

Loser-Savkar Fellowship Application

Proposal

Abstract (Maximum 100 words)

Summarize how you propose to learn about learning processes during your professional development project, and how you hope to apply what you learn to your teaching.

In spring Dean Jennifer Daniels shared "Does the Syllabi Matter: The Role of Syllabi in Higher Education," which documents three UVA educators' discovery of the great differences learning-based syllabi vs. the traditional content-based syllabi make. I've been deeply interested in learning about this approach. My findings suggest while many colleges are using learning-focused syllabi to enhance their teaching and student retention, the idea is still relatively new to NOVA. I am applying for the Loser-Savkar Fellowship to fund further research into this approach, esp. specific ways to create learning-focused syllabi so as to transform our teaching via active learning.

Rationale (Maximum 500 words).

Please review the evaluation criteria on the fellowship web site.

What course, seminar, workshop, or other learning project will you use to acquire knowledge about learning? Why do you believe that this knowledge is sound and applicable to teaching?

Why is this new knowledge about learning likely to benefit your teaching and your students? What other professional development have you done related to learning and teaching? As you reflect on your current teaching, what questions or puzzles have emerged that motivate you to learn more about learning processes?

According to the 2016 article, the traditional content-based syllabi have become increasingly authoritative and rule-infested; they stifle student motivation and hinder student learning. Whereas, the learning-focused syllabi are characterized by question-driven course descriptions, long-ranging and multi-faceted learning goals, and an approachable and inviting tone. They focus more effectively on student success. There has been much study of the role of syllabi during the past decades, but this new study introduces an approach that is not only theoretically innovative but also pedagogically effective in fostering student learning. Given the background of our students--many come from countries where syllabi are literally non-existent, many are the first in their family to attend a college, and many return to college with neglected reading and writing skills—I believe this new approach will work very well with our students. Therefore, getting to know and learning to deliver learning-focused teaching through effective construction and use of syllabi to serve these students is becoming very crucial to faculty like me, who is keen on exploring the new approach.

In reconnaissance and as preparation for working towards learning-focused syllabi research, Jen and I held a brown bag discussion in April. We surveyed the division faculty's experiences and practices

regarding syllabi revamping during semester change. We also introduced the concept of learning-based syllabi. The event was well attended and it triggered enthusiasm in the new approach. To introduce the concept to a larger audience, Jen and I also did a panel presentation at the 4th Adjunct Faculty Professional Development Conference last week. We aimed at bringing the large number of adjunct faculty into the discussion about learning-focused syllabi and help them get prepared for courses that often land on their plate abruptly.

The workshop and conference made me realize many questions need to be considered before we can effectively construct learning-focused syllabi and conduct learning-focused teaching: What can we do to make the syllabi exemplary for student learning? How can we use the syllabi as a pedagogical tool for socialization with students? Can we study the syllabi as scholarship of teaching and learning? How do we balance the syllabi to build positive academic atmosphere and fulfill institutional requirements? Can the college develop some standard practices in learning-focused syllabi construction, file sharing, and information exchange?

These and many other questions require investigation and study. But, this self-education and research is very time-consuming, particularly when I have a full-time faculty teaching load with multiple college and discipline committee services. The situation will be even more so as I plan to study the practices of peers not only in the English discipline but also across the disciplines. I hope eventually my study will lead to essay publication, more conference participation, and workshops for faculty and students. Therefore, I would be very grateful, as I am now to the support of our dean, that the Loser-Savkar Fellowship can give me some time and necessary funding for educating myself and gathering ideas to implement the learning-focused syllabi pedagogy.

Schedule (Maximum 150 words)

Tell us when you intend to complete each activity in your proposal. Please note that all activities must be completed within one calendar year of the award.

I will research, including locating and reading database articles and relevant books, searching and perusing college websites (esp. their teaching and learning centers), tracking higher education websites, and soliciting personal practices from peers around the country. I am discussing with campus international student group leaders and plan to hold a workshop in 2018 to help students with academic orientation specifically via syllabi education. It only makes sense to engage the students in the conversation of syllabi development, when that development will directly affect their academic success. Based on the student feedback, needs, their practices, and my research, I will also begin implementing the learning-focused syllabi in my own courses, and certainly share what I learn with my colleagues across the campuses.