Mediating the Syllabus: Student Success Through Shared Governance

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# The Problem

Students tend to have a lot of misconceptions about the *purpose* of the syllabus, which leads to a disconnect between student-instructor perceptions and expectations. This can lead to resentment and feelings of antagonism on both sides—students feel that the document is largely used to punish them, while we feel that our time and effort in crafting thoughtful policies is ignored or disrespected.

# One Possible Solution: Co-Creating Course Policies

Have students propose, discuss, revise, and finalize some (or all!) of the course policies by which they’ll be governed.

## Benefits

* Gives students agency and a sense of ownership of their experience in the course
* Invites them to think from the instructor’s perspective, reducing feelings of animosity and antagonism
* Fosters self-reliance and accountability as they consider what are reasonable expectations for their instructor(s) and for themselves as students
* Reduces questions and complaints about policies throughout the semester
* Sets a tone of collaboration and trust from the first day
* Students learn and retain more by doing the work of crafting the policies than they would through lecture on the rationale

## Necessary Considerations

* Involves meaningful reflection on your existing policies and the rationale behind them
* Will take more time than the usual 1-2 syllabus days
* Requires active facilitation and participation from both instructor and students

Worksheet: Co-Creating the Syllabus

# Syllabus Inventory

Inventory your existing policies to determine where there is room for negotiation.

* **Hard Policies:** No room for negotiation. This most likely applies to required course materials, program objectives/learning outcomes, major assignment sequence, etc. **For these policies, be prepared to explain *why* it’s not open to negotiation.**
* **Soft Policies:** Room for negotiation. Could be things like attendance, late work, specific modalities for assignments, etc. **For these, identify the basic expectations that must be met or maintained and the rationale behind them.**

| **Policy** | **Hard or Soft?** | **Rationale, Basic Expectations** |
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| Attendance |  |  |
| Late Work |  |  |
| Communication |  |  |
| Technology in the Classroom |  |  |
| Grading/ Evaluation |  |  |
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# Implementation Considerations

**How many class meetings do you want to set aside for this?** Note that this answer may be different for 50-minute vs. 75-minute classes.

**What/how much do you need to do synchronously vs. asynchronously?**

**Small groups vs. whole-class discussion?** One or the other? Both? How many rounds?

**How will you address and negotiate conflicting expectations about student/instructor responsibilities?**

**How can students submit anonymous suggestions/questions?** Is this somewhere the rest of the class can see, or just you?

**How will decisions be finalized?** Wholesale vote? Vote on each policy? Majority wins? Unanimous approval required? If the decision isn’t unanimous, how can students follow up with questions/concerns, and how will those be addressed?

# Implementation Outline

Use as many rows as needed to outline how you might incorporate this practice into your class. Specify whether each step is a class meeting or an asynchronous assignment; list what objectives/requirements should be accomplished during that step; and identify any logistics you’ll need to iron out in order to facilitate.

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| **Meeting or Assignment** | **Objectives/Requirements** | **Logistical Considerations** |
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