

**Syllabus Design for Whitman Classes  
(or Everything You Need to Know About Whitman  
Before Day One of Class)**

**New Faculty Orientation**

**August 25-27, 2008**

Originally Prepared by:

**Susan Ferguson** (English and General Studies [retired]; Director of the Whitman College Center for Teaching and Learning, 2002-2003)

**David Carey** (Philosophy and General Studies)

**Melissa Clearfield** (Psychology)

**Kendra Golden** (Biology)

Modified Slightly by:

**Keith Farrington** (Professor of Sociology, and Director of the Whitman College Center for Teaching and Learning, 2003-2008)

**Kurt Hoffman** (Interim director of the Whitman College Center for Teaching and Learning, 2008-9)

**The Goals of this Handout:** (a) To introduce you to particular features of Whitman that should help you get started well with classes, and (b) to help with your production of useful and coherent syllabi tailored to Whitman, particularly in terms of your course policies.

**Generalizations about Whitman College** about which the five of us agree to strongly influence teaching and syllabi:

- It's ok to be different here. Faculty members generally have a lot of autonomy in what and how to teach. Thus, syllabi can also be quite different in innumerable ways. Copies of Whitman syllabi in a variety of courses can be found on-line or by requesting them from Keith Farrington.
- Whitman students are smart and willing to work hard.
- Students will do what's asked most of the time for nearly every class. If the assignments are unreasonable, however, they'll often balk.
- If you are technologically inclined, and wish to use overheads, PowerPoint, or some other form of "multi-media" teaching aids in class, that is great; however, bear in mind that these have not yet become engrained in Whitman's teaching culture as something that students have come to expect in each and every one of their classes. Once again, individual preference and personal teaching style can be your guiding principle in deciding how much or how little you wish to use such materials.
- Whitman students almost all want (and often tend to expect that they will receive) A's in all of their classes. They can have difficulty accepting anything less grade-wise, and this expectation can conceivably cause you some difficulties in dealing with individual students as the year wears on. But the fact that students want to receive the highest grades possible certainly should not be taken to suggest that you should automatically give in to these wishes – feel free to maintain whatever grade distribution fits your course and its specific subject matter

and its level of difficulty, etc. Individual course grades are the prerogative of the individual faculty member in question, and this principle is taken very seriously here at Whitman.

- Students will generally understand what they read. So, when setting your schedule and planning class time, plan to do more than just cover the reading to get them to understand it.
- In general, our students like variety in the use of class time. This may not be possible in all of your classes, but it does seem to be something useful to remember in courses where flexibility in teaching styles is a possibility.
- While you are completely free to address and interact with your students in whatever ways seem most appropriate and comfortable to you, it is probably accurate to characterize Whitman in general as a relatively informal and interpersonally-inclined campus.

**Issues and Policies** that you may wish to address and include in your syllabi, and possible suggestions as to how to tailor these issues and policies to Whitman's more informal teaching norms:

- **Contact information:** Be clear about how and when. You don't have to provide your home phone number (although you certainly can if you wish). But it probably is a good idea to indicate your e-mail address and your office phone number.
  - Office hours—For full-time faculty, 3-4 hours per week is sufficient. This assumes you are also willing to schedule appointments with students as needed. Some faculty use a sign-up sheet with 10 or 15 min. slots to keep things orderly.
  - ✓ TIP: Better to add office hours during a busy week than be stuck keeping empty hours all semester unless you enjoy an open-door, drop-by system and want to keep lots of office hours.
  - ✓ TIP: Consider a door sign indicating whether a closed door means “ok to knock and come in” or “please don't knock unless urgent.”
- **Attendance:** There is no college requirement that faculty take or track attendance. However, many faculty do, at least casually, and attendance policies are not uncommon.
  - ✓ TIP: It's ok here to email a student who's been absent a lot and find out what's up. This can prevent major hassles down the road. There is a fair bit of “in loco parentis” to the campus culture, although individual faculty do choose how much they'll go with that tendency in their own dealings with students.
  - ! COLLEGE POLICY: Mid-term deficiency slips are required for students doing D or F work at mid-semester. These are available in the Division Offices. These are important as a warning device for students, and they protect you later on from complaints. You can use these for “disappearing” students also, even if they have done C or better work—it alerts their advisors as to what is going on. *The midterm deficiency slip does ask for attendance data so some sense of student attendance is helpful in supporting your mid-term assessment.*
- **Grading:** It's often highly desirable to provide students with a fairly specific breakdown of how the final grade will be determined in your course.
  - BIG ISSUES: What do grades mean? How do I grade fairly? How can I most efficiently and effectively comment on student papers? Homework? Exams? These are major issues that we all have to deal with, and it's certainly not a bad idea to have put some serious thought into these in the planning stages of your syllabi and your courses more generally.

- ✓ TIP: Want to avoid having participation be a “slushy” grade at the end of term? Check the CTL web page for sample “guidelines for grading participation” that can be modified into a handout for students. Also, consider assessing participation in writing 1-2 times per semester so that students know how they are doing in this regard and can do what is necessary to improve in this area of class performance..
  - ✓ TIP: Make sure for your own workload management that you lay syllabi up against one another and stagger due dates for assignments and exam dates. Consider making yourself a master calendar, visible at one glance, for all of your courses, plus various application and research deadlines.
- **Late Work and Extensions:** Best to have a stated policy about this on your syllabi. Faculty run the gamut here from “no extensions and no late work ever” to “almost anything goes.” Do what you believe best, and if you’re not sure, try to make a policy that doesn’t box you in, especially during your first semester here.
    - ! COLLEGE POLICY: Students absent for college activities like athletic competitions and those with verified family emergencies must be allowed to make up work. Students with verified health problems are generally treated in similar fashion, although this decision is largely at your own discretion. You will receive frequent emails from various offices on campus about excused absences and health problems. Students should also keep you informed—urge them to do so.
- **Miscellany:** A number of other topics might be addressed in a Whitman syllabus, including, but by no means limited to, a general Course Description, a statement of Course Goals, Policy on Revisions, a Policy on Questioning a Grade, Classroom Etiquette, Details of Assignments, etc.
- **Class-by-Class Schedule:** Such a schedule might include specific lecture topics, exam dates, and due dates for assignments and papers
    - ✓ TIP: Consider putting on dates when significant assignment sheets will be distributed—this reminds both you and the class that these assignments are forthcoming.
    - ✓ TIP: Consider building in a clause like “All assignments are subject to change,” especially during your first semester here. It’s probably better to revise a syllabus in the middle of the semester so as to better serve the needs of a course or the professor than to feel boxed in by your original layout.
    - \* BIG ISSUE: How much to assign? What can the typical student in your courses do in eight hours of prep? That’s one of the tricky questions. DO talk to experienced faculty in your department or an area similar to yours to get help here. Both too much and too little work can lead to discontent and problems. It is obviously desirable to be demanding, but it is also important to look closely at the workload for both you and the students. A very general but possibly useful guideline for at least some of you is to require about 2 hours of student prep time for each 1 credit of course time. So, for a 4-credit class, about 8 hours of work including paper writing and exam prep. Also, you may want to consider finding effective ways to keep students working hard and meaningfully engaged in the course without overtaxing your own resources. This is a marathon, rather than a sprint – consider your own endurance and you’ll probably do yourself a major disservice if you give yourself a massive stack of grading to do every week!

## **ABOUT COURSE GOALS—THE BIG, BIG ISSUE**

Whether or not you choose to state any of your course goals on your syllabi, you may find it useful to think about them as you are pulling your syllabi together. A few things you may find it helpful to consider are the following:

1. What are your top 3-5 learning goals for the course? That is, what do you hope the students will be able to do or know after they have completed the course? Think of skills as well as mastery of content. Consider the longer term as well as the shorter term. For instance, what would you hope students could do a year or two after the course ended?
2. Given those learning goals, how might you best evaluate how well students are actually accomplishing those goals? To work with this question, it is particularly helpful to remember that course objectives like “students will know x” or “students will appreciate y” are far less easily evaluated than other kinds of goals like “students will be able to identify the features of x” or “students will be able to write or speak out a clear argument about y.”
3. With a clear sense of the primary learning goals and methods of assessment, it can be somewhat easier to make the tough choices about what to include and what, however regrettably, to leave out in terms of content. It can also be easier to decide how to conduct the course day-by-day. Obviously, other factors will play a key part here as well, including your own preferred teaching style, the size and level of the class, and the meeting time and place. But if you keep your overall course goals in mind throughout the process of course preparation, they can serve as a compass as you navigate the waters of the ten thousand smaller decisions!

**Finally, enjoy what you’re doing as much as possible! Most of us find Whitman College to be a great place to ply our trade as college teachers, and we’re fairly certain that that will be the experience for the great majority of you. However, if problems arise (We’ve all had some), please approach Kurt Hoffman and/or other Whitman faculty members – both inside and outside of your own department – for help and advice.**