Reverse-engineering a Syllabus: Using Learning Objectives to Design Your Courses

There are many ways to go about framing a syllabus, whether you start with an established model, a familiar textbook, a set of themes, or a selection of primary sources, to name just a few. The right method for you will depend in part on the type of class, the explicitness of standards at your institution, and your priorities as an instructor. This year's GSIC-sponsored workshop will focus on the method of course design called reverse-engineering, which takes as its starting point the ultimate objectives of your course—i.e., the skill sets and experiences you would like your students to acquire as the result of taking your class—and works backwards from there to establish first what intermediary goals will lead to your desired outcome and, second, what kinds of activities are likely to help students reach those goals.

Placing outcomes at the forefront of your planning allows you to think creatively and holistically about what benefits your material and the study skills required to master it can impart. The range can run from short to long term, from small to broad scale, from discipline-specific skills to life-changing experiences. Such goals are, of course, part of the thinking behind any course development strategy, but in a reverse-engineered syllabus they are made very explicit, to yourself and ultimately in some form to your students, and every assessment and assignment is tailored specifically to those objectives. This approach is highly respectful of students. It encourages high expectations and uses student-centered means to meet them. What students learn to do becomes more important than what material they cover.

After a short introduction to the overall process, participants in this workshop will have the chance to brainstorm a set of desired outcomes for a course of their choosing. We will then work in small groups to evaluate and revise the resulting lists, with the goal of establishing objectives that are assessable, achievable, meaningful, and grouped so that the highest order processes are facilitated by a logical sequence of subordinate goals. A rubric will be provided as an aid to this discussion. Next, we will consider how our ultimate goals can best be assessed. Finally, any remaining time will be spent in

beginning to determine possible assignments and activities that would prepare students to perform well on those assessments. A list of resources that may be helpful to anyone interested in looking further into research-based pedagogical practices will also be available. This workshop is geared toward graduate students and new faculty, but everyone is welcome.