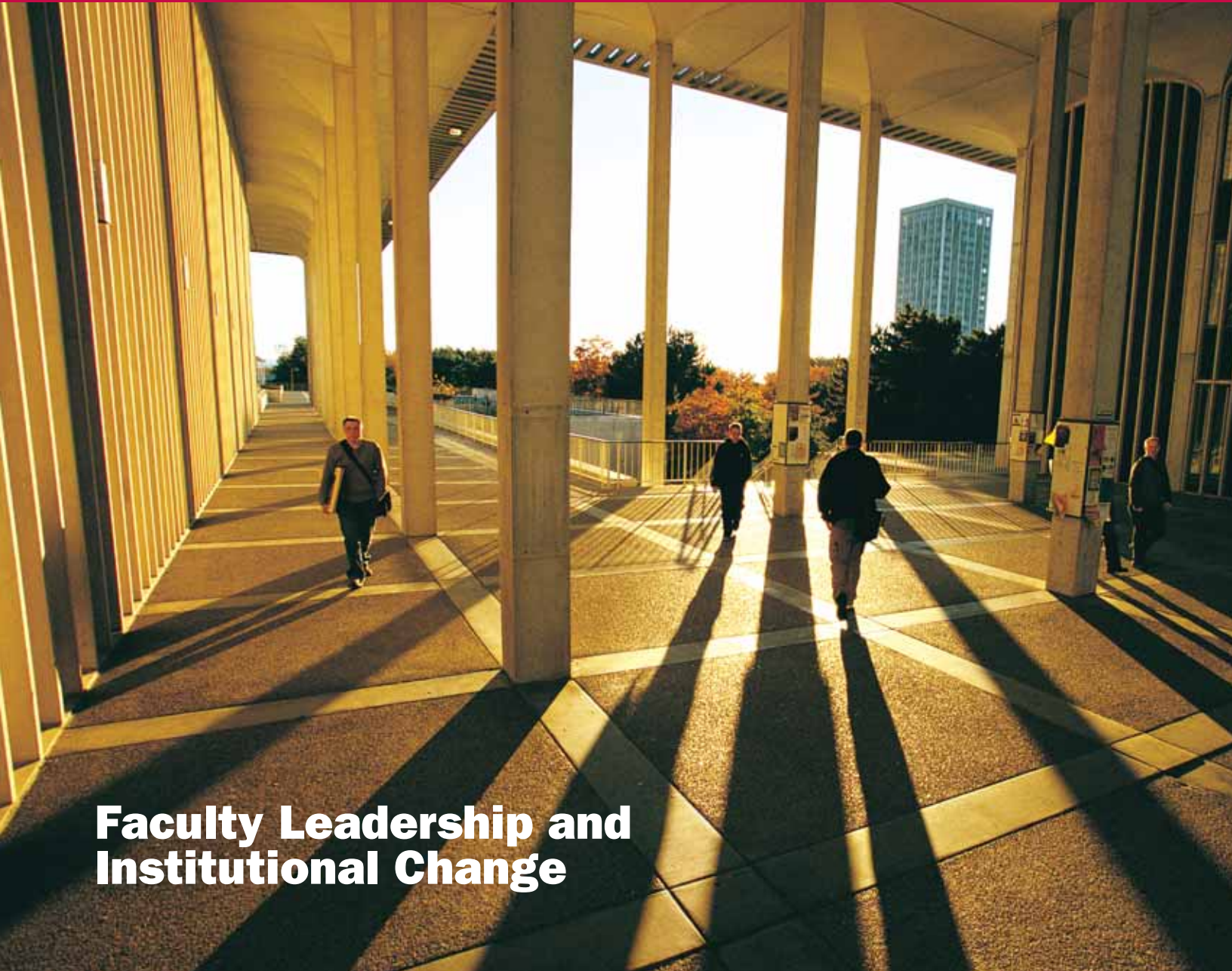


Liberal Education

ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES



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MANO SINGHAM

Death to the Syllabus!

IT IS TIME to declare war on the traditional course syllabus. If there is one single artifact that pinpoints the degradation of liberal education, it is the rule-infested, punitive, controlling syllabus that is handed out to students on the first day of class.

I have seen long and highly detailed syllabi that carefully lay out rules for attendance, punctuality, extra credit, grades, and penalties for missing deadlines, as well as detailed writing assignment requirements that specify page and word length, spacing, margins, and even font style and size. The syllabi use boldface, underlining, italics, and exclamation points for added emphasis; the net effect is that of the teacher yelling at the student.

What such syllabi often omit is any mention of learning. They list the assigned readings but not reasons *why* the subject is worth studying

or important or interesting or deep, or the learning strategies that will be used in the course. The typical syllabus gives little indication that the students and teacher are embarking on an exciting learning adventure together, and its tone is more akin to something that might be handed to a prisoner on the first day of incarceration.

The implicit message of the modern course syllabus is that the student will not do anything unless bribed by grades or forced by threats. Students coming to class unprepared? Start each class with a quiz based on the readings. Students missing classes or coming late? Take off points for absence and tardiness. Students missing due dates for assignments? Take off points for lateness. Students not participating in discussions? Assign points to whoever speaks and, if you want to get really fancy, adjust the number of points to reflect the quality of the contributions. And so on.

Here's an idea: why not try to overcome those problems by making the topics and readings interesting, the discussions cordial yet lively, and the assignments challenging but meaningful?

The controlling syllabus

I recently attended a conference of college teachers. One of the sessions, which had an overflow crowd, promised to provide a stress-free method for "managing" students—an odd word choice that presumes students are like employees and we their bosses. Soon into the session, it became clear

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that the presenter's idea of being "stress-free" was to create a set of rules so detailed that everything about assessing students could be quantified on a micro level. The presenter advocated an intricate structure of points and penalties to ensure that every possible excuse a student might present for not meeting a requirement could be dealt with by invoking the appropriate rule, thus avoiding having to make judgments that might be challenged by a student.

The speaker justified her approach by asserting that the syllabus is a "legally enforceable contract" (something one hears often these days) and so the instructor is almost obliged to make sure that it includes everything expected of the student and not to deviate from it.

The speaker seemed unaware that a detailed legalistic syllabus is diametrically opposed to what makes students want to learn. There is a vast research literature on the topic of motivation to learn, and one finding screams out



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loud and clear: controlling environments have been shown consistently to *reduce* people's interest in whatever they are doing, even when they are doing things that would be highly motivating in other contexts.

Making judgments is time-consuming. A rigid, rule-infested, watertight syllabus might appeal to administrators whose preferred response to any situation is to invoke a rule. But why should teachers want one? The teacher–student relationship is a mentoring



one. We should be modeling for them the exhilaration of the life of the mind. What does it say about us if we lay out rules and force students to obey? And what makes us think that we can make general rules to deal with every contingency?

I suspect that we have gotten into a vicious negative spiral, a kind of “syllabus creep” whereby faculty keep adding new rules to combat each student excuse for not meeting existing rules. Although faculty sometimes justify this by saying that students want to know exactly what is required to be done in order to get a particular grade and that they are merely responding to that need, college faculty (and administrators) also seem to be driven by the fear that students will take legal action over a grade dispute. But courts have traditionally shown great deference for the faculty's professional judgment, intervening only if they feel the teacher or institution has been arbitrary, capricious, acting in bad faith, or violating accepted academic norms. It is sad that many teachers are willing to forego their autonomy and the privilege of making professional judgments about academic competence and, instead, transform themselves into rule-enforcing tyrants.

It is true that by the time students come to the college classroom, they have had over twelve years of education. They have been treated, except by a few exceptional teachers, as if tests and grades and points are the most important things and that learning, like medicine, is good for you but not enjoyable. Faculty may feel that students are so deeply conditioned to view learning negatively that resistance is futile, that we cannot hope to reverse it and must respond accordingly. It is assumed that we have to teach in an authoritarian manner because of the way students are. However, all the literature on student motivation has convinced me that the opposite is likely to be true: students act the way they do because we treat them the way we do.

An experiment

To test this, I abandoned the controlling syllabus. I now go to the first class with only a tentative timeline of readings and writing assignments. A few weeks into the semester, when students have a better sense of what kind of person I am and what the course is about, we discuss what might be the best way

of assigning meaningful grades. We collectively decide what goes into a good paper or talk, what good participation means, and together create rubrics to assess them. While I make the judgments about performance, I give the students maximum flexibility and choice in what we do and how we do it—within the broad constraint that the course has to have integrity and coherence and that the grades have to be good measures of the level of student performance in the course.

I have done this for four years now, and it has been a wonderful experience. It is what I thought teaching should be like when I entered the profession. What is interesting is that the more I delegate decision making about course structure and rules to the students, the more discretion and leeway they give me to make judgments about their performance. For example, they consistently reject creating detailed marking schemes for things like participation (of the kind found on authoritarian syllabi), saying that they trust me to make a fair holistic judgment.

Faculty are often skeptical when I tell them about my experiment. They are quick to claim that it would not work for them because their particular situation is special: their students are different, their subject is different, their institution is different, and so on. No empirical justification is ever provided for these objections, and I suspect that they are grasped at because we have become deeply conditioned to think of the controlling syllabus as the only way to do things and are nervous about giving it up.

Completely abandoning a syllabus may not be possible for everyone. What replaces the

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controlling syllabus will undoubtedly depend on the subject matter, size of the class, nature of the institution, and the like, and there can be no universally prescriptive solutions. What should be universal, however, is the goal of moving away from an authoritarian classroom. In doing so, we need to be mindful that students have become accustomed to the controlling syllabus.

Taking it away suddenly can disconcert them unless they are reassured that they can trust us, that our assessments measure important learning, that we have the competence to make judgments about their performance and meaningful criteria for doing so, and that we have the impartiality to be honest and fair. Accordingly, I spend a great deal of time and effort building such trust and creating a sense of community in the classroom among the students and between them and me. This is a harder but more pleasant task than creating a watertight syllabus, but it results in a much more rewarding experience for both the students and the teacher.

College faculty are fortunate in that we still have some level of autonomy in teaching. We should use that freedom to show our students how wonderfully rewarding true learning can be. Aristotle said that “all men by nature desire to know,” but we seem to assume that today’s students do not want to learn and have to be bludgeoned into doing so. The club we teachers use is the controlling syllabus. It is time to throw it away. □

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