SYLLABUS DESIGN GUIDELINES

There are no absolute formulas for syllabus design. Instructors craft her/his syllabus to meet their specific contexts. There are also no set rules as to how lengthy or indeed how detailed a syllabus should be. Some instructors prefer to provide their students with *skeletal* framework with additional components added as a semester develops. Others, however, prefer at the outset to provide students with a *comprehensively* described document that answers any possible question that a student might ask! In syllabus design, it is important to remember that the syllabus' primary audience is students and, for that reason perhaps its most important characteristic is that of *clarity*.

While there are a myriad of ways in which an instructor can design a syllabus, there a number of components that are commonly used to structure syllabi.

Header
- Name of institution, division, and department.
- Course number and title.
- Semester, year, meeting place, and times.
- Instructor's name, contact phone, and email.
- Office hours, place, and times.

Course Description
An abbreviated description of the course, that is exactly the same as is published in the *Course Announcement*.

Course Overview
The course overview provides a broad statement that describes the scope and purposes of the course. This is an expansion of the course description.

Course Objectives
Objectives are *concise* statements of what students should know and be able to do as a result of having taken the course. They, therefore, define an instructor's expectations student *performance* stated in terms of desired outcomes. Course objectives provide students with a clear idea of the areas in which they will be evaluated.

Assessment Strategies
An effective syllabus contains a clear statement about *how* student work will be evaluated. In the case of a studio course, *critique* is the leading assessment strategy. An instructor, however, may also employ strategies such as papers, and or presentations to ascertain students' understandings about course content not evident in their studio work.

Evaluation Criteria
It is essential that students be made aware of criteria that the instructor will apply when evaluating student work. It is important that the assessment process hold no mystery for students. Students should have a clear understanding of what an instructor considers to be important when they review and ultimately grade student work. For instance, an instructor may prize *preparedness, self-reliance*, and *risk-taking*, - if so, these things should be identified up-front so that students don't have to second-guess the instructor. Because in a studio course critique takes such a prominent role in the evaluation of student work, instructors may find it beneficial to set out their expectations for student involvement in the critique process.

3

SYLLABUS DESIGN GUIDELINES (continued)

Grading
The level of student performance in a RISD course is indicated with a letter grade. Some instructors like to allocate percentages to assignments in order to give students a sense of a specific assignment's weighting in comparison to another. In such circumstances, instructors then allocate points to particular assignments, which are then computed at the conclusion of the course when the average score is translated into a specific letter grade.

Other instructors, however, feel uncomfortable with any type of points scheme, preferring a more *holistic* approach. In this situation, the instructor may, for instance, throughout the course award letter grades for each assignment, but at course completion, and after having reviewed the body of a student's work and grades, the instructor assigns a final grade that her or she best reflects a student's overall progress and performance.

Some instructors wish to take into account the quality of a student's participation unexcused absences, and late or incomplete submission of assignments. If this is so, the instructor needs to be explicit in terms of how such factors may affect a student's final course grade.

Texts, Readings, and Sources
Some courses require students to purchase textbooks and or course reading packets. The syllabus should indicate where these materials are available. Instructors may choose to distribute readings periodically throughout the course. It is useful if the syllabus contains a full listing of the required readings. Also, Instructors may wish to provide students with a list of recommended reading that supports course goals. It is sometimes useful to provide students with lists of specific journals, website sources that complement course instruction.

Health & Safety
Health and safety issues are extremely important aspects of almost every studio courses. The syllabus should clearly indicate any limitations there might be as to the use of certain equipment and or studio materials. Instructors are advised to seek the advice of departmental technicians and or the College's Environmental Health & Safety Manager on matters regarding workshop and studio health and safety issues.

Studio Materials & Equipment
The syllabus should provide a complete listing of all studio materials and equipment that students are required to purchase. Preferred retailers, if applicable, should be identified.

Schedule/Topical Outline
In order that students can visualize the scope and requirements of a course over a semester, the syllabus should contain a detailed schedule or topical outline. The comprehensiveness of the schedule is very much a personal matter, but at very least it should identify meeting days, times, and the major focus of particular sessions. It is also useful to include the due dates for each assignment.

Assignments
How assignments are made available to students is very much a matter of personal preference. Some instructors like to include all course assignments at the time the syllabus is distributed, while others prefer to provide students with them only when a new assignment is to begin. Either method works well, but the clearer the assignment brief and the greater its detail in terms of the instructor's expectations of his/her students, the more effective the assignment brief will be.