>

(RUSA) passed a resolution² sponsored by their Academic Affairs Committee, which resolved:

1. That the RUSA reminds faculty and administration of the senate's Report and Recommendations on Availability of Syllabi.
2. That RUSA requests the Office of Scheduling and Space Management and IT Project Governance Committee take the Senate's recommendation into consideration and make syllabi available in the Course Synopsis System.
3. That RUSA strongly encourages Vice President Furmanski and department chairs to require faculty to make syllabi available before classes begin, and encourages faculty to take the initiative on this as well.
4. That RUSA encourages students to request their syllabi if their instructors do not make them available well before classes begin.

In November of 2008, Candice Greaux, then New Brunswick Student Representative to the Senate Executive Committee, requested that the Instruction, Curricula, and Advising Committee be asked to look at the implementation of their 2006 recommendations.³ Both the RUSA recommendation and Greaux's proposal both cited some of the positive effects of having timely access to syllabi: students would be able to better gauge their workload for the semester resulting in less dropping and adding of courses; the likelihood of the bookstores and individual students being able to locate and acquire used texts would increase, resulting in reduced costs for students.

While the Instruction Curricula and Advising Committee was issued the charge as requested, as other, seemingly more urgent, charges were issued to the Committee, this one was continually relegated to the back burner. However when the Committee took up the charge in the Spring of 2012, it did not seem that very much had changed.

What is a Syllabus?

The OED defines a syllabus as "a statement of the subjects covered by a course of instruction or by an examination, in a school, college, etc.; a programme of study."⁴ However, most current syllabi seem to be much more than a simple "statement of the subjects covered by a course of instruction." That definition would seem to more closely correspond to our official course descriptions. Among any number of other things, syllabi may also include information on course objectives, requirements, assignments, and assessments (tests, papers, projects); as well as policies relating to attendance, electronic devices, grading, professional ethical practices, academic integrity, etc.

However, the students to whom we spoke felt that the most pertinent information—at least that which they would like to have initially—would be a course description, the books that they would be using, and the course requirements (tests, papers, etc.).

² <http://senate.rutgers.edu/RUSAResolutionOnCourseSyllabi.pdf>

³ <http://senate.rutgers.edu/GreauxProposalOnCourseSyllabiAvailabilityRevised.html>

⁴ "syllabus, n." OED Online. March 2012. Oxford University Press.
<http://www.oed.com.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/view/Entry/196148?redirectedFrom=syllabus>

Availability of Syllabi at Rutgers

The 2006 Senate recommendations on syllabi, called on departments to “maintain current course descriptions, including information on expected work and grading structure (assignments, papers, projects, exams and other methods of evaluation) on their departmental web sites:” and for the Office of Scheduling and Space Management to develop a process by which these “could then automatically be attached to that department’s course listings in the Course Synopsis System.”

In order for these course descriptions/syllabi to be linked to the Course Synopsis System, they need to first exist and be accessible.

In order to get a gauge on accessibility, some New Brunswick committee members surveyed the availability of syllabi on their own department websites.

Syllabi Availability: Selected New Brunswick Departments

| Department | # of courses Spring 2012 | Course Syllabi Available on Department Site | Link from Schedule of Classes | Notes |
|------------------------------|--------------------------|---|-------------------------------|--|
| Asian Language & Culture | 61 sections | 35 | Partial but “Page Not Found” | |
| Chemistry & Chemical Biology | 29 | 8 | Yes from all | At least 2 had syllabi posted more than 2 weeks before the semester began |
| Economics | 27 (undergraduate) | All except independent study | Yes | |
| Physics & Astronomy | 30 (undergraduate) | All except independent study | Yes | |
| Sociology | 55 | 20 | Yes from all | Chair & UG director email all instructors to supply copy of syllabus for posting |

The Newark College of Arts and Sciences has a new site (<http://www.ncas.rutgers.edu>) which has standard links to most NCAS departments⁵. There is a “Courses” section in most NCAS department sites; in many cases that area includes at least brief, and in some cases expanded, course descriptions. (See Appendix A) Some departments (Chemistry, Computer Science, History) do have links to syllabi for all or almost all courses being offered in the Spring 2012 semester. Provided that they are willing to work their way through a series of departmental menus, in many cases Newark students should be able to find useful course information.

There are no links to department sites or individual course sites from the Newark portion of the Schedule of Classes.

⁵ If a department is maintaining its own site, the NCAS site links to the department site.

Camden has a “Majors and Degrees” page (<http://www.camden.rutgers.edu/page/majors-degrees>) that has a link for each undergraduate program offered on that campus. These in turn offer a link to the department page. Of the department pages surveyed, all have a link to the catalog course descriptions; many also have a very useful departmental two-year course schedule. However, of the 15 departments/programs surveyed⁶ only one department (History) had links to current syllabi.

Most of the Camden programs surveyed did not offer a link from the Schedule of Classes to a department or individual course site. Sociology, Anthropology, and Criminal Justice did link to the department “Courses” site. Computer Science and History had links in the Schedule of Classes, but the links were broken.

When Syllabi Are Available

We must assume that the first 2006 recommendation “It is reasonable to expect that every instructor would have at least a draft syllabus available, either as a handout or online, by the first class meeting,” is for the most part not really an issue. There might be circumstances where such a syllabus is not available on the first day—where an instructor literally takes over a class at the last minute, for example. And some syllabi may just not be very useful and may not provide all of the information that a student needs, or wants. However these are probably the exception and not the norm. In a clicker survey of some 500 students in three New Brunswick economics classes in the Spring 2012 semester, in response to the question

In your courses this semester, have you found that course syllabi are available for courses that you have registered for

- (a) Before the semester begins;
- (b) By the first day of class;
- (c) In the first week of class;
- (d) Later;
- (e) Never

22 percent responded that they had syllabi before the semester began; 57 percent responded that they had them by the first day of class; and 19 percent responded that they had them in the first week of class. Only 1 percent responded that they received a syllabus later than the first week.

Information Available During Registration

In the survey referenced above, students were also asked:

⁶ Accounting, African Studies, American Studies, Anthropology, Sociology & Criminal Justice, Biology, Chemistry, Childhood Studies, Computer Science, Economics, History, Nursing, Physics, Political Science, Social Work, and Religion. Political Science did have links to syllabi on their Spring 2012 course list page; as of the 2d week of the Fall 2012 semester there were no syllabi associated with that course list page.

Overall, do you feel that enough information about courses is available when you register?

26 percent of the students surveyed responded that they “rarely” had sufficient information, while 49 percent responded that they “sometimes” had sufficient information. 20 percent felt that they “often” had sufficient information; only 5 percent reported that they didn’t really look for information when registering.

It would seem that most students look for information about the courses that they may be interested in taking during the registration period, and would certainly want to have access to at least draft syllabi prior to the first course meeting. The 2006 recommendations to departments to have these posted and to Scheduling to link to these posted syllabi were written in response to that need. However there are still clearly major problems in these areas.

Syllabi in Course Management Systems

A sample survey of some departmental web sites also points out one area where advances in technology are probably working against general accessibility of syllabi. As more and more courses take advantage of Course Management Systems, it is there, rather than the departmental web site, that a syllabus gets posted. While a class site is usually only accessible to the students registered for that course, in Sakai at least it is possible for instructors to create links from their syllabi and make them viewable to non-members of the course. (See Appendix B). So departmental sites or the Schedule of Classes could link to the Sakai syllabus directly.

Blackboard’s Content Collection feature also allows you to select a file within a course and make it available to specific users or even public through a URL which can be emailed or posted on a web site. That leaves the course protected but opens access to a specific file.

In eCollege syllabi are typically integrated into the course shell which can only be accessed by registered students and faculty; it is not possible to publicly link to syllabi. However it is possible, and Continuous Studies is willing to, set up something where syllabi could be loaded to a common site and be publicly accessible. This would however probably require faculty to post the syllabus in that common space.

So in the case of Blackboard and Sakai, it should be fairly simple for instructors to provide links to syllabi that could be available on the department website. While eCollege does offer a work-around, if that would require faculty to post their syllabus in two places it would seem just as simple for instructors to provide the department with a copy of their syllabus.

On their part, departments must consciously and conscientiously look to maintain a usable course site on their departmental web pages, and should mandate that faculty submit their syllabus, or a link to their syllabus, for inclusion on their sites as soon as a

draft is available. For most students a draft that includes a basic course description, lists the textbook, and gives them some idea of the course expectations, if available when they are trying to decide which courses to take, is probably sufficient.

This is admittedly an issue for smaller departments that may not have the staff support to not only develop but maintain such a site. Deans should be prepared to provide resources to those departments.

The sooner students have sufficient information, the sooner they can make final decisions about their semester course selections. Increasing the accessibility of that information could significantly reduce the amount of Drop/Adds being done at the beginning of each semester and the corresponding traffic in and out of courses.

Recommendations:

1. Departments should maintain an actively updated course site on their departmental web pages, and should mandate that faculty submit their syllabus, or a link to their syllabus, for inclusion on that site as soon as a draft is available.
2. If at the time of registration a current draft syllabus is not yet available, a syllabus from the last time the course was offered by the same instructor, if appropriate (with a disclaimer), should be available.
3. When possible, department listings should link to syllabi that are in Course Management Systems. When not possible, the department site should include a duplicate of what is in the course site.
4. Departmental sites should list who is responsible for posting syllabi to that site.
5. Departments on all campuses should enter the link to their departmental course site into the Course Synopsis System (<https://sims.rutgers.edu/coursesynopsis/>) for inclusion in the Schedule of Classes.

Appendix A

Rutgers-Newark: Availability of Syllabi Spring 2012

Accounting

Ph.D: <http://business.rutgers.edu/phd/courses/descriptions/accounting>

“Please note: Links to recent syllabi are provided where possible. In some cases, the link goes to the web site for the individual faculty member, where the syllabus is maintained. In other cases, the link allows you to download the syllabus. Other syllabi are available in the Program Office.

These syllabi are provided as information to potential applicants. They should also help current students make their individual study plans. But they are subject to change. Students should not buy books or make other plans related to a course until they have confirmed with the instructor that they have an up-to-date syllabus for the semester in which they are taking the course.”

African American and African Studies

Undergraduate: <http://www.ncas.rutgers.edu/department-african-american-and-african-studies/courses>

No syllabi. One or two sentence description.

Anthropology

Undergraduate: <http://www.ncas.rutgers.edu/department-sociology-and-anthropology/course-descriptions>

No syllabi. One or two sentence description.

Art History

Undergraduate:

The Department of Arts, Culture and Media maintains their own website; no course descriptions or syllabi are available.

Journalism

Undergraduate:

Part of the Department of Arts, Culture and Media

Biology

Undergraduate: <http://www.ncas.rutgers.edu/department-biological-sciences/programs-and-course-descriptions#catalog>

Federated Departments of Biology Biology Courses With Web Sites:

<http://runewarkbiology.rutgers.edu/department/CourseWebSites.html>

“These links lead to sites maintained by the instructors of those particular courses. If any of the links are broken, please [notify the webmaster](#). If you have problems with the course websites themselves, please contact the instructor for that course.”

14 undergraduate; 1 graduate

Graduate: linked directly to syllabus/course offered Spring 2012/syllabus from 2006

Undergraduate: 6 of the courses being offered in Spring 2012; links broken to 4; 2 live links both go to the same faculty member's site
Links broken to 7 of the not offered courses; 1 clearly not there because not offered in Spring

Chemistry

Undergraduate: <http://chemistry.rutgers.edu/undergrad/undergraduate-prog>
Links to most syllabi for both non-major chemistry courses and chemistry major required courses. Links to almost all courses being offered Spring 2012; some links go to page indicating Blackboard link.

Computer Science

Undergraduate: <http://www.ncas.rutgers.edu/department-math-and-computer-science/undergraduate-course-syllabi>
Syllabi for all Spring 2012 CS courses; 1 broken link. Some syllabi for non-Spring courses linked as well.

Economics

Undergraduate: No course descriptions or syllabi

English

Undergraduate: <http://www.ncas.rutgers.edu/department-english/spring-2012>
Brief course descriptions for courses being offered in Spring 2012. Separate links for courses offered the previous 2 semesters.
Graduate: <http://www.ncas.rutgers.edu/department-english/graduate-school-spring-2012-courses>
Course descriptions for graduate English courses being offered in the Spring 2012 semester. Separate links for courses offered the previous 2 semesters.

History

Undergraduate: <http://www.ncas.rutgers.edu/department-history/courses>
Brief course descriptions.
<http://www.ncas.rutgers.edu/spring-2012-course-syllabi-0>
Links to syllabi (pdf) for all Spring 2012 History courses (by section)
Separate links for courses offered Fall 2011.
Graduate: <http://www.ncas.rutgers.edu/department-history/courses-0>
Brief course descriptions.
<http://www.ncas.rutgers.edu/graduate-course-syllabi>
Links to syllabi (pdf) for all Spring 2012 graduate History courses
Separate links for courses offered Fall 2011.

Philosophy

Undergraduate: <http://www.ncas.rutgers.edu/department-philosophy/undergraduate-programs>
Brief course descriptions.

Political Science: No course descriptions or syllabi

Social Work

Undergraduate: http://catalogs.rutgers.edu/generated/nwk-ug_current/pg401.html
Course descriptions from the Newark Undergraduate Catalog

Spanish

Undergraduate: <http://www.ncas.rutgers.edu/department-spanish-and-portuguese-studies/major-spanish-940>
Brief course descriptions

Urban Education

Undergraduate: <http://www.ncas.rutgers.edu/department-urban-education/urban-teacher-education-program-utep-course-descriptions>
Course descriptions.

Appendix B

Making a Sakai Resource Viewable by Non-Members of the Course

1. In your course site, find the resource you would like to make public.
2. To the right of that resource, select the 'Actions' drop down menu and then select 'Edit Details'.
3. Under 'Availability and Access', select the option 'This file is publicly viewable'.
4. Scroll down and select 'Update'.