



# SCUE *Policy Paper*

## STUDENT COMMITTEE on UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION

*The oldest existing branch of student government at the University of Pennsylvania, the Student Committee on Undergraduate Education was founded in 1965, a time when Penn undergraduates had little control over their own education. Since its inception, SCUE has remained an autonomous and apolitical organization whose suggestions and proposals have initiated and shaped some of the most significant projects in Penn's history. SCUE takes as its purview any issue which affects undergraduate education or the intellectual atmosphere at Penn. We work to enhance and expand curricular opportunities, advising, and the overall quality of the undergraduate academic experience. We serve our duty in various roles: as advocates for the student voice and as advisors to the faculty and administration. Our efforts are predicated on the tenet that undergraduates must have a say in the academic programs of which they are most integrally a part. Our membership consists of approximately 35 undergraduates from all four schools who are selected by a six-member Steering Committee. This policy paper is meant to supplement the White Paper on Undergraduate Education, published most recently in 2005.*

## SYLLABI ONLINE

### A PROPOSAL SUBMITTED TO ALL UNIVERSITY FACULTY AND STAFF

#### I. Status quo

The University's Registrar catalogs more than 2,000 courses in over 50 areas of study across four undergraduate schools. Most undergraduates have no choice but to navigate published course books or Penn's online resources to arrive at a cursory description of the course that they might wish to take. Even with the guidance of an academic advisor, undergraduates consistently rely on these inadequate course descriptions to arrive at their decisions during pre-registration. As a result, the Add/Drop period is a haphazard process, with students unable to obtain complete information about a course offering without physically attending the class.

#### II. Proposed action

**SCUE therefore believes that all course syllabi should be made available online.** Posting syllabi online will help all undergraduates, especially freshmen, to make informed course selections. With increased transparency, students will be able to evaluate a course before entering the classroom. The registration process will become more efficient because, with better information, students will decide more quickly whether to keep or drop a course. To that end, SCUE respectfully offers the following recommendations:

- 1) Departmental coordinators and administrative assistants shall send a reminder to all teaching faculty and staff one month before each semester's Advance Registration period, asking them to submit tentative syllabi for their upcoming courses.
- 2) Faculty shall submit tentative syllabi or course outlines to departmental staff before each semester's Advance Registration begins.
- 3) Before the first day of Advance Registration, departmental staff shall post syllabi on departmental website as a clearly visible link next to the course listing. The syllabus should reside no more than three (3) clicks beneath the department's home page. If a course is cross-listed, it should appear on the website of each applicable department.
- 4) All syllabi shall remain online, in order to create an archive.

The Provost, Associate Provost, and the Council of Undergraduate Deans all support this proposal.

#### III. Rationale

From an undergraduate's perspective, easily accessible online syllabi will:

- Guide students' decision-making during the course selection period
- Encourage students to discover "the road less traveled" – course offerings about which they would have otherwise been unaware
- Ensure that students who enroll after the semester begins are able to adequately complete assignments
- Help incoming freshmen navigate a complex curriculum

From a professor's perspective, easily accessible online syllabi will:

- Enhance publicity for little-known courses that nevertheless pique student interest
- Better match students with classes, ensuring that students who register are those who have a genuine interest in the material
- Allow substantive material to be covered on the first day of class, rather than a perfunctory course overview
- Reduce the need to maintain waiting lists, because students will no longer drop a class upon reading the syllabus—they will have already factored the course expectations into their registration decisions

SCUE approvingly notes the current success of nearly all Wharton undergraduate departments in placing syllabi online. Each course syllabus is easily accessible from departmental websites. In the College of Arts & Sciences, the Political Science and Asian American Studies departments have made substantial progress as well. Many of our peer institutions, such as Princeton and Harvard Universities, have implemented centralized databases that include syllabi of all courses offered.

#### **IV. Challenges**

We do recognize the amount of time and effort that it requires to plan a course, and professors may therefore be unenthusiastic about the prospect of submitting a syllabus months in advance. Furthermore, some professors have expressed a reluctance to make public their intellectual property. SCUE therefore recommends that, should a complete syllabus not be available, faculty submit a document containing the bare essentials of course information (e.g. course readings, major assignments, and an overview of topics covered). The professor may wish to provide a clear disclaimer that course content and requirements are subject to change.

In “The Promising Syllabus”, Dr. James M. Lang (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 1, 2006) explains what makes a syllabus enriching: “First, it offers an explanation of the course’s promise to the students: What will they have gained, in terms of knowledge or skills, by the end of the semester? The focus moves away from what the teacher will cover to what the student will take away from the course. Second, it describes the activities in which the students will engage in order to help them fulfill that promise: the readings, the class activities, the assignments. Third, and most interestingly, the promising syllabus ‘begins a conversation about how the teacher and the student would best come to understand the nature and progress of the student’s learning.’”

While we recognize that it is not always possible to complete such a syllabus before advance registration begins, professors are already required to provide at least a tentative syllabus within the first week of the semester. Even placing old syllabus materials online would greatly improve the status quo. By posting syllabi on departmental websites, Penn can take the first step towards a centralized online database of all course information, a measure which would significantly improve the undergraduate academic experience.

Finally, we presented the Syllabi Online proposal to a meeting of the SAS Department Staff. Those in attendance gave their support and expressed a willingness to perform the necessary website administration tasks.

#### **V. Implementation**

SCUE strongly urges faculty and departmental staff to begin the process as soon as possible. Described below is a timeline for implementation.

- Post finalized syllabi of all 07A courses on departmental websites before January 19, the end of the Add/Drop period
- Post tentative syllabi of all 07C courses on departmental websites before March 19, the start of Advance Registration
- Post finalized syllabi of all 07C courses on departmental websites before September 14, the conclusion of the first full week of classes
- Post tentative syllabi of all 08A courses on departmental websites on or before October 29, the start of Advance Registration

On behalf of the members of the Student Committee on Undergraduate Education, and for the benefit of all undergraduates, we look forward to an ongoing partnership on the matter.

Respectfully submitted,  
The Student Committee on Undergraduate Education

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