Sloan-C Effectiveness Practice

Learning Effectiveness

Key Practice: The Unique Value of Online MBA Course Syllabi

Institution: Centre for Innovative Management, Athabasca University, Canada

How this practice improved learning effectiveness: As a communication tool for students, prospective students, faculty, staff, and other institutions, course syllabi help people navigate through critical course information expeditiously. Course syllabi improve learning effectiveness because they are learning contracts between students and faculty. The syllabi help students do a preliminary assessment of the course content and workload and help them understand what is expected of them. We are in the process of placing all of our Executive MBA course syllabi online. This effectiveness summary highlights what we learned in the process.

We work closely with our course editors on the courses and we took a similar approach with the syllabi. We started with a syllabus template that faculty developed and agreed to. This enabled us to have some interesting debates and discussions on the courses at our faculty meetings and moreover, it enhanced faculty awareness of the topics covered in other courses. This helped us come to consensus on key integration points we want to emphasize to students. We used this information to create a roadmap on the courses to assist students in "connecting the dots" between the courses.

As with paper-based syllabi, the content allows students to focus on the course content and engage more effectively in the course discussions. In the online environment, the syllabi provide students with *immediate* electronic links to important dates and university policies in the Student Handbook, such as plagiarism. Handbook updates can be reflected immediately in the links within the syllabi.

In face-to-face courses, academics can revise course content just before the class. This is not possible in online courses as we work closely with course editors on the content and the courseware has to be ready several months before the course is launched. However, by developing our courses in advance, we are able to take the time to review and ensure that our course objectives, weekly topics covered, and learning outcomes are aligned. With a quality assurance step through our editors, we ensure that the syllabi are updated regularly and that the most current content is reflected on our website.

Evidence (or plan to obtain evidence): As with face to face courses, students indicated that what they especially liked was that the syllabi indicated up front how they would be evaluated and what the grading scheme entails. Some students found that reviewing a course syllabus before taking the course reduced their anxiety levels, especially if the course was in a discipline that was not their strong suit. Other students indicated that the syllabi helped them pace themselves and even work ahead of schedule so that they could accommodate business and personal commitments. Based on subjective input, the use of

online syllabi reduced the number of questions faculty field at the start of courses. These advantages are especially beneficial as our MBA courses are 8-weeks long, as compared to traditional face to face courses that span 14-15 weeks.

Estimated costs associated with this practice: The cost was low because we reviewed the literature and since it was consistent in terms of what a "good syllabus" should cover, we developed a template that was agreed to by our faculty and it enabled our academics to use it as a guide yet adapt it to their individual needs.

Relation to other pillars: Learning effectiveness and student satisfaction are enhanced because commonly asked questions are addressed in writing at the start of the course so students can more effectively focus on the course content. This practice is innovative because it enhanced faculty awareness and discussions on course content and we linked the online syllabi to the online Student Handbook. The approach relates to the access pillar in that we placed our syllabi on our program website for more ready access by the public, prospective students, other institutions and of course, current students. Faculty like the online course syllabi because the syllabi cover details in a consistent manner yet the format allows them the flexibility to personalize it.

References, supporting documents: NA

Useful links:

http://www.mba.athabascau.ca/Titan/aucimwebsite.nsf/AllDoc/EC01FB28AD3C051A87256F3C00550AB3?OpenDocument

Altman, H. B., & Cashin, W. E. (1992, September 1992). *Writing a syllabus*. Retrieved June, 2004, from http://www.idea.ksu.edu/resources/

Summary: The course syllabus serves as a useful communication tool primarily between students and faculty as it concisely outlines expectations. We are able to provide students and other interested parties with timely and consistent information on courses and we are able to provide details on key university policies.

Other Comments: None

Contact: Kam Jugdev, PhD, PMP (kamj@athabascau.ca), Maureen Hutchison, BA (maureenh@athabascau.ca), Shelley Lynes, MBA, (shelleylynes@energyinet.com)