

Chapter 5

Reinforcing Responsible Learning: Acknowledgement of Syllabus and Course Requirements

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reviews the common business practice of providing an employee handbook to new employees, which should guide employee behavior. The expectations and responsibilities of employees are accepted and documented using an employee acknowledgement statement. These real-world practices are introduced to the college human resource management classroom through the course syllabus and a document called a “Course Start Contract” or “Acknowledgement of Syllabus and Course Requirements” developed by the authors. The Course Start Contract explains and reinforces the need for college students to accept responsibilities in the classroom in the same way that employees must accept responsibility and comply with organizational requirements in the workplace.

INTRODUCTION

Many instructors, especially at the college and university levels, are often challenged and even expected to bring the “real world of work” into the classroom. The goal is generally understood to prepare students for the world of work that they are expected to enter upon graduation. This is supposed to help students make the transition from “student” to “employee” more smoothly and reduce the gap between student

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and employee roles. The challenge is to adapt many world-of-work practices to the classroom in a way that is supportive of learning as well as preparing individual students for this transition.

The authors of this chapter have substantial experience in the real world of work at several levels and industries as well as in different cultural settings. Their professional experience as well as expertise are grounded in human resource management (HRM). That is, it is natural for them to turn to general standard HRM practices when seeking to begin bridging the two worlds: academic and workplace.

The chapter particularly introduces one tool: An “Acknowledgement of Syllabus & Course Requirements” (also called a “Course Start Contract”) utilized for over 13 years in the HRM program and selected management courses at the University of Guam (UOG). It is seen as successful in improving student acceptance of responsibility for personal learning performance and reducing dependence on the instructor. The chapter explains how the Acknowledgement of Syllabus & Course Requirements or the Course Start Contract incorporates many of the important and standard pieces found in an Employee Handbook Acknowledgement statement.

BACKGROUND

Most college level courses, in a significant number of educational institutions today, are required to provide students with a syllabus for each course. While syllabi are such a staple, the body of knowledge around the scholarship of teaching and learning literature affirms that innovating on syllabi is lacking (Fornaciari & Dean, 2014). In this way, much of the literature focuses on operational norms: “what” to include and “how” it should be structured. Little is still known about the course syllabus as a tool of the teaching and learning process. Thereby syllabi innovation or syllabi companion strategy is an important part of 21st century educational tools in higher education.

The syllabus is generally expected to identify the requirements and expectations of the specific course that is being taken. The syllabus further identifies materials that will be utilized such as textbooks and handouts. More and more, the syllabus identifies the electronic tools and media that may be used in a course. The syllabus usually includes discretionary statements that allow for changes and modifications during the semester. In some cases, the syllabus has even been identified as a “contract” between the student and the instructor who represents the academic program, the academic unit, and even the institution itself. Fornaciari and Dean (2014), referring to multiple authors, confirm that the idea of a course syllabus as a contract “dominates the literature and is the longest enduring and most common metaphor” (p. 705). Most academic programs require instructors to provide and then follow quite closely the syllabus that outlines the expectations and requirements of the course of study. The same instructors hear something like the following every semester, multiple times, often from the same students:

Student: *“Professor, when is this assignment due?” or “What is required? How do we do it?” or “I did not get the syllabus.”*

Instructor: *“It’s explained in the syllabus” or “The syllabus can be found on the course site.”*

Student: *“I don’t have a copy of the syllabus” or “I didn’t read the syllabus.”*

Then the instructor is expected to re-explain something that is clearly identified and mapped out in the course syllabus. In the world of work, a similar document is often provided to employees: the document is often identified as the “Employee Handbook” or the “Company Handbook.” It is also a common practice to obtain a written assurance that an employee has received and understood the company (employer) expectations for the employment relationship. This will be identified here as the Employee

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