



## UMUC School of Undergraduate Studies Guidelines for Undergraduate Teaching

University of Maryland University College (UMUC) is committed to providing the highest-quality education to its students. Research and evaluation data, both externally and within UMUC, support the following guidelines for teaching our undergraduate students. UMUC is also committed to providing its faculty members with the technical, pedagogical, and administrative support needed to follow these best practices. These guidelines and the accompanying rationale are provided to assist UMUC faculty in planning for effective teaching as well as reflecting on and improving their practice.

### Approach and Perspectives

Since its inception, UMUC has been committed to providing the highest-quality education to its students around the world. The approach to teaching in the School of Undergraduate Studies (SUS), regardless of the delivery format, integrates three distinct but overlapping perspectives: an outcomes-based philosophy of teaching and learning, a learning model, and current research, including UMUC's own research on best teaching practices.

### Course Learning Outcomes

Preparation to teach a specific course begins with a careful look at the course description and learning outcomes. These, and an explanation of the role of the course in the overall curriculum, can be found in the online syllabus and teaching guide and in the departmental 999 faculty classroom. The learning outcomes should function as the organizing principles of the entire class. Faculty should know and use these outcomes in planning the class, refer to them while teaching, and use them toward the end of the course as principles of recapitulation and summary. The outcomes are the foundation for the activities, assessments, and content of the course and individual class. The individual teaching guide for the course includes suggestions for using the outcomes effectively in teaching and explanation of how they relate to the larger program.

### The SUS Learning Model

The SUS learning model is built on seven principles first formulated by Arthur Chickering, elaborated upon over the years by many educators, and supported by UMUC's own research into student success and effective teaching. The principles are:

- ✓ faculty engagement
- ✓ student collaboration
- ✓ active learning
- ✓ frequent and prompt feedback
- ✓ time on task
- ✓ high expectations
- ✓ respect for diversity

The full learning model and its concrete suggestions for teaching support an outcomes-based teaching approach appropriate to UMUC's student population and mission.

## Planning Your Class

The course learning outcomes should drive the flow of the class around the questions, "Does this sequence of lessons or ideas allow for adequate and appropriate teaching of specific learning outcomes?" "Do the assessments allow students to demonstrate whether the course learning outcomes have been properly assimilated?" "Do the activities and materials adequately demonstrate, explain, and support each of the learning outcomes?" To help students meet the outcomes, consider the following aspects of your class presentation:

- ✓ **Pacing and sequencing.** Pay special attention to planning the pace of the eight-week course, especially if this length is a new experience for you or your students. In planning the amount of work each week, one strives for a golden mean: enough material so students can achieve the outcomes and practice concepts—but not so much that the students get bogged down. The model syllabus and teaching guide that accompany the course contain suggestions on how to achieve this balance.
- ✓ **Variety of learning approaches.** Class activities should vary and include active learning opportunities such as small-group and peer-to-peer activities, case studies, role play, multimedia presentations, debates, and student presentations. Incorporate adult learning principles into assignments and discussions by asking students to apply their real-world experience to your course and to practice skills in different ways.
- ✓ **Creative use of the Internet and other resources.** Students in any course format should be expected to use a range of resources (including the online environment when appropriate) for course assignments and activities, such as conducting Internet research, consulting UMUC databases, and searching for and analyzing maps, charts, and other relevant images, as well as referring to their textbook and online course content.

### Are You Ready?

In planning your class, have you:

- ✓ Studied the description and student learning outcomes for the course?
- ✓ Reviewed the teaching guide?
- ✓ Familiarized yourself with the textbook and course content for your course?
- ✓ Outlined the order and sequence of assignments throughout the session, noting required assignments and adapting the model schedule to the dates in your session?
- ✓ Paced assignments and activities to allow adequate time for students to master concepts and build skills but also to keep up effective progress and to allow for feedback?
- ✓ Determined the details of assignments (e.g., topics, materials) and how to allow students to learn and practice in different ways?
- ✓ Included assignments and activities for which course resources and the Internet are used appropriately?
- ✓ Familiarized yourself with UMUC's policies and procedures, especially those related to grades, withdrawals, and incompletes?

## Setting Up the Class

Faculty are expected to have a viewable syllabus and the classroom setup ready for review two weeks before the start of a session. Students can view all areas of the classroom one week before the start of class. Therefore, it is important to provide adequate and accurate class information to students from the beginning.

## Online Classroom (including the online classroom for face-to-face or hybrid classes)

- ✓ Provide accurate faculty contact information including e-mail address in the form, cdavis@faculty.umuc.edu (i.e., your faculty user ID followed by @faculty.umuc.edu).
- ✓ Include an up-to-date biography in the Bio area. Students read these carefully, so make considered decisions about the personal/professional information you include.
- ✓ Post a clear and helpful welcoming message in the Class Announcements area.
- ✓ Set up the Gradebook area. Record all assignments and their weights and deadlines corresponding to the description in the syllabus.

## Syllabus

The course outcomes and description are consistent across all sections and may not be changed by individual faculty members. Other sections of the syllabus are provided as a model that may be enhanced by faculty-added information and/or edited to the needs of the class:

- ✓ Grading Information and Criteria
- ✓ Project Descriptions
- ✓ Course Schedule

In these sections, some specific content may still be required; when in doubt, consult your academic program director. There should be sufficient detail in all of these areas so that students understand course expectations and can plan their time.

The syllabus is the primary document students use as a reference tool in planning their work and understanding the expectations of the course. A clear and dependable document will reduce student complaints, as well as misunderstandings about assignments and deadlines. Your syllabus information should be written and proofread carefully, in a semi-formal tone and free of grammatical and spelling errors. Make sure that information is consistent (for example, the project descriptions should match the assignments listed in the schedule), clear, and complete (including deadlines and penalty for late submissions).

## Week One Content and Student Activities

The opening of the course—whether at the first face-to-face meeting or through the opening announcement and online conference—is when you start to establish a solid academic atmosphere and gauge student needs, backgrounds, and interests. However, to set appropriate expectations and pace, the opening should not just be a "get acquainted" period; it should get students involved in course content right away. For example, the introductions conference or opening discussion might ask students to one or more of the following:

- ✓ Look at the course outcomes and syllabus and explain how the focus of the current course might build on courses they have taken before.
- ✓ Do an initial reading assignment and introduce themselves by offering a brief explanation or analysis.
- ✓ Identify an author, idea, concept, or theme they expect to find particularly interesting in the course and explain why.

In an online class, having a "cybercafe" or "student lounge" conference gives students an area in which to share experiences and talk about ideas that may be outside the specific focus of the class and can help keep discussions on topic in the main conferences.

## Is Your Class Ready?

A few days before students can access the class and syllabus, do a systematic self-review. Have you:

- ✓ Provided information on how and when you can be contacted?
- ✓ Set up the Gradebook area?
- ✓ Completed and/or edited all parts of the syllabus, including the grading information, class policies (e.g., deadlines), project and assignment descriptions, and 8-week schedule?
- ✓ Explained how students can get information about class meetings or closures during emergencies?
- ✓ Posted a welcome announcement and/or planned your face-to-face opening?
- ✓ Designed (and posted online) the opening week's activity for the class?
- ✓ Provided an opportunity for students to ask questions about the syllabus, learning outcomes, and initial assignments?
- ✓ For the online classroom, set up other appropriate conferences, such as a cybercafe and a conference for general questions about class material?

## During the Session

Once class begins, you must facilitate effectively, monitor student progress, and make adjustments as need to keep the class on course. This includes:

- ✓ **Applying the learning model in class discussions.** The principles of the learning model can help structure conferences and other discussions.
  - *Faculty engagement and time on task:* Use discussions to encourage student input, and offer guidance to deepen the learning with a clear focus on course outcomes. All discussion topics should align with one or more course outcomes and provide opportunities for students to demonstrate mastery of the outcome. The Learning Activities section of the teaching guide may provide topics and approaches for discussions. The concepts, skills, and issues identified in the guide are another source of topics.
  - *Student collaboration and respect for diversity:* Structure discussions so that students from a variety of backgrounds and viewpoints feel welcome to participate. Help drive the discussion and use diversity to deepen learning with questions, concrete examples, or interpretations from a variety of contexts.
  - *Active learning and high expectations:* Participation requirements should be clear and specific about the kind of contributions students are expected to make to the class. Ask students to reflect on the assignments and materials and to substantiate their point of view with evidence, real-world examples, and other resources.
  - *Frequent and prompt feedback:* Give prompt and targeted feedback to students about their participation, both through participation grades and through responses and comments to the class that model appropriate analysis and response.

- ✓ **Explaining class assignments and activities to maximize student learning.** To support active and focused learning, assignments must allow students to apply concepts in real-life situations, problems, or practice. Assignment descriptions must be complete and sufficiently detailed for students to use in planning their work. The teaching guide may offer sample language for the assignment description, the grading weights, and criteria for grading, often in the form of a grading rubric. The presentation of the assignment in the syllabus and subsequent discussion should:
- Be explicit about the alignment of assignment objectives with course outcomes.
  - Explain how each assignment builds on the ones before to take students to the appropriate level of learning.
  - Incorporate principles of adult learning in the design, such as applying theoretical principles to real-life situations.
  - Provide clear and complete explanation of the tasks and products required for successful completion of the task.
  - Offer necessary guidance on how to find and evaluate resources, cite sources, present and format an argument, or other aspects of the assignment.
  - Refer students to appropriate sources of help, such as reference documents, or support, such as the Effective Writing Center.
  - Clearly explain the grading criteria for the assignment and the weight of the assignment in the overall grade. Use a rubric or scoring chart to illustrate how the elements of a complex assignment will be evaluated.
  - Where appropriate, offer models of excellent performance and examples of typical weaknesses.
  - For group assignments, be clear about how individual performance will be assessed as well as group work.
- ✓ **Monitoring student progress.** A systematic approach to monitoring student progress helps to identify key points of student weakness for more focus, and avoid failures or withdrawals at the end that might have been prevented earlier. A plan for monitoring student progress should include:
- *A regular schedule.* This helps students organize their time and understand expectations. Establish a rhythm and structure with a new online class announcement and a new conference discussion at least weekly and specific assignments for each unit of the schedule.
  - *Frequent and varied checkpoints.* This keeps students connected and helps you identify those who are overwhelmed or confused. Graded assignments often "assess to advance," determining whether students should pass and move on. It is even more critical to "assess to assist" students as the course progresses. Comments on graded assignments can point out areas of strength and weakness and make suggestions for improvement, but so can feedback on ungraded assignments (such as discussion comments or preliminary drafts), as can comments on overall class performance (Stiehl & Lewchuk, 2007).
  - *Identification of critical points for student success.* There are often key points in a course—the first written assignment, choice of a thesis statement, peer review—that seem to separate strong and self-confident students from those who are weaker or unwilling to engage. Look for those points and provide support to get students past that obstacle. For example, break a task into steps, provide concrete examples and models of strong performance, identify additional resources to understand difficult concepts, and contact students who are lagging behind.
  - *Monitoring your own facilitation.* It is easy to be engaged with the most active students and lose track of ones who are sporadic or withdrawn. Make sure that class activities require students to comment, ask questions, and demonstrate their understanding of course concepts so that weaker students cannot "lurk" without trying out their skills. Set specific intervals to conduct a deliberate check of each individual's participation and progress (such as regular participation grades), and reach out to involve and support every student.
  - *Teaching at the right level and revisiting outcomes.* UMUC has articulated standards for academic rigor and for different levels of undergraduate courses. The teaching guide gives information on the position of the course in the program and overall curriculum. The language of the course outcomes also helps: to "describe" a concept, for example, is simpler than to "analyze and apply" it. Think carefully about how the level and outcomes affect the focus, grading standards, and activities in the class. Check assignments for appropriate language and grading criteria and for adequate staging of assignments, to allow students to build skills and understanding over time.

- *Encouraging self-assessment.* Metacognition—thinking about one’s own thinking—is important for effective learning, and reflecting on one’s progress confirms a sense of responsibility and achievement. Give students opportunities to summarize what they have learned, detail how their preconceptions were validated or contradicted, apply their learning to different situations, and reflect on this learning.
- *Defining what success looks like.* For both graded documents and participation, provide clear criteria and/or rubrics so that students will understand what constitutes acceptable performance and what constitutes excellence. In commenting on their work, refer specifically to those standards.

### Are Students Progressing?

As the class moves on, make sure that it stays on target and students are not being left behind. Are you:

- ✓ Explaining the schedule to students and calling their attention to upcoming assignments?
- ✓ Online, posting a new (dated) announcement and opening a new discussion conference at least weekly while archiving earlier announcements and materials for reference?
- ✓ Responding to private messages and individual questions in less than 48 hours?
- ✓ Engaging in the online class discussion several times per week? If face to face, facilitating active discussion?
- ✓ Summarizing discussions and assignments when they close and discussing how they prepare for the next step?
- ✓ Providing clear expectations and assigning a grade for student participation, regardless of delivery format?
- ✓ Providing clear criteria for grading assignments, including rubrics or scoring guides and examples?
- ✓ Helping students to avoid plagiarism by explaining standards and providing referrals to support services and resources?
- ✓ Returning submitted assignments within a week with comments that will assist in future assignments?
- ✓ Providing resources and referrals for students who need support in particular areas?
- ✓ Identifying specific checkpoints throughout the session to evaluate how each student is doing, and communicating with students about their progress?
- ✓ Identifying specific points throughout the session to evaluate your own practice, focus on course outcomes and level of teaching, and adjust as needed?

## Conclusion of the Course

Careful wrap-up of the course is important both academically and logistically. Financial-aid and academic-progress rules, as well as degree requirements and prerequisites, often require that students know how they did in the course in order to progress and succeed in the next course. It is just as important that students understand the level they have reached in their learning in order to progress to the next steps. Effective closure to the course includes:

- ✓ **Helping students prepare for the final exam or project.** Give students clear expectations for the culminating activity and emphasize the connection between the course outcomes and the exam or project.
- ✓ **Giving full feedback at the end.** Final comments about students’ performance—not just on the last assignment, but throughout the course—will give them an overall understanding of their strengths and

weaknesses and prepare them for future course choices and performance on assignments. Be sure to provide adequate feedback to individual students and leave time in the schedule for discussion with individuals as well as with the class as a whole.

- ✓ **Calculating and submitting final course grades promptly.** Often, students cannot register for the next course until grades are in for the current one. Record the grade for the final project or exam in the Gradebook area and enter the final course grade in the grade roster accessed through your MyUMUC account. (The steps are *Faculty Portal* → *Faculty Self-Service* → *My Academics* → *Course Management* → *Post Final Grades*.) Be sure to tell students how they can find out their final grade and how they can communicate with you to ask for explanations or clarifications.
- ✓ **Review and reflect on your teaching and the approaches used in your course.** Review the teaching guide for your course and send constructive feedback to your academic director. Look at your student evaluations and use the feedback to identify strengths and weaknesses and to enhance the course next time. Identify points at which the class seemed to lose focus or be most enthusiastic, and think about how that can help improve teaching and learning next time around.

### Is It Completed?

In the last couple of weeks of the course, are you:

- ✓ Reminding students when it is time to do course evaluations?
- ✓ Preparing students for the final exam or project by providing instructions, sample assignments or exams, and study guides?
- ✓ Revisiting course learning outcomes and discussing how the students had the opportunity to achieve them?
- ✓ Explaining to students how they will receive their final grade and feedback?
- ✓ Providing adequate feedback to each student on final assignments or exams and the full final grade?
- ✓ Explaining to students how you may be reached for questions about final grades?
- ✓ Familiarizing yourself with the rules on Incomplete and FN grades?
- ✓ Calculating and submitting final grades within 72 hours of the end of the course?
- ✓ If a student requests an Incomplete grade: verifying that the student is eligible, determining whether the Incomplete should be granted, and if granted, specifying the contract for completion of the course, including a deadline appropriate to the reason and the amount of work still to be completed?

## References

Chickering, A. W., & Gamson, Z. F. (1987, March). Seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education. *American Association for Higher Education Bulletin*, 39(7), 3–7.

Stiehl, R., & Lewchuk, L. (2007). *The outcomes primer* (3rd ed.). Corvallis, OR: The Learning Organization.