

### **Report of Activities for the 2018 Loser-Savkar Fellowship**

During the past year, I

1. constructed a bibliography that documents authoritative research relevant to syllabus study from the past 20 years. To do that I have done extensive close reading.
2. developed a “Syllabus for You” questionnaire that includes 12 multiple choice questions that help gauge our students’ understanding of syllabus, their needs, and learning habits and practices.
3. conducted two rounds of the questionnaire: first with 180 students from ENG 111 and ENG 111-ENF 3 classes in fall 2018, and then with 241 students from ENG 111 & ENG-ENF 3 classes in spring 2019. A total of 421 students participated in the survey. I spent much time coordinating with my peers and analyzing the survey results.
4. ran with Dean Jen Daniels one workshop in the Language & Literature Division and another at the 4<sup>th</sup> Adjunct Professional Development Conference. I also co-presented with Dean Jen Daniels on the learning-focused syllabus and my own research on three different occasions: VCCS Humanities Peer Conference 2018 at Glen Allen in November 2018; NOVA PUP on Annandale Campus in January 2019; and VCCS 2019 New Horizons Conference in April 2019. The presentations were well attended and received, and I shared as well as learned a lot in the process of interacting with my peers.
5. designed a integrated PowerPoint document of 27 slides based on the various slides used during the above five presentations.
6. revamped all my course syllabi to make them more learning-focused both in content and form, such as using graphics, humor, first person narration and “you,” question form, and student-friendly language and rules.

7. worked closely with Dean Jen Daniels, including discussing the questions I developed for the questionnaire, incorporating her suggestions, and emailing and meeting in person with her to prepare for the presentations. I contacted CSSA (Chinese Student and Scholar Association) and met two of its officers to discuss the possibilities of conducting the questionnaire at the group's 2018 fall semester event. I also met Jen and our colleague Susanna Ferrara to explore ways to teach the syllabus right before the New Horizons conference. This project has truly been a collaborative effort because I contacted more than a dozen fellow instructors and secured their help and support with the questionnaire.
8. analyzed the questionnaire results and drafted a script for training students to understand syllabus. It can be used to develop a training course.

6 Attachments:

1. Bibliography
2. Questionnaire
3. PowerPoint
4. Script for Training Students
5. Conference Presentation Photos
6. Expense Receipts. (In lieu of door prizes, bookmarks and Chinese face-changing dolls were purchased to thank my peers who helped conduct the questionnaire. I misplaced receipts for mailing and thank-you cards.)



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## Syllabus Survey

Read each question and then check ALL the answers that apply to you.

1. *When did you first understand what a syllabus was?*
  - a) In high school or middle school
  - b) After I came to NOVA (or another college)
  - c) I am still confused by what it is
  
2. *If you are from another country, were you introduced to a syllabus there?*
  - a) Yes
  - b) No
  - c) N/A
  
3. *How important is the syllabus to you?*
  - a) It is not very important because the professor will tell me what to do for each class in person anyway.
  - b) It is important only at the beginning of the class because I need it to figure out what the semester will be like at the start.
  - c) It is important only if I need to see a dean or other authority if I am not happy with my grade.
  - d) It is important every day because it contains includes information about due dates, attendance policies, office hours, and I can find information I need without having to ask the teacher.
  
4. *When can you count on your professor being in the office if the syllabus states, "Drop-in Office Hours: M/W 10:30-11:15 AM; T/R 2:00-2:30 PM"?*
  - a) Mondays at 10:45 in the morning
  - b) Tuesdays in the afternoon between 2:00 to 2:30
  - c) Fridays in the afternoon between 2:00 and 2:30
  - d) Thursdays at 2:15 in the afternoon
  
5. *Which of the following would be applicable to you if your class syllabus states, "Office Hours by Appointment: T/Th: 8:30-9:30am & Friday morning"?*
  - a) You can walk into your professor's office on any Thursday at 9:15 in the morning and the professor will be there.
  - b) Your professor will be there if you have made an appointment for a Tuesday at 8:50 in the morning.
  - c) Your professor will not be available on Friday morning unless you have made an appointment for that day.
  - d) You can walk into your professor's office on any Tuesday at 9:00 in the morning and your professor will be there.
  
6. *How do you feel if your class syllabus states, "Office hours: Before and After Class"?*
  - a) I feel I need to ask my professor to clarify how long before and after my class that my professor will be in the office.
  - b) I feel that I know exactly when to find my professor.
  - c) I feel the office hours are not written in a student-friendly manner.
  - d) I feel the professor is quite flexible with the office hours.
  
7. *How do you read the "course description" and "course objective"?*
  - a) I need to read them only once; that's enough.

Yuemini He, ENG, NVCC, Annandale, April 2019

- b) I can ignore or skip them when I read the syllabus.
- c) I need to read only one of them.
- d) I read them carefully since they convey a different perspective about the course.

8. *Which statement or statements on attendance do you prefer?*

- a) When you are absent, you do not need to email me, but you may. Please refrain from asking, “What did I miss?” We do so much in a class session, and I won’t sum it up on email for you. I will send occasional updates and recaps on Blackboard. Use your resources: Blackboard, your classmates, and my office hours, to compensate for what you missed on your own time. If you’re sleepy or sick with a fever or something contagious, please stay home.
- b) If you are ill or can’t make it, let me know, ahead of time if possible, or by email, so that I can mark you as excused. But bear in mind that an excused absence still counts as an absence. Even though I post your assignments on Blackboard, there is no way to learn what you would have gotten in class by merely asking me, “What did I miss?” The truth is that you missed 75 minutes of learning.
- c) **Send me an email** at XXXX@nvcc.edu to notify me that you will not be there. I do not need the reason, only the statement that you will be absent.  
**Check Blackboard**, but do not expect that everything we did in class will be available there.  
**Contact another student** prior to the next class to find out what you missed. Ask me for clarification, not for what you missed.
- d) The above three statements send the same message and I do not care which the professor adopts to deliver the message.

9. *Which tone do you prefer your professor to write in?*

- a) “I welcome you to contact me....”
- b) “If you need to contact me....”
- c) “Students can contact me....”
- d) “Students wishing to speak with a professor should....”

10. *Below are excerpts from two syllabi. Which class would you take?*

- a) The first one
- b) The second one
- c) Both

d) Neither

**U.S. History since 1865**

**How you'll know you're learning**

Throughout the course, you will have multiple opportunities to explore a variety of historical events, engage in historical thinking, form and develop arguments, and share what you learn through discussion and writing. We will, for example, have frequent in-class discussions, debates, small group activities, and other similar exercises. In addition, the following activities will help guide you through the learning process and help you measure your progress as you move toward deeper understanding.

**Reading Checks.** Every week, you will be given a short out-of-class writing assignment based on the scheduled readings for the upcoming class period, no more than one (1) page, to help you more fully analyze the readings and prepare for class. As already mentioned above, this course is built on the expectation that students want to be active learners, and keeping up with the reading empowers you to take full advantage of class discussions and lectures.

**Oral History Project.** The entire class will conduct an oral history project in partnership with the Hawfields Presbyterian Home (HPH). This oral history project is a priority of HPH, which is eager to preserve the history of elders in the community. It is also essential to our course because it will allow you to practice what historians do—gather, evaluate, and make sense of new historical sources. Doing this project, and doing it well, matters not only for the success of our course, but also to our local community.

You will work in pairs throughout the semester both in- and out-of-class (see the Schedule for details and due dates) to complete the oral history project. Each pair will research relevant local and personal history, develop interview questions, interview one person from the HPH community, accurately and fully transcribe that interview, analyze the interview for the class, and present a complete audio recording and written transcript of the interview to the HPH community...

11. *What do you like to see in a syllabus in terms of how your professor presents information?*

- a) Color blocked
- b) Tables, pies, charts
- c) Bold or underlined for emphasis
- d) Interactive components, e.g. directions to Blackboard, links, websites, sources (Oral Communications Center; Tutoring Center; Language Center; Reading and Writing Center; Computer Lab; Testing Center)

12. *Which describes your status?*

- a) International student at NOVA
- b) First in the family to attend a college
- c) Returning to college after being away for years
- d) None of the above





## **Works Cited**

Palmer, Michael S., et al. "Does the Document Matter? The Evolving Role of Syllabi in Higher Education." *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, vol. 48, no.4, 2016, pp. 36-47, doi: 10.1080/00091383.2016.1198186.



# Reconstructing Teaching: From the Traditional Syllabus to the Learning-focused Syllabus

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# Does the Document Matter? The Evolving Role of Syllabi in Higher Education

by Michael S. Palmer,  
Lindsay B. Wheeler,  
and Itiya Aneece

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## In Short

- Traditional or content-focused syllabi make clear what the “course will do” and what “students will **NOT** do.” A lot of bolding, all-capping, italicizing, and underlining are obligatory aesthetic elements of these documents.
- Learning-focused syllabi are characterized by engaging, question-driven course descriptions; long-ranging, multi-faceted learning goals; clear, measurable learning objectives; robust and transparent assessment and activity descriptions; detailed course schedules; a focus on student success; and, an inviting, approachable, and motivating tone.
- When students read a learning-focused syllabus, they have significantly more positive perceptions of the document itself, the course described by the syllabus, and the instructor associated with the course.
- It is not enough to require syllabi, we need to require the *right* type of syllabi. Learning-focused ones can positively affect student motivation before students even enter the classroom, making meaningful engagement in the course much more likely.

*Michael S. Palmer is the Managing Director of the University of Virginia’s Center for Teaching Excellence. His educational development research centers on teaching consultation techniques, graduate student professional development, course design initiatives, and the impact professional development activities have on teacher beliefs and practices.*

*Lindsay B. Wheeler is Assistant Director of STEM Education Initiatives in the Center for Teaching Excellence and a lecturer in chemistry at the University of Virginia. Her research interests include understanding the importance of STEM graduate teaching assistants on learning and what factors influence STEM faculty teaching practice.*

*Itiya Aneece is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Environmental Sciences. Currently, she is helping with the redesign of the core undergraduate labs in the department as a Teaching+Technology Support Partner.*

CHANGE • JULY/AUGUST 2016

This 2016 article makes a case for a “learning-focused” syllabus over the “law and order” one.

Michael S. Palmer  
Lindsay B. Wheeler  
Itiya Aneece

## Two Types of Syllabi

### **Learning-focused syllabi are characterized by**

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#### **Traditional or content-based syllabi include**

- What course will do
- What students will NOT do
- A lot of bolding, all-capping, italicizing, and underlining

- Engaging, question-driven course descriptions
- Long-ranging, multi-faceted learning goals
- Clear, measurable learning objectives
- Robust and transparent assessment and activity descriptions
- Detailed course schedules
- A focus on student success
- An inviting, approachable tone

## Content-focused syllabus for History 1000: U.S. History since 1865

### Course Overview

This course emphasizes the major political, social, economic and intellectual developments in the nation from the Civil War to the present and aims to challenge students to critically analyze these developments. The course also examines how events and developments that occurred prior to 1865 influenced the nation's evolution after the Civil War. The course will cover such topics as Reconstruction, the New Deal, the Great Depression, the Atomic Age, the Cold War, and the 1960s. Due to the constraints of the semester, the 1970s-80s will only be covered generally, while the 1990's-today will not be covered.

## Learning-focused syllabus for History 1000: U.S. History since 1865

### **A bit about the course**

You've probably studied U.S. history before, exploring the major themes, events, and people who have shaped this country. In your other history courses, you may have learned certain historical information and then been required to write clear, evidence-based arguments about the past. We will do that, but I expect you will find this course to be different in useful and challenging ways.

Together, we will explore how and why individuals chose to act—or not to act—in response to the local, national, and global forces that have shaped the United States since 1865. For example, how did Americans respond to the U.S. acquiring and using the atomic bomb? And how were they affected by the 20<sup>th</sup>-century tech boom? Historians call this approach *social history*, a major trend in historical analysis over the past few decades. This focus on the lives of ordinary (and not so ordinary) people can help you deeply understand the past. It also might prompt you to reflect on how and why *you* choose to act (or not to act) in response to the local, national, and global forces shaping our world now.

To allow you to experience doing what historians do, you will get to contribute to an oral history project. This project, developed in partnership with a local community organization, will encourage you to ask some big questions about how to do historical research and historical meaning as well as to explore the relationship between personal/local stories and national ones.

## Course Policies and Student Expectations

- Attendance at each lecture is expected. It is essential that students come to class regularly if they hope to perform well in the class. Class will begin promptly at 2:00pm, so be on time.
- Students should come to class prepared for the day's lecture. Preparation includes having completed any assignments that are due, being ready to listen and answer questions during the lecture, and finishing all the assigned readings for the class.
- Once in class, it is expected that students will be attentive, including taking notes, and that students will show respect to their classmates and the instructor.
- No class work will be accepted via email. All papers must be submitted as a hard copy on the date they are due. Late papers will be penalized.
- Quizzes can only be taken in class and cannot be made up regardless of reason.
- Review Sheets and any other handouts will not be sent to students electronically. They must be picked up in class or at the instructor's office.
- Students must bring a Blue Book to each exam.
- Students must turn off all cell phones, watch alarms, etc. in class unless they have extenuating circumstances that they have spoken with the instructor about.
- Cheating in any form, including plagiarism, will not be tolerated. Cheating on any assignment or test will result in a failing grade for the assignment or test and may also result in a failing grade for the course. Please note that each student is responsible for the work he or she turns in. Students who cheat will be reported to the Honor Council.

## **Learning-focused syllabus for History 1000: U.S. History since 1865**

### **A few course policies**

Due dates are firm, but extensions requested ahead of time are normally granted. In all cases, later work is preferable to plagiarism, which is considered a violation of the honor code. What is plagiarism? Generally speaking, it is any attempt to take credit for work done by another person. All historians, including undergraduates, must rely on the work of others to shape their own knowledge and interpretations. In their writing, they must acknowledge the importance of other works through footnotes and/or direct textual references to influential books, articles, and ideas. Failure to acknowledge the work of others, or transposing sentences, words, and concepts into your own work without using quotation marks or citations can result in plagiarism. Working with a professor, tutor, or friend to clarify your ideas and organization for a paper or presentation is generally not plagiarism. Using an outline or thesis given to you by someone else without substantial modification is plagiarism. If you have any questions about what may constitute plagiarism, please consult with me. There is no penalty for honest inquiry or confusion.

## Content-focused syllabus for History 1000: U.S. History since 1865

### Course Requirements

Each student in the course will be expected to complete three exams and one essay during the semester.

**Exams** – Each exam will consist of three sections: an identification section, a short answer section, and an essay section. Review sheets will be distributed before the exams to assist students in their preparation. Review sheets will only be distributed in class and will not be sent out electronically to students. *All students are required to bring an unmarked Blue Book to each exam.* These Blue Books will be collected in class on the day of the test and redistributed before the exam begins. The final exam will not be cumulative.

**Quizzes** - Students are required to take a short reading quiz at the start of each class period. Quizzes can only be taken in class and cannot be made up regardless of reason.

**Essay** – Students are required to write one 3-4 page double-spaced essay based on *Making Freedom: African Americans in U.S. History*. The assignment is not a research paper and should be based on the book alone. The essay is due when we will be discussing the 1960's in class. Students should come ready to discuss the book when they turn in their papers.



## Learning-focused syllabus for History 1000: U.S. History since 1865

### **How you'll know you're learning**

Throughout the course, you will have multiple opportunities to explore a variety of historical events, engage in historical thinking, form and develop arguments, and share what you learn through discussion and writing. We will, for example, have frequent in-class discussions, debates, small group activities, and other similar exercises. In addition, the following activities will help guide you through the learning process and help you measure your progress as you move toward deeper understanding.

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# NVCC: Questionnaire, Results & Analysis

The questionnaire asks a total of 12 multiple answer questions.

The total number of ENG111/3 students who were invited to do the questionnaire was 140, and 104 students out of that group filled out the form. The response rate is nearly 75%.

The total number of ENG 111 students who were asked to do the questionnaire was 142, and 76 students out of that group filled out the form. The response rate is slightly more than 50%.

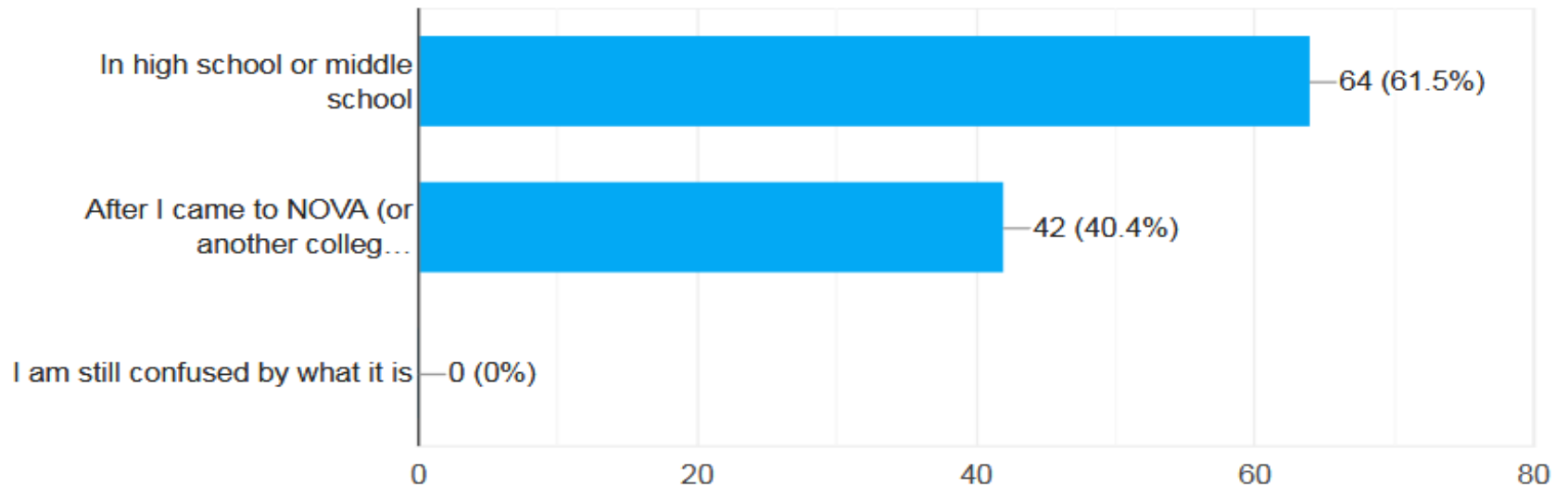
In the second round survey, an additional 241 students participated. That brings the whole number of students surveyed to 438.



## English 111 / 3 (from first round)

### When did you first understand what a syllabus was?

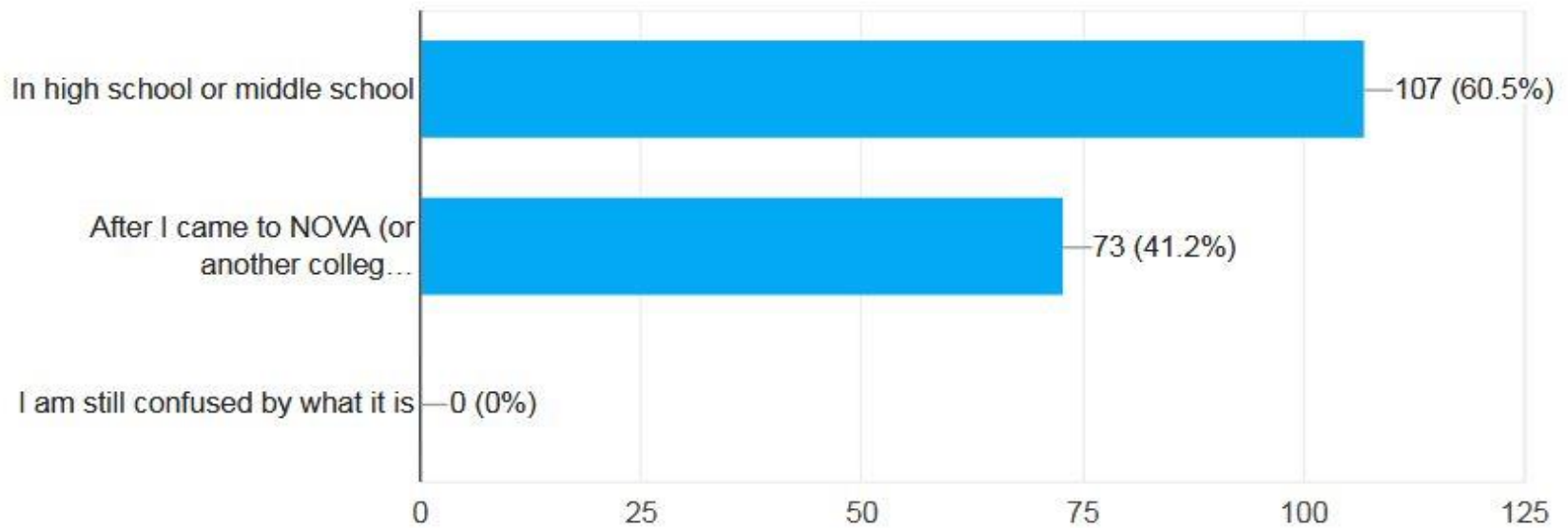
104 responses



## English I I I / 3 (from second round)

### When did you first understand what a syllabus was?

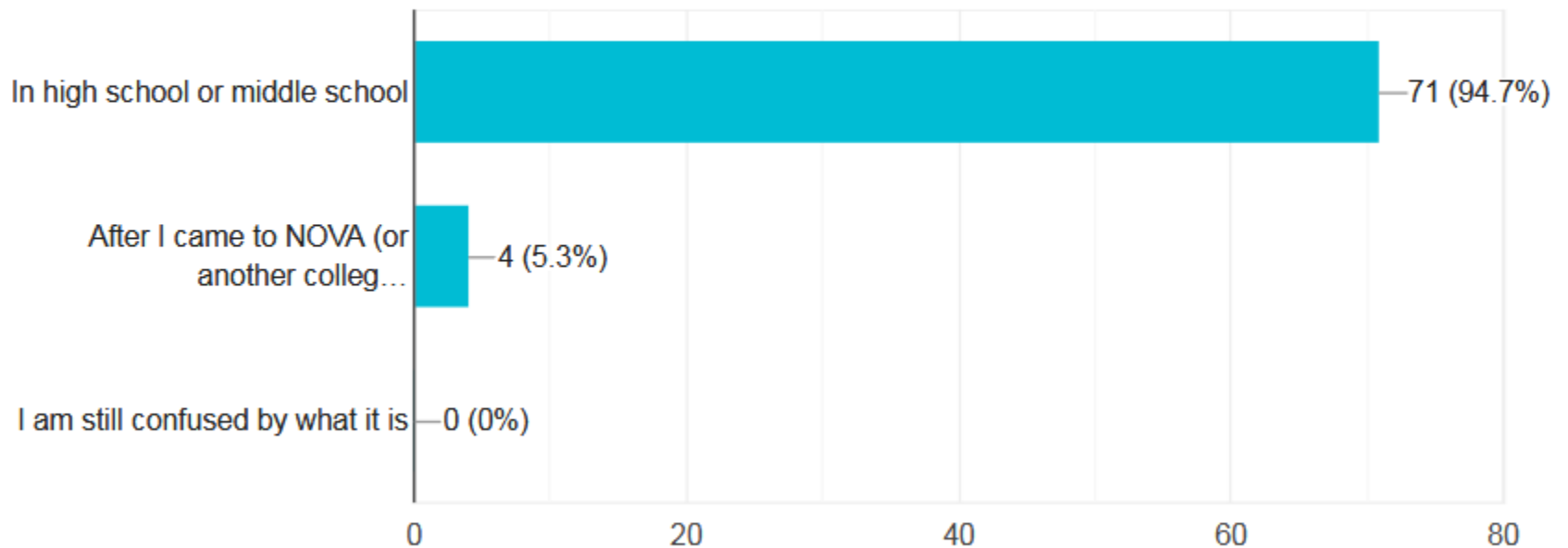
177 responses



## English III (from first round)

### When did you first understand what a syllabus was?

75 responses

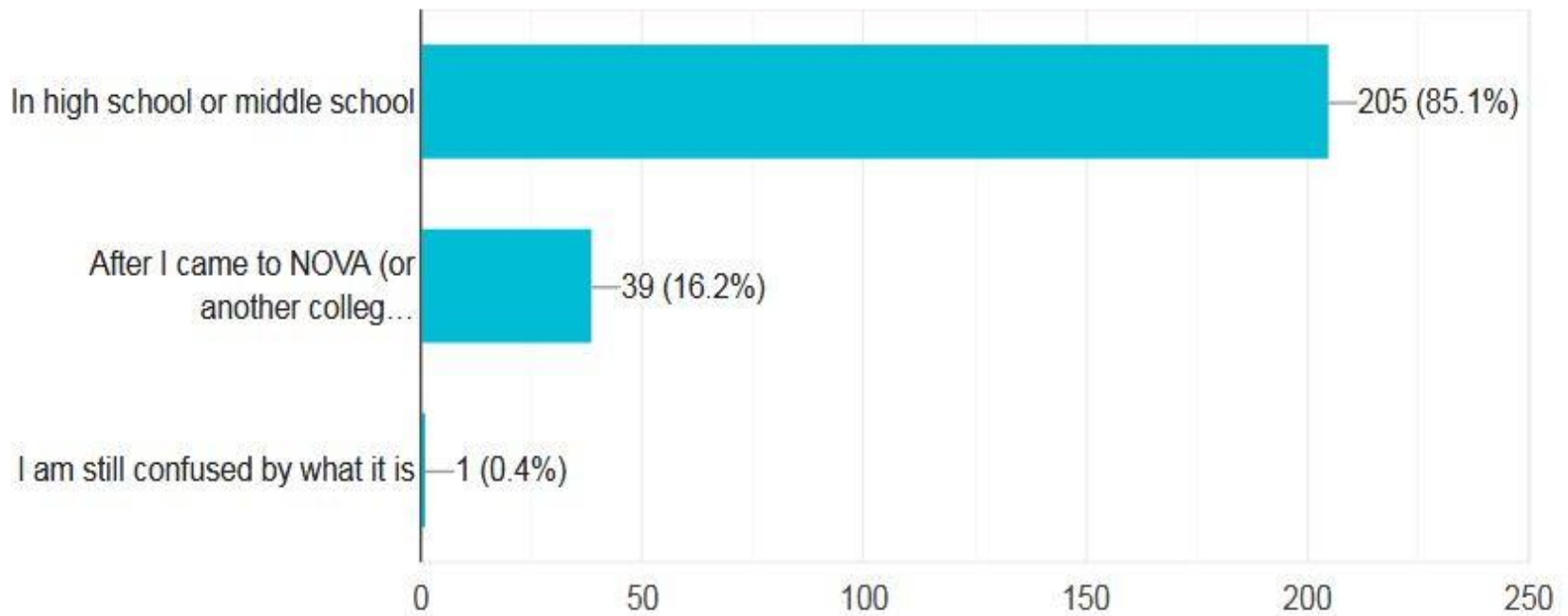


## English III (from second round)

### When did you first understand what a syllabus was?



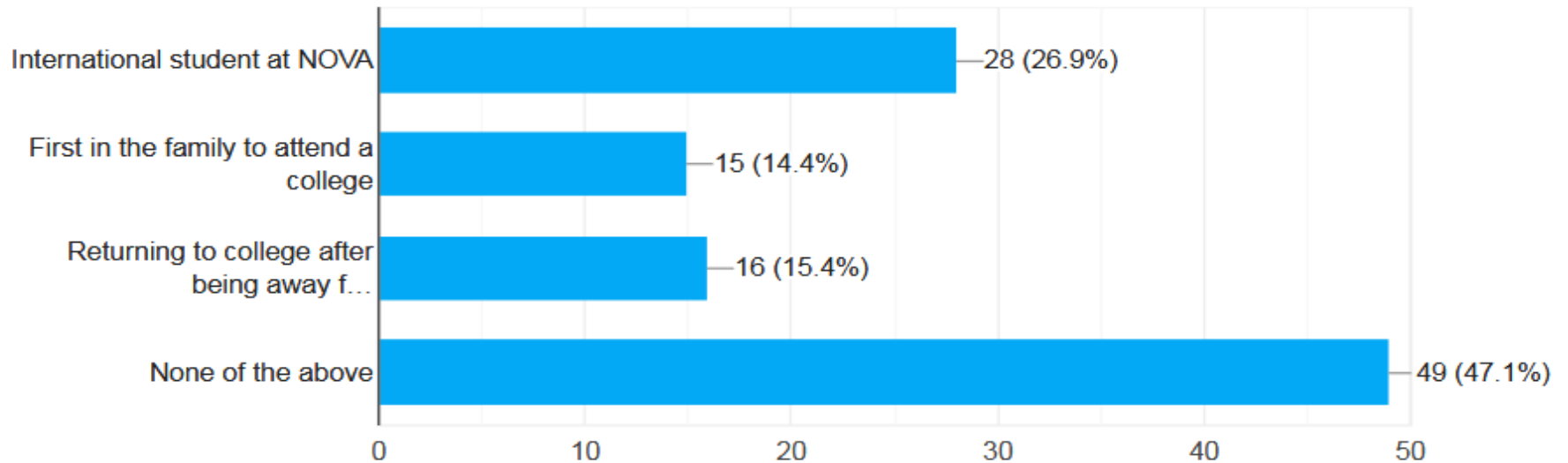
241 responses



## English III / 3 (from first round)

### Which describes your status?

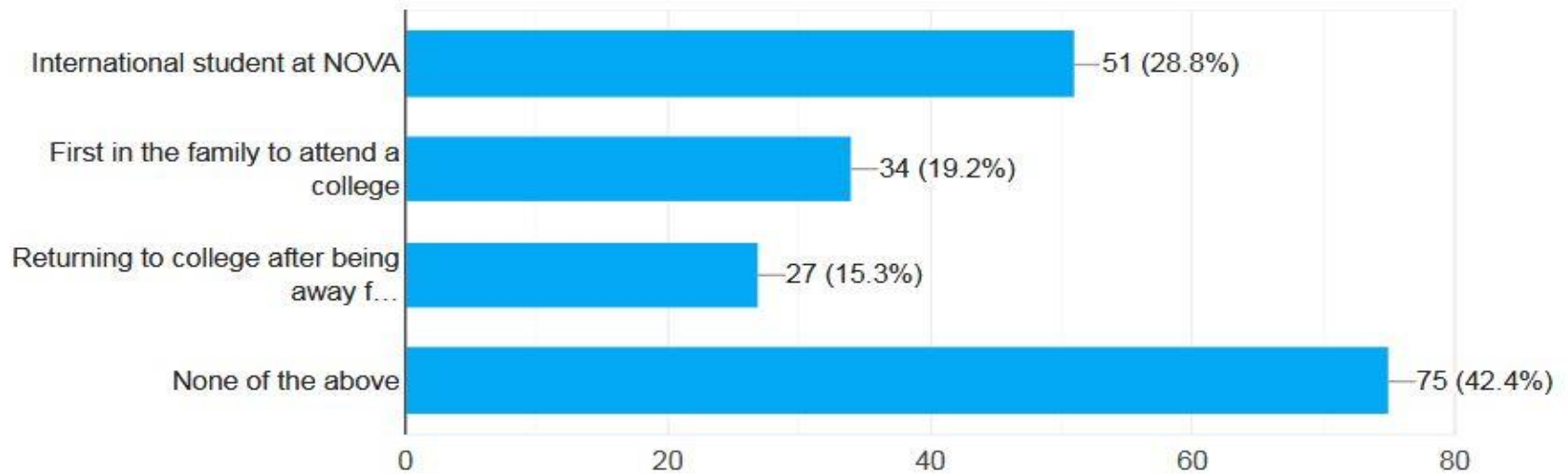
104 responses



## English III / 3 (from Second round)

### Which describes your status?

177 responses

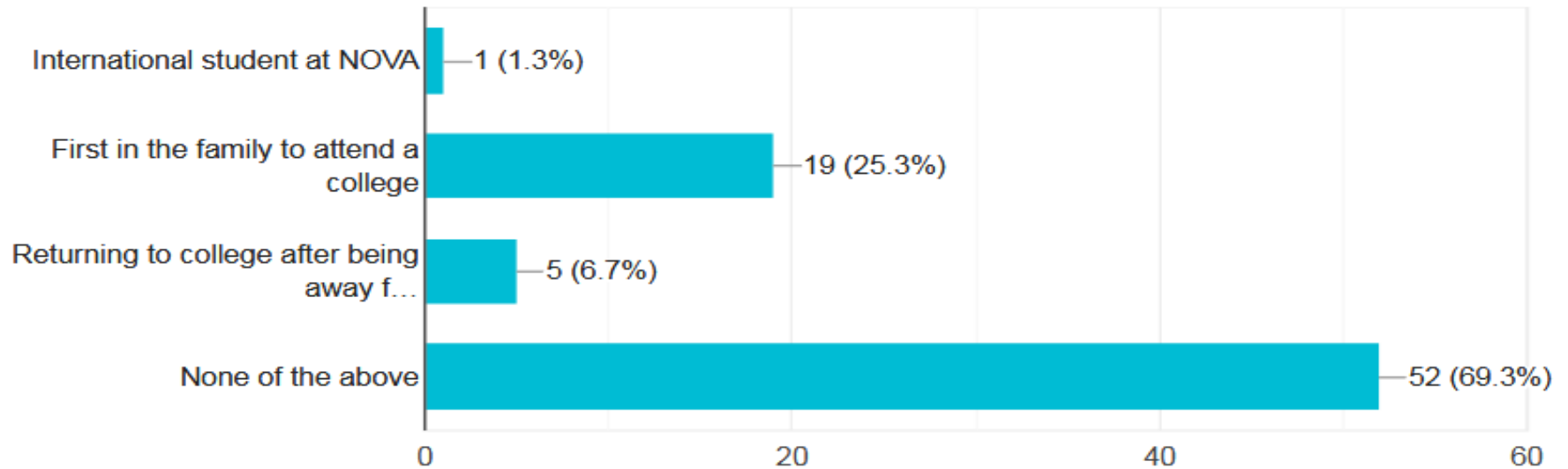




## English III (from first round)

### Which describes your status?

75 responses

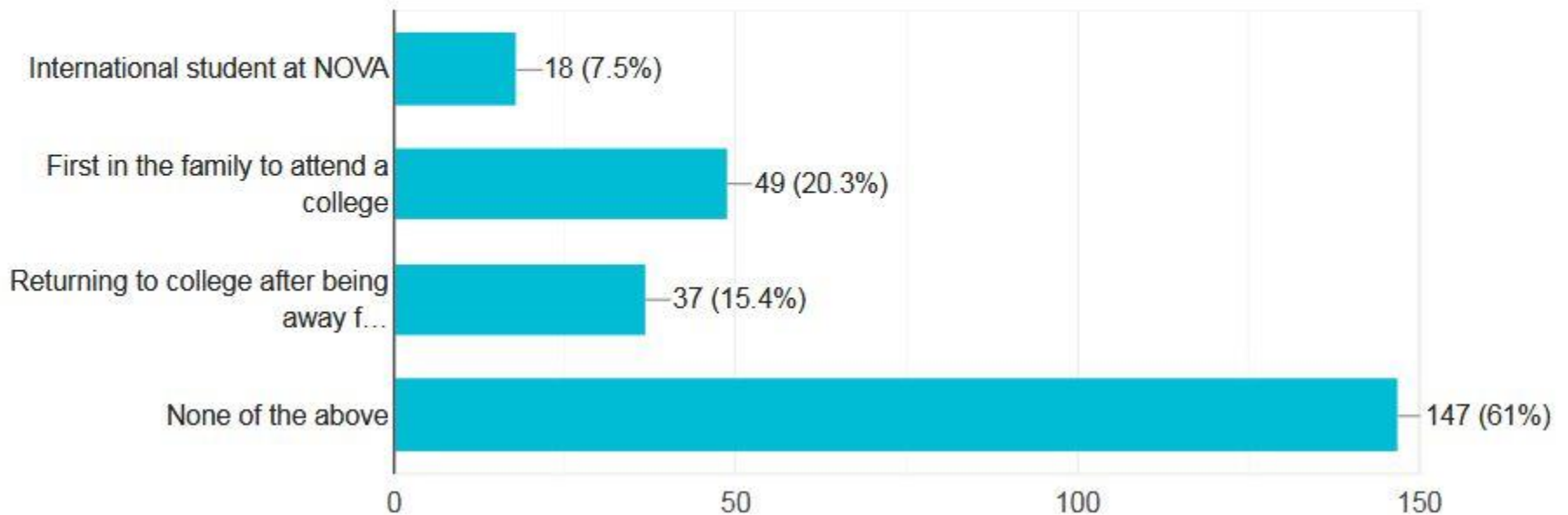


## English III (from second round)

### Which describes your status?



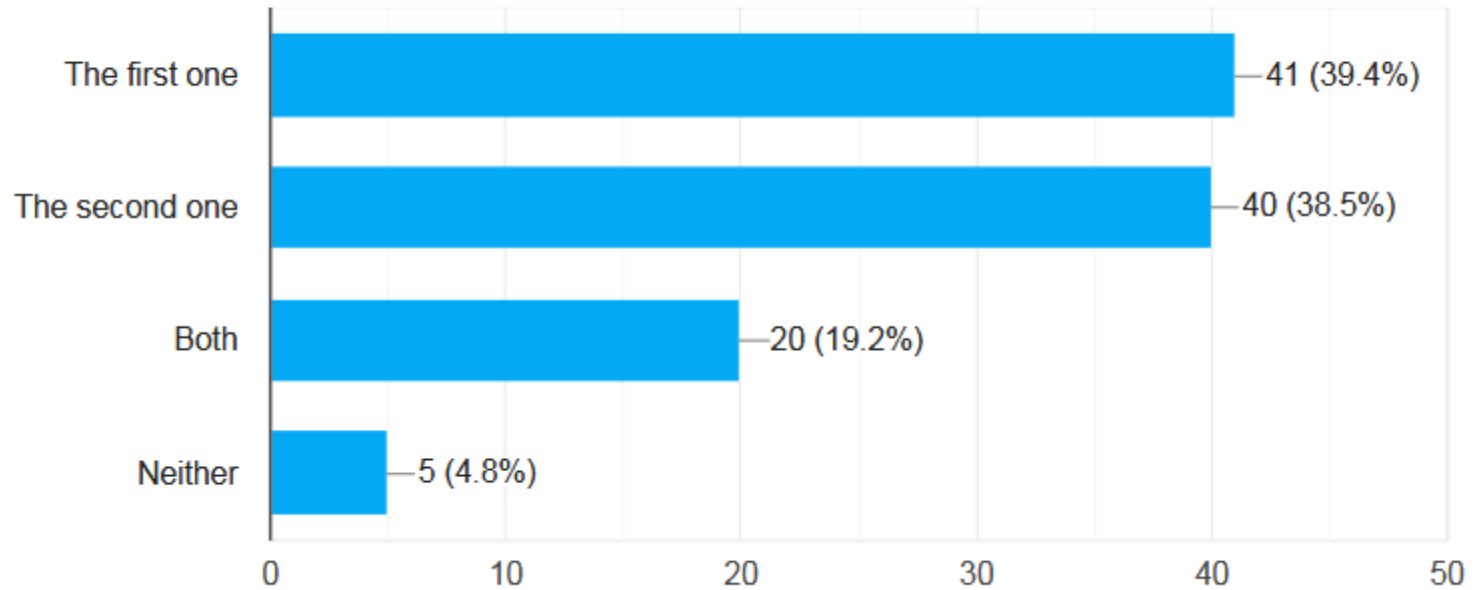
241 responses



## English III /3 (from first round)

Below are excerpts from two syllabi. Which class would you take?

104 responses

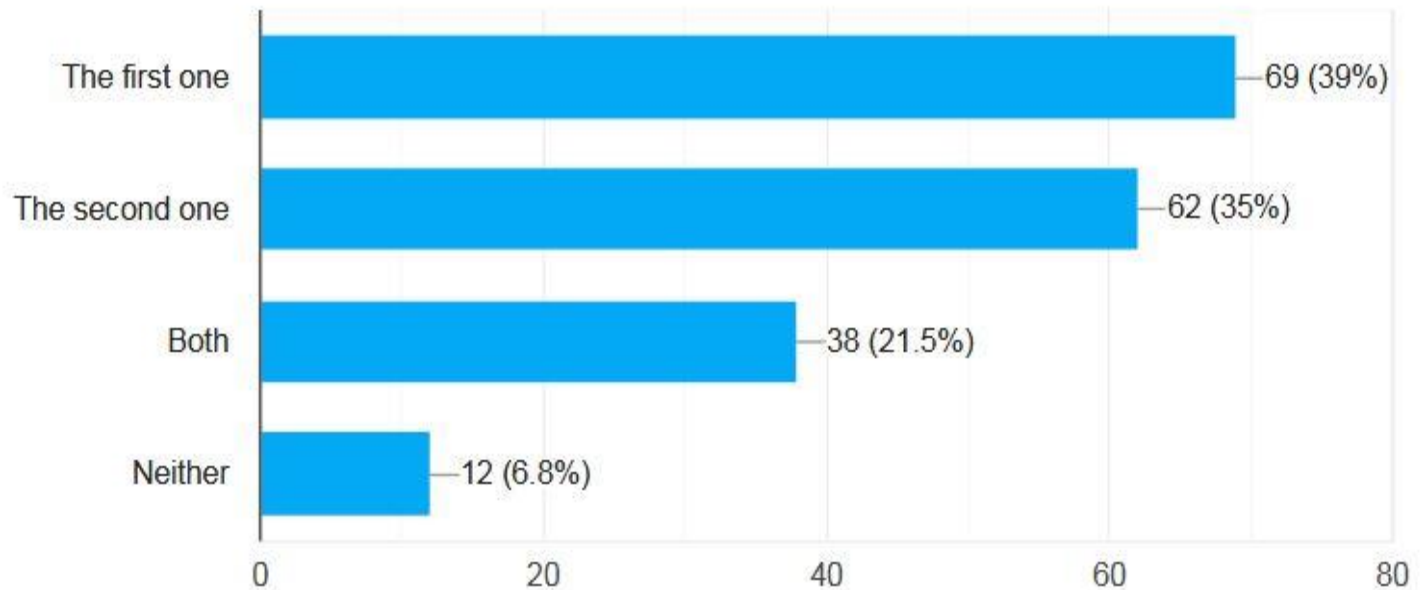


## English I I I /3 (from second round)

Below are excerpts from two syllabi. Which class would you take?



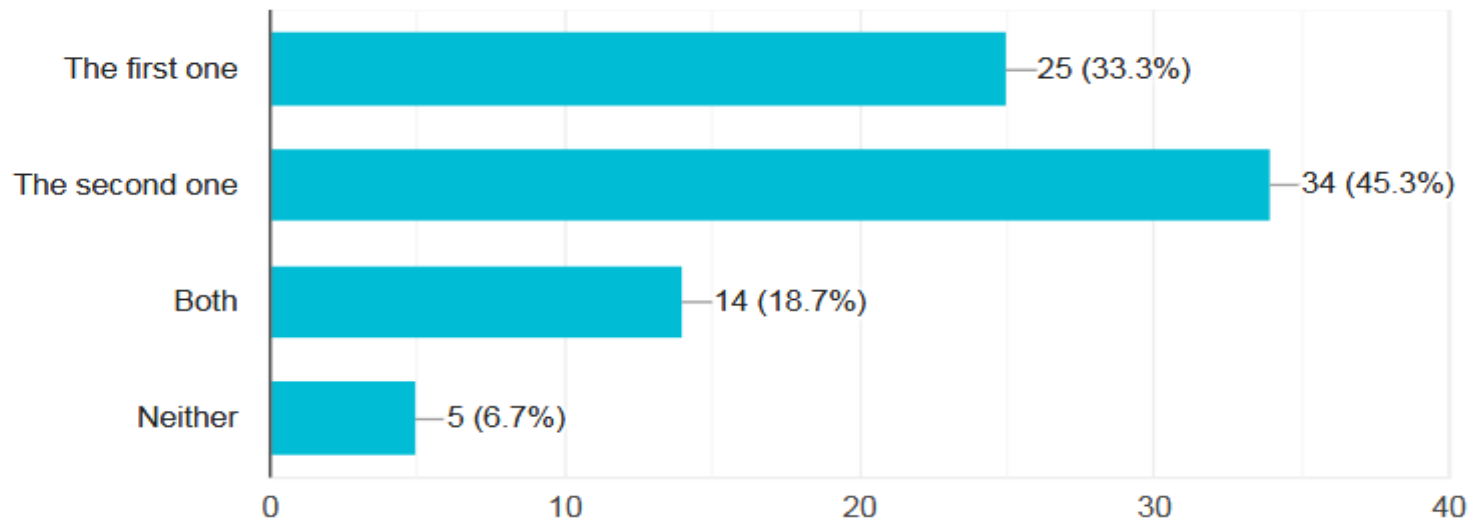
177 responses



## English III (from first round)

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75 responses

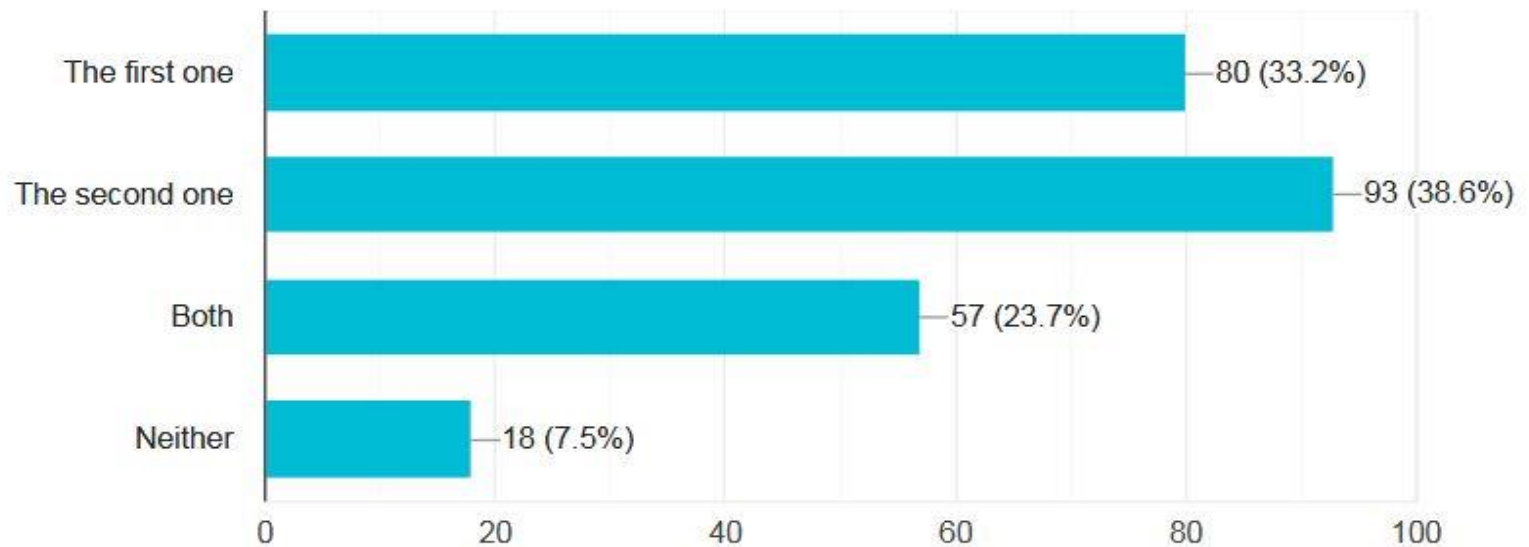


## English I I I (from second round)

Below are excerpts from two syllabi. Which class would you take?



241 responses



## **“When Will We Talk About the Syllabus?” By Anne Curzan**

Aug. 10, 2017, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*

If we are going to expect students to write in class, for example, why not use a short, engaging writing prompt at some point on the first day? If students are going to be solving problems in groups, why not do so on the first day? I know that students often have not read or mastered any of the specific course content yet, but we can always create a prompt or an activity that is self-contained and will welcome students to our classrooms and what we plan to do there more than any course description or schedule on the syllabus can.



## Major Questions for Exploration

- How do we balance the syllabi to build a positive academic atmosphere and fulfill institutional requirements?
- What can we do to make the syllabi exemplary for student learning?
- How can we educators use the syllabi as a pedagogical tool for socialization with students?
- Can we study the syllabi as scholarship of teaching and learning?
- Can the college develop some standard practices in learning-focused syllabi construction, file sharing, and information exchange?



# Using the Learning-focused Syllabi to Enhance Student Academic Success

- Which parts of your syllabus could you rewrite to make more student learning-focused? How?
- What would you do to make the boilerplates more engaging?
- What creative assignments can aid you in teaching the syllabus?
- What activities will you adopt to integrate the syllabus throughout the semester?

# Best Practices in Real Syllabi

## Syllabi from Our College

ENG 237: Introduction to Poetry

ENG 211: Creative Writing I

ENG 111-ENF 3: College Composition

## Syllabi from Other Colleges

Political Science 1823: The Politics of Race and the Criminal Justice System

ENG 427: American Poetry in the Twentieth Century

HI 112: US HI II

## Using the Learning-focused Syllabi to Enhance Student Academic Success

- What do you think of the learning-focused syllabus approach?
- Which parts of your syllabus could you rewrite to make more student learning-focused? How?
- What would you do to make the boilerplates more engaging?
- What creative assignments can aid you in teaching the syllabus?
- What activities will you adopt to integrate the syllabus throughout the semester?



## Script for Student Training

In response to the discovery that

- a) More than half of the students who were from another country were never introduced to a syllabus there.

### 1. What is a syllabus?

A syllabus is your guide to a course and what will be expected of you in the course. A syllabus generally includes course policies, rules and regulations, required texts, and a schedule of assignments. A syllabus can tell you nearly everything you need to know about how a course will be run and what will be expected of you.

- b) Near 20% of both groups of students believed the syllabus “is important only at the beginning of the class because I need it to figure out what the semester will be like at the start.”

### 2. What is the purpose of a syllabus?

The purposes of a syllabus are almost as varied as the possible contents but can be grouped into several categories. A syllabus serves three major roles: as a contract, as a permanent record, and most importantly, as a learning tool.

- c) Only 3% more students from ENG 111 than ENF 3 will choose the learning-focused syllabi course; slightly more than 20 % of students do not care how the syllabi are written.

### 3. Why makes the learning-focused syllabi student-friendly?

There are two kinds of syllabi: the traditional syllabi and the learning-focused ones. If you don't know what the learning-focused syllabi are, here are some of their defining characteristics

- Engaging, question-driven course descriptions
- Long-ranging, multi-faceted learning goals
- Clear, measurable learning objectives
- Robust and transparent assessment and activity descriptions
- Detailed course schedules
- A focus on student success
- An inviting, approachable tone

- d) At least 10% more ENF 3 students failed to correctly interpret the office hours posted than ENG 111 students did.

### 4. What are the common abbreviations for the days of the week?

While constructing syllabi, instructors often use abbreviations for the days of the week to keep their syllabi short. Here are the common abbreviation forms:

- Monday – M., Mon.
- Tuesday – T., Tu., Tue., or Tues.
- Wednesday – W., Wed.

- Thursday – R., Th., Thu., Thur., or Thurs.
- Friday – F., Fri.
- Saturday – S., Sat.
- Sunday – U., Sun.

### **5. What are office hours?**

In their syllabi, instructors normally list their office hours, during which you can meet your instructors. There are two types of office hours: walk-in/drop-in office hours and office hours by appointment. The differences between the two types are

- walk-in office hours are available for you to meet with your instructors on a first-come, first-served basis.
- office hours by appointment require you to first schedule an appointment with your instructors and then meet your instructors at the scheduled time.

e) To the question, “How do you feel if your class syllabus states, “Office hours: Before and After Class,” more than 10% of students from each group consider “the office hours are not written in a student-friendly manner.” While at least a quarter of the students from both groups feel “the professor is quite flexible with the office hours.”

### **6. What do you think of “Office hours: Before and After Class”? Check all that apply.**

- For readers who do not know the class time, it is meaningless.
- Even for readers who know how to find the class time, it is not convenient to use.
- Even for readers who know the class time, it is not specific as to how much time is under discussion.
- The professor leaves much flexibility to the students.

f) Significantly more ENG 111 students than ENG 111-ENF3 students reported that they would gloss over some elements in the syllabus, such as course description or course objective, or both.

### **7. Why are Course Objectives important?**

- You are more cognizant of the selected learning materials and instructional approach to the course when you understand course expectations from the beginning.
- You make more connections with the content as you move through the course when you know the sequence of how and why the course was designed.
- The course material will resonate with you more when you are fully aware of the course objectives targeting specific skills, concepts, or knowledge.
- As you are taking the course, you are more likely to ask questions if something doesn't make sense, especially content directly relating to a particular course objective.
- You are mindful of your own abilities when completing assignments; you are more apt to assess your own work in the course, checking to see firsthand if your performance is meeting those course objectives.

**8. What are the tips that can help you use the syllabus to navigate your semester?**

- At the beginning of the semester, carefully read the entire syllabus and take note of the important dates when exams, assignments, and papers are due.
- Just as you check a map or directions for various intersections along your journey, check the syllabus before each class for reading assignments and to gain an idea of the day's topic.
- If you have ever used something like MapQuest, you know that directions and maps can sometimes be confusing or even mistaken. When something about the syllabus is unclear, talk to the professor. Ask them to help you to understand an assignment, or why a certain topic is being covered at a given point.
- Professors put a lot of time planning their syllabi, and nothing disgruntles a professor more than a student who does poorly because they failed to consult the syllabus.

