Course Outlines in the BC Transfer System

Designing Content and Format to Facilitate Course Transferability

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February 2024

BCCAT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Course outlines are one of the key elements in program and course articulation within the BC Transfer System (BCTS). A course outline is the primary source of information for evaluators assessing transfer credit requests. However, course outline formats are not consistent across the 39 BCTS member institutions. Most institutions also have two kinds of course outlines: the outline that is approved through internal processes (the official course outline), and the outline that is distributed to students in class (the syllabus).

The purpose of this report is to examine and compare course outlines at BC Transfer System member institutions, and to provide recommendations for course outline content and format to facilitate requests for transfer credit.

Course outlines and/or syllabi were collected from 36 BCTS member institutions, along with each institution's policies and procedures relating to the content and formatting of course outlines and syllabi. A comparison of the course outlines and/or syllabi showed that nearly all of them contained almost all of the information used in evaluations of transferability. Most of these documents contain additional information, usually related to class or institutional policies. The Transfer Credit System (TCS), the platform that supports the BC Transfer Guide (BCTG), requires institutions to include a reason for a decision to close or deny transfer requests; a review of these reasons indicated that very few of these decisions are related to a lack of information on a course outline or syllabus. Institutions receiving requests also have the option to request additional information from sending institutions, although available data suggest that these requests are not common.

The report presents four recommendations.

1) Institutions should ensure that both course outlines and syllabi include the elements most likely to be assessed by receiving institutions.

2) Institutions should consider separate and distinct policies addressing the content and format of course outlines and of syllabi.

3) Institutions that do not have templates for course outlines or syllabi should consider creating these.

4) Institutions receiving transfer credit requests should consider whether course outlines or syllabi are acceptable documentation for these requests.

INTRODUCTION

Course outlines are one of the key elements in program and course articulation within the BC Transfer System (BCTS). A course outline is the primary source of information for evaluators assessing transfer credit requests, because it generally contains descriptions of features such as course content, learning outcomes, required textbooks or readings, and methods of assessing student performance. These can be compared with features of courses at other institutions, to determine whether there is sufficient equivalency to justify an award of transfer credit.

A course outline is the primary source of information for evaluators assessing transfer credit requests, because it generally contains descriptions of features such as course content, learning outcomes, required textbooks or readings, and methods of assessing student performance.

These can be compared with features of courses at other institutions, to determine whether there is sufficient equivalency to justify an award of transfer credit.

However, each of the 39 BCTS member institutions has its own mandate and programming. This means that the content and structure of course outlines are not consistent across institutions. At many institutions there are two kinds of course outlines: the outline that is approved through internal processes when a new course is created or when an existing course is revised, and the outline that is distributed to students enrolled in each section of the course. Additionally, not all BCTS member institutions have policies or other resources (e.g. templates) to encourage internal consistency of course outline contents and formats.

This report was commissioned by the Admissions Committee of the BC Council on Admissions & Transfer (BCCAT). The purpose of this report is to examine and compare course outlines at BC Transfer System member institutions, and to provide recommendations for course outline content and format to facilitate requests for transfer credit.

The guiding criterion for awarding transfer credit in the BCTS is equivalency, and an assessment of equivalency is inherently subjective. Definitions of "equivalency" can also vary across disciplines and institutions. Generally, for transfer credit to be established, a course or program at the sending institution should be similar enough to a course or program at the receiving institution that students taking either course or program will acquire approximately the same knowledge.

Each receiving institution assesses equivalency in relation to its own courses or programs, curricula, and academic standards. Thus, it is not possible to correlate specific elements of a course outline with an increased or decreased probability of transfer credit being awarded for the course. The suggestions in this report are intended to provide a broader perspective on the content and format of course outlines across the BCTS, which institutional staff can then use to assess their own institution's practices.

The first two sections of the report clarify the definitions used in the discussion, and review the published research on course outline content and format. These sections are followed by a description of the project methodology, and then by the data analysis and its results. The report concludes with suggestions for policy and practice.

DEFINITIONS

Research on course outlines uses several different terms to describe the institutional documents that contain course information. BC Transfer System member institutions also do not use consistent terminology. This report uses these definitions:

Course outline: the document describing the course that is used in the institution's internal approval processes. The formal institutional approval of this document may create a new course, revise an existing course, or discontinue a course. This document is also known as the ***official course outline***, the ***course form***, the ***curriculum guideline***, the ***course outline of record***, or the ***authorized course description***.

Syllabus: the document distributed in class to students, containing information about that particular version of the course. In addition to some or all of the information in the course outline, the course syllabus generally includes such information as the email address and office number of the instructor teaching that section of the course; the content that will be covered during each class meeting; and dates for specific course activities. This document is also known as the ***instructor course outline***, the ***course outline***, or the ***course syllabus***.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Very little published research explicitly links course outline content or structure to transfer credit procedures or decisions. However, the general literature on course outlines provides insights that are useful for understanding the context of this project.

The literature indicates that course outlines and syllabi are created for and serve several different purposes. Parker and Harris (2002) identify three main purposes of syllabi:

- They serve as a contract between the student, the instructor, and the institution, by outlining each party's responsibilities and by communicating relevant policies and procedures.
- They provide information to students enrolled in a specific section of the course.
- They provide a permanent record of the course for future reference: for example, as a guideline for other instructors assigned to teach the same course.

Course outlines serve some of the same purposes as syllabi, but also provide information used in internal institutional processes, and are used by external agencies such as accreditors.

The purpose of course outlines and syllabi as a source of information for transfer credit evaluations is rarely mentioned in the literature. This purpose could be categorized as an evaluation by an external agency (the institution receiving the transfer credit request). Since a transfer credit evaluation assesses course or program equivalencies, it would use at least some of the course outline information provided for the purposes listed above.

The literature also indicates that there may be different versions of the course outline or syllabus for the same course, depending on when the course is offered or was taken; whether the course has been formally revised; and each instructor's preferences in delivering the course. Part of instructors' right of academic freedom is the right to determine the course content they feel is relevant to a topic, and to use their professional expertise to select the methods they feel are appropriate for teaching that content. How-

ever, specific elements may be required in course outlines and syllabi by the program or the institution, and these elements may be standardized across all courses. These elements may include, for example, the course name and number as shown in the institution's academic calendar, or information on the institution's or program's academic misconduct policy.

More recent literature compares course outlines in print or PDFs with online course outlines. Online course outlines are usually posted to a learning management platform; some or all of the course activity may also take place there, or the platform may be used only to post reference information about the course (e.g. assignment instructions and due dates) with the course activities taking place in person. Online course outlines can incorporate content such as video that is not feasible to include in other formats. There may also be online information about courses on an instructor's personal website or institutional webpage.

> The literature on course outlines includes research around the purpose and use of course outlines, and research on relationships between different forms of course outlines and outcomes such as student perceptions of instructor effectiveness.

The literature on course outlines can be grouped into three broad categories. The first is research around the purpose and use of course outlines. The second is research on the relationship between different forms of course outlines, or different content in course outlines, and outcomes such as student perceptions of instructor effectiveness. This category also includes research on perceptions of the usefulness or effectiveness of specific course outline features. The third uses data from course outlines to investigate questions such as the most common topics covered in specific types of courses. The summarized findings presented below draw primarily on research in the first and second categories.

As previously mentioned, the definitions of the terms "course outline" and "syllabus" are not consistent across the published research. For the purposes of this literature review, the terminology in some of the summaries below has been amended to be consistent with the definitions of "course outline" and "syllabus" used in this report. It should also be noted that many of these studies use "course outline" and "syllabus" interchangeably. Therefore, if a study uses the term "course outline" but the document described in the study is a syllabus, the description of the study will refer to a "syllabus".

The Use of Syllabi

Thompson (2007) explored instructors' strategies in presenting the content of syllabi to students. He suggested that when creating course syllabi, instructors feel a tension between making the class welcoming and interesting, and emphasizing the course information that students need to know. He proposed that syllabi are part of "selling" the course to students, and that students may perceive syllabi as being "defensive" in that syllabi usually include negative information such as potential penalties for policy infractions. Thompson suggests that instructors should explain, either in person or on the syllabus itself, that most students will not encounter these negative situations, and also provide the rationale for the policies described. Burdina and Sasser (2018) propose that these types of explanations are also an opportunity to introduce students to language and concepts used in the course itself, such as presenting deadline extensions in the context of "opportunity cost" in an economics course.

Calhoon and Becker (2008) surveyed 112 psychology students on how they used the syllabus throughout a 15-week course. The students were given a paper copy of the syllabus in the first week, and also had ongoing access to an online version. Almost all of the respondents kept the paper syllabus for the entire course, with the majority storing it in the same binder or notebook as their class notes. About half of the respondents transferred course information such as assignment due dates and exam dates into their personal planners or calendars. Respondents tended to consult the syllabus less as the course progressed, with the majority looking for information such as dates of quizzes later in the semester. The number of times that respondents looked at a syllabus

during the term depended on the course subject. English, math and science courses were cited as the types of courses where students would consult the syllabus more often, primarily because of the relatively higher volume of readings and assignments in those courses.

Formats and Perceptions of Syllabi

A survey of 166 US business school instructors (Marcis, Keller, Deck and Carr, 2005) collected data on instructors' perceptions of the most important information on a syllabus. "Important" was defined as supporting the role of the syllabus as a contractual agreement. Respondents were asked to rate 28 pieces of information that might be included on a syllabus, from most to least important. The five pieces of information identified as most important were, in order, grading procedures and policies; instructor contact information; instructor office hours; number of assessments (e.g. examinations and quizzes); and titles/authors of textbooks and readings. The survey did not ask specifically about information that would be useful in assessing a request for transfer, but course information ranked 8th, course description ranked 9th, and course format ranked 21st out of the 28 items.

Slattery and Carlson (2005) noted that the format and content of course descriptions on syllabi may vary. A course description may be the same as the description in the academic calendar, or it may include additional information such as an explanation of how the course relates to other courses in the same subject area. The researchers suggest that other components that are important to include in syllabi are detailed schedules of readings, including the locations of reading assignments that are not in assigned textbooks; putting the information that students refer to most often on the first page of the document; and using headings to help students to navigate the syllabus content.

Harrington and Gabert-Quillen (2015) examined whether the length of a syllabus affected students' perceptions of the course and the instructor. They created syllabi of three different lengths (six, nine, and 15 pages), and distributed them to 149 community college students. The medium-length syllabi produced the most positive perceptions. Students that had accumulated more than 24 course credits were more likely to see a medium or long syllabus as indicating a caring and helpful instructor. Additionally, students participating in focus groups indicated that they preferred receiving a longer syllabus at the start of the semester, with complete information on assignments, rather than initially receiving a shorter syllabus and then being provided with more detailed information later on.

Kim and Ekachai (2020) explored whether different online syllabi formats affected students' intentions to take a course, or affected their perceptions of how engaged they would be with the course. Ninety-four students were shown an online syllabus that was either posted on an instructor's personal website or posted on a D2L learning management site. The students viewing the syllabus on the instructor's own site reported a higher likelihood of taking the course and being engaged with it, which the researchers attribute to a free-standing website being able to use elements such as interactive graphics. However, not all instructors may have the skills or the resources to create and maintain a free-standing website to host interactive course outlines and information.

More recently, as described by Richmond, Morgan and Cooper (2019), instructors have been encouraged to make their syllabi more learner-centered. "Learner-centered" was defined as emphasizing collaboration and shared power between students and instructors. The researchers examined 109 syllabi from psychology programs, representing a 19-year time span and all four years of study in an undergraduate degree program. The amount of learner-centered design and language in syllabi increased across time. Learner-centered syllabi tended to be longer, but the positive language in a learner-centered syllabus might make the larger amount of material more accessible to students. The researchers' data set included syllabi from face-to-face, online, and hybrid courses; however, the number of syllabi from hybrid and online courses was too small to make valid statistical comparisons between different course formats.

Wheeler, Palmer & Aneece (2019) investigated whether student perceptions of a course were affected differently by a content-focused syllabus or a learning-focused syllabus. One hundred and twenty-seven students were asked to review a history course syllabus in one of the two formats, and then asked to report their perceptions of the syllabus, the course, and the instructor. Respondents indicated that the schedule of activities and the assessment components were the most helpful components of both forms of syllabi. However, the respondents who reviewed the learning-focused syllabus reported more positive perceptions of the structure and tone of the document, of the course workload and activities, and of the instructors.

Fischer, McPartlan, Orona, Yu, Xu, & Warschauer (2022) explored potential relationships between the contents of syllabi and student performance in online courses. Their data were drawn from syllabi for 11 science courses at an American university, with the caveat that these courses were offered online prior to COVID-19 – in other words, during a time when instructors were able to choose whether to teach in person or online. This university did not have templates or guidelines for online syllabi. The researchers rated the syllabi on different criteria, and also compared their content; they found wide variations in learning objectives and in the alignment of required elements of the courses with those objectives. Nearly all of the syllabi gave some suggestions for success in online courses, but only half included FAQs or contact information to help students address technical problems.

Their analysis then correlated the grades of the 635 students enrolled in the 11 courses with the researchers' ratings of the syllabi. After controlling for demographic characteristics, students' grades were higher in the courses with the syllabi rated more highly on course organization, technology information, alignment of activities with learning objectives, and information on interpersonal interaction. Course organization had the strongest positive effect on student grades, and the alignment of activities with learning objectives had the strongest negative effect. However, students' prior academic performance was the strongest predictor of performance in the courses.

Comparing Syllabi

Parkes, Fix, and Harris (2003) collected 217 graduate- and undergraduate-level syllabi from 11 colleges and schools within a single university, and examined the syllabi content and format. Among their findings was that even though the university gave instructors the flexibility to set their own student attendance policy, more than half of the syllabi did not include any guidelines for class attendance; also, more than two-thirds of the syllabi did not have any information on how late assignments would be handled by the instructor. On average each course had three components of student assessment, and the weighting of each assessment component was clearly stated in the syllabus. The authors conclude that "the syllabus should discuss explicitly the rights and responsibilities of students and instructors...[t]he failure to do so we observed could lead to situations both students and instructors would like to avoid" (p. 76). They also emphasized that consistent and specific communication enhances student learning, as well as reducing student anxiety and perceptions of unfairness.

McDonald, Siddall, Mandell, and Hughes (2002) analyzed 361 syllabi from Canadian universities, representing graduate and undergraduate courses from multiple institutions and disciplines. The most common items in the syllabi were lists of assessments and their weightings; lists of course readings; "basic course and contact information"; outlines of course topics; and brief descriptions of tests and assignments. Less than half of the syllabi included information on university policies such as plagiarism and accommodation; the instructional approach to the courses; or course-specific policies such as attendance, late assignments, and course conduct. Less than 10% of the syllabi included suggestions for student success strategies and information on academic support services.

The researchers also surveyed students on the items they considered most important on a syllabus. The students' top-ranked item was information on course assessments and grading guidelines, followed by listings of evaluation weightings and due dates for

evaluation components. These rankings differ somewhat from the instructor rankings in the Marcis et al (2005) study. However, students indicated that detailed information on grading and assessment was often provided verbally by instructors during class sessions. Students also appreciated syllabi that were clearly worded, consistently formatted, and organized into specific groups or sections that were easy to locate.

Habanek (2005) assessed 25 syllabi, from multiple disciplines at a single university, for content and for tone. Only 20 percent of the syllabi contained "a detailed schedule of meeting dates and assignments" (p. 63); however, almost all contained at least some information on studying and preparing for class, sources of assistance, and the importance of due dates. Habanek suggested that students may be confused if a syllabus includes suggestions for success without a clear connection between these and the structure or outcomes of the course.

Gentry, Lawrence, and Richards (2016) conducted one of the few studies that compared syllabi to the process of transferring credit. They collected syllabi and calendar information on political science programs at two-year colleges, to assess the transferability of those programs into four-year degree programs in the same discipline. They found that the curricula of two-year programs usually included foundational courses that could be used to fill general education requirements in most four-year programs. While most courses in the two-year programs were generally transferable, the curricula of these programs often did not include courses such as methodology that were commonly found in the first two years of four-year programs. Students transferring from two-year programs to four-year programs might have to take additional lower-level courses if these courses were either not available or not transferable from their two-year institution. Thus, this study looked more at the transferability of entire programs, rather than at characteristics of individual course syllabi that might affect transferability.

COURSE OUTLINES AND SYLLABI IN THE BC TRANSFER SYSTEM

In the BC Transfer System, transfer credit requests are submitted by institutions through the Transfer Credit System (TCS), the online platform that supports the BC Transfer Guide (BCTG). Each request requires the sending institution to complete a standardized form, and attach a course outline. The form requires the course prefix or code (the three- or four-letter sequence that identifies the course's subject area); the course number; the course title as listed in the academic calendar; the name of the sending institution; the date when the course was or is first offered; and the credit value of the course (BCCAT, 2023). In the past, attaching a course outline was optional, but an outline is now required for the request to be distributed. There is also a "comments" section on the form, which sending institutions are encouraged to use to provide additional information that may assist receiving institutions in evaluating the course's transferability.

Students may also submit requests for transfer credit, through the Registrar's Office at the institution where they are currently enrolled. Most institutions require students to complete a standardized form to submit a request, and to provide a course outline. The institution then distributes the request to other institutions using the TCS. At the institutions that receive the request, the request is evaluated either by staff in the Registrar's Office, by faculty members, or by subject matter experts. Transfer credit resulting from student requests may be recorded internally at the receiving institution, if it is not considered precedent-setting, or may be posted to the BC Transfer Guide if it meets the BCTG's criteria for inclusion.

There is no consistent practice across BC Transfer System member institutions as to whether course outlines, syllabi, or both are required as documentation for a transfer credit request. If the request is submitted by a sending institution, a course outline is

usually provided. If the request is submitted by a student, the student may be required to provide both the course outline and the syllabus that was distributed in class when they took the course. The syllabus is usually more helpful in assessing equivalencies because it describes the specific offering of the course that the student completed, which may differ from the generalized version of the course described in the course outline. However, receiving institutions can ask the sending institution to provide additional information if the documentation accompanying the request is not sufficient for an informed evaluation of the course's transferability.

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In 2008, BCCAT created a "provincial transfer-friendly course outline" template (https://www.bccat.ca/pubs/TCSCourseOutlineForm.pdf). The template was developed during a time when several BC colleges were given the status of "special purpose teaching universities" (also referred to as "teaching-intensive universities") and were permitted to grant their own undergraduate degrees. It was anticipated that increasing the number of degree-granting institutions in BC would also increase transfer activity. Around the same time, the BCTG was expanded to include listings of some types of transfer agreements with private institutions outside the BCTS. There were also increases in the amount of transfer activity between BCTS member institutions and out-of-province institutions.

The "provincial transfer-friendly course outline" template was intended to help institutions less familiar with the BCTS to create course outlines with the information used to evaluate a transfer credit request, particularly at degree-granting institutions. While the template has not been revised since 2008, it is available on the BCCAT website as a resource for individuals and institutions.

BCCAT's *How To Articulate* handbook (BCCAT, 2023) suggests information for sending institutions to include on course outlines when making transfer credit requests. Some or all of this information is also required on the TCS form that is submitted with the request; it is entered separately on the TCS form for the convenience of the receiving institution(s) and to enable BCCAT to track data on transfer credit requests.

METHODOLOGY

Two sets of data were collected for this project. The first set of data was from publicly posted policies and resources on the websites of the 39 institutional members of the BC Transfer System. Since the definitions of "course outline" are not consistent across institutions, this phase of the data collection process involved identification and collection of policies and procedures addressing the content of both course outlines and syllabi. Programs or departments within institutions may also have their own policies on the content of syllabi, but the data collection focused on policies at the institutional level. The list of policies and procedures that were reviewed is presented in Appendix A.

Twenty-three of the 39 BCTS member institutions have publicly posted policies relating directly to course outlines and/or syllabi, or other policies containing information on course outline and/or syllabi content. Sixteen of those 23 institutions do not distinguish between course outlines and syllabi in their policies.

The data collection involving policies and other resources was expected to be relatively straightforward, but in reality it was not. Generally, information on course outline content was included in institutions' course development policies or procedures, or in a stand-alone course outline policy. However, not every institution has an easily identifiable course outline policy, and some institutions have different policies for the content of official course outline and for the content of syllabi. Additionally, at some institutions, course outline or syllabi content was addressed in policies not immediately identifiable as relevant to that topic, such as those outlining faculty members' responsibilities as instructors.

Because of these complications, the scope of the data collection was expanded to include course outline templates as well as policies. However, some institutions do not have an official course outline template; some do not have the template publicly posted on their website; and others have posted a link to a template, which directs users to a password-protected internal site. To avoid potential problems around releasing institutions' internally protected information, for those institutions where course outline templates were not public, we collected several examples of course outlines from each of these institutions that had been submitted with their transfer credit requests on the Transfer Credit System (TCS). It was assumed that these outlines would use an institutionally approved format.

While all BCTS member institutions are enabled to perform sending and receiving functions, some institutions focus primarily on receiving articulation requests, rather than proactively sending articulation requests. Thus, examples of course outlines were not available for all BCTS members, because not all institutions send transfer credit requests. The final data set included data for 36 BCTS member institutions.

The second source of data was comments entered on the TCS by receiving institutions that had either closed or denied a transfer credit request. When a request is closed, the decision is not posted in the BC Transfer Guide, and the course does not receive transfer credit. When a request is denied, an entry is posted in the BC Transfer Guide for the course, with a notation of "no credit". Before 2023, receiving institutions that closed or denied transfer credit requests had the option of providing a reason in the TCS; as of 2023, receiving institutions are required to enter a reason for these decisions. Looking at the reasons that institutions close or deny a transfer credit request may provide some insight into whether the content of a course outline affects the decision not to grant transfer credit to the course.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

There are valid reasons for institutions to not publicly post blank course outline templates, such as discouraging the creation or circulation of counterfeit course outlines. To respect the decision of some institutions not to make their templates publicly accessible, the data in this section are presented as aggregates or summaries, so that data cannot be directly linked to specific institutions.

In looking at the information provided below, it is important to remember that some data were drawn from course outlines posted in the TCS. If an institution did not have a publicly available course outline template, several course outlines from that institution were retrieved from the TCS, to see whether the format and content was consistent. If it was, then data were collected from all of the sampled course outlines. However, this method of data collection may also have captured data specific to particular types of courses or programs: in other words, data that are not included or required in all of the institution's course outlines. It is also important to remember that a syllabus may include information about a specific course section's features and policies, which would not be part of a more generalized official course outline.

The first step in the data analysis was to identify commonly occurring elements in BCTS member institution course outlines or syllabi. It rapidly became apparent that some features were common across all institutions' documents. Therefore, rather than counting the occurrences of each element, the elements that were on every institution's course outline or syllabus are presented in Table 1. If an element is included in this table, it is included on the official course outline or syllabus of all 36 BCTS member institutions in the data set. The only element that was not present in all of these course outlines and syllabi was the number of weeks of instruction, which was not included on one institution's course outline template.

Table 1: Common Elements in Course Outlines and/or Syllabi at BC Transfer System Member Institutions

Course name	Evaluation components, and weighting of each component
Course ID number or code*	Required course materials
Number of credits	Instructional hours for each part of course (e.g. lecture, laboratory, tutorial)
Prerequisites for enrollment	Number of weeks of instruction
Co-requisites for enrollment	Program or area offering the course
Whether the course is a required course (and, if so, in which programs/credentials)	Calendar description
Course learning objectives/outcomes	Program and/or institutional learning objectives/outcomes (if applicable)**

N=36

*Syllabi may also include the identifying number assigned by the Registrar's Office to that specific offering of the course.

**These are usually shown in relation to the course learning objectives, i.e. the program and/or institutional learning objectives/outcomes that relate to the each of the course's learning objectives/outcomes.

There are only minor differences between the elements listed in Table 1 and the information required on the TCS submission form for a transfer credit request. The TCS form specifies that the course name must be the same as the name listed in the institution's academic calendar. The TCS form also requires the date when the course was first offered, which would usually be included in a course outline but not always included in a syllabus.

The next step in the analysis was to identify elements of course outlines and syllabi other than the common elements shown in Table 1. These additional elements are presented in [Appendix B](). Normally, an appendix such as this would not include elements that were relatively uncommon. However, all of the elements that were identified are presented in the appendix, since the less common elements might be useful information for institutions planning or revising their own course outline or syllabi requirements.

The most frequently occurring additional elements were statements on academic integrity, which also usually included information on the institution's own academic integrity policy; whether credit for the course could be acquired through prior learning assessment (PLA); the date of the last update to the course; a land or territorial acknowledgement; how qualitative evaluation elements such as participation would be assessed; and the semester or year when the course was first offered. In relation to requests for transfer credit, some of these additional elements would be useful information for a receiving institution. For example, if the receiving institution does not accept PLA transfer credit, it is useful for it to know whether the sending institution awards PLA credit for courses. However, it seems that most of the course information most relevant to assessments of equivalency is already present in most institutions' course outlines or syllabi.

Almost all course outlines and syllabi contained information on course-related policies and on support services available to students. The frequencies for these elements are presented in Tables 2 and 3. It should be noted that if these types of information are not included on a course outline or a syllabus, they may be available to students through other sources, such as on-campus notices or online posts, the academic calendar, academic advisors, the Registrar's Office, program staff, or student services staff. Thus, omitting this information from course outlines or syllabi does not mean that students may not receive this information at all. In relation to transfer credit requests, as with other course-related information, the relevance of this type of information to a course's transferability may depend on the receiving institution's own policies or practices.

Table 2: Frequency of Policies Included on Course Outlines

Type of Policy	Number of Institutions with This Information Included in Course Outlines
Attendance and/or absences from class	6
Classroom conduct*	4
Recording lectures	3
Copyright for course materials	3
Student progress	2
Examinations (e.g. scheduling, missed exams, conduct during exams)	2
Food/drink in classrooms	2
Class cancellations	2
Campus emergency procedures	1
Electronic device usage during class	1
Sexual violence and/or harassment	1
Department and/or program specific policies	1
Non-academic conduct	1
Rewriting assignments	1
Academic freedom	1
Format for communicating with instructors	1
Athletes' absences	1

N=36. "Included" was defined as either presenting the full text of the policy, or providing a URL link to the full text of the policy on the institution's website.

*Three institutions had separate policies on classroom conduct for in-person classes and for online classes.

Table 3: Frequency of Information on Student Support Services on Course Outlines

Type of Support Service	Number of Institutions with This Information on Course Outlines
Accessibility*	6
Information technology (e.g. IT contact emails or phone numbers; directions for addressing problems with online access or connectivity)	2
Library	1
Counselling	1
Writing centre	1
Academic success centre	1
Wellness	1
On-campus food bank	1
General**	1

N=36

*Providing information on the institution's commitment to accessibility, including how it is defined, and/or providing contact information for the institutional unit that facilitates academic accommodations for students.

**A link to the institution's student services webpage, which contained information on and directions to all student support services offered by the institution.

The next step in the data analysis was to examine the reasons given in the TCS data for closing or denying transfer credit requests. These data are presented in Table 4 (reasons for closing requests) and Table 5 (reasons for denying requests). As the tables show, it is extremely rare for a transfer credit request to be closed or denied for a reason related to the course outline. Only 20 of 3,519 closed requests and 14 of 973 denied requests in the period covered by the data were related to issues involving a course outline.

The most common reason for closing or denying a request was that there was no equivalent course at the receiving institution, which was the reason for approximately half of all closures and denials. When the course outline was the reason for a closure or denial, it was usually because of a procedural issue, such as the course outline not being included with the request or the course outline being out of date.

Table 4: Reasons Related to Course Outlines for BC Transfer System Articulation Requests Being Closed

Reason	Frequency
Course outline that was provided was not up to date	11
Course outline was not included with request	3
Course outline that was provided was the same one submitted when course was previously evaluated	2
Institution will not evaluate courses more than 10 years old; date of the course outline is past that limit	1
Title of course on the course outline is not the same as title of course on TCS request form	1
Institution will only evaluate official course outlines; the course outline submitted with request was not an official course outline	1
Course outline was from a different semester than when the student took the course	1
TOTAL	**20**

N=3519. Data from requests posted in the Transfer Credit System (TCS) between August 31, 2022, and August 2, 2023.

Table 5: Reasons Related to Course Outlines for BC Transfer System Articulation Requests Being Denied

Reason	Frequency
Course outline was not included with request	9
Course outline does not indicate university-level course content	3
Information on course outline is not consistent with information on TCS request form	1
Course outline is for independent study course; will only consider these for transfer credit on a case-by-case basis	1
TOTAL	**14**

N=973. Data from requests posted in the Transfer Credit System (TCS) between March 14, 2023, and July 6, 2023.

In assessing these data, it is also important to remember that receiving institutions have the option of requesting additional information from sending institutions before deciding whether to grant transfer credit. If a course outline from the sending institution did not have sufficient information for the receiving institution to evaluate the request, the receiving institution may have requested more information instead of closing or denying the request. Thus, these data may not fully reflect the numbers of transfer credit requests that were affected by issues with the content or format of course outlines.

However, other data suggest that requests for additional information on transfer credit requests may be fairly rare. At any given time, the TCS has approximately 5,000 "pending" requests awaiting a decision at the receiving institution. TCS data from October 2022 to August 2023 showed 103 requests that were "pending" because they had been returned to the sending institution with a request for additional information. These general numbers suggest that a very small percentage of articulation requests generate follow-up requests for further information, regardless of the reason for those requests.

In summary, there appears to be a high level of consistency across course outline content at BC Transfer System member institutions. Additionally, the content and format of course outlines are rarely, if ever, a reason for transfer credit being denied, or for a transfer credit request to be closed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations are based on the literature review and the outcomes of the data analysis. They focus on course outlines and syllabi in the context of transfer credit.

1. **Institutions should ensure that course outlines and syllabi include the elements most likely to be assessed by other institutions receiving transfer credit requests.**

   The review of BCTS member institutions' course outlines did not identify any systemic issues of important elements being omitted from course outlines or syllabi. However, institutions should ensure that the elements most useful for transfer evaluation (as described in this report and in BCCAT's *How to Articulate* handbook) are included in both course outlines and syllabi. Institutions creating or revising guidelines for the content of course outlines and syllabi are especially encouraged to consult these sources.

2. **Institutions should consider separate and distinct policies addressing the content and format of course outlines and of syllabi.**

   A syllabus may be the most relevant documentation for a student-initiated transfer credit request. However, a course outline may be more relevant documentation for a request initiated by the sending institution. Separate policies and procedures for these two types of documents may result in documentation that supports transfer credit requests more effectively.

   Policies specifically discussing course outlines and syllabi may also improve the consistency of these documents across the entire institution. Institutional policies specifically addressing course outline and syllabi format and content, and clearly identified as such, will help course outline authors understand what the institution expects or requires to be included in these documents. Discipline- or program-specific information is also an important component of course outlines or syllabi for courses in specific areas, but a set of institutional guidelines will establish standards for content and format in these documents across the entire institution.

3. **Institutions that do not have official templates for course outlines or syllabi should consider creating these.**

   Templates may give more direct guidance to course outline authors than written directions for content and formatting. However, templates should be designed to allow authors to incorporate additional information specific to individual programs or courses.

4. **Institutions receiving transfer credit requests should consider whether course outlines or syllabi are acceptable documentation for these requests.**

   Since course outlines and syllabi both contain course information, it will be helpful to the sending institutions to know which type of document is most useful to the receiving institution in evaluating transfer credit requests. If one type of document is preferred for specific types of requests (e.g. the syllabus for the specific class taken by a student, if the request is initiated by the student), that information should be incorporated by the receiving institution into its guidelines for sending institutions.

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APPENDIX A: BC Transfer System Member Institution Policies, Procedures, and Resources Related to Course Outlines

NOTE: This information was collected in fall 2023. Readers are strongly encouraged to visit institutional websites for the most current information on each institution's relevant policies and practices.

Acsenda School of Management

https://acsenda.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/5005-Program-Curriculum-Development-Changes-1.pdf

Athabasca University

https://www.athabascau.ca/university-secretariat/_documents/policy/undergraduate-course-outlines-policy.pdf

BC Institute of Technology

https://www.bcit.ca/files/pdf/policies/5403.pdf

https://www.bcit.ca/files/apqa/pdf/resource_for_course_outline_syllabus_development_and_change.pdf

Capilano University

https://www.capilanou.ca/media/capilanouca/about-capu/governance/policies-amp-procedures/senate-policies-amp-procedures/S2009-06-Course-Outlines-of-Record-and-Course-Syllabi.pdf

Coast Mountain College

https://coastmountaincollege.ca/docs/default-source/policies/education-policies-and-procedures/education-council/edu-008p-program-and-course-development-procedure.pdf

College of New Caledonia

https://cnc.bc.ca/docs/default-source/student-services/ctl/course-outline-and-course-syllabus_2021.pdf?sfvrsn=c5f84285_0

https://tools.cnc.bc.ca/CNCPolicies/PolicyFiles.ashx?attId=232

Columbia College

https://www.columbiacollege.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/2.3-Course-Outline-Policy.pdf

https://www.columbiacollege.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Course-Outline-Template.pdf

Coquitlam College

https://www.coquitlamcollege.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/2.4.9-Course-Outline.pdf

Douglas College

https://www.douglascollege.ca/sites/default/files/docs//Curriculum%20Development%20and%20Approval%20Policy.pdf

https://www.douglascollege.ca/sites/default/files/docs/educational-policies/Evaluation%20Policy.pdf

Emily Carr University of Art + Design

https://www.ecuad.ca/assets/hero-images/4.4.2-Course-Outline-Form-Update-December-2018.pdf

Justice Institute of BC

https://www.jibc.ca/procedure/course-development-change-suspension-and-termination

https://www.jibc.ca/policy/course-development-change-suspension-and-termination

Kwantlen Polytechnic University

https://www.kpu.ca/sites/default/files/downloads/comanual11185.pdf

Langara College

https://langara.ca/about-langara/policies/pdf/POLICY%20F1003_CourseOutlines.2015-03-24.APPROVED.pdf

LaSalle College

https://www.lasallecollegevancouver.com/~/media/Files/Vancouver/Institutional_Policy_on_Evaluating_Learning_LCV_Diploma.
ashx?la=en

North Island College

https://www.nic.bc.ca/pdf/policy-3-35-course-outline.pdf

Nicola Valley Institute of Technology

https://www.nvit.ca/institutionalpolicies/boardgovernance/educationcouncil/a37courseoutlineandcoursesyllabus.htm

Royal Roads University

https://www.royalroads.ca/about/centre-teaching-educational-technologies/design-develop-course/service-levels/course

Selkirk College

https://policies.selkirk.ca/media/policiesselkirkca/college/COS-Form-CURRENT-effective-Oct-17-2017.docx

Simon Fraser University

https://www.sfu.ca/senate/senate-committees/scus/ugrad-curriculum/courses.html

Thompson Rivers University

https://www.tru.ca/__shared/assets/ed08-35663.pdf

University of BC (Vancouver)

https://senate.ubc.ca/files/2021/08/Policy-20190207-V-130-Syllabus.pdf

University Canada West

https://www.ucanwest.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/UCW-5012-Course-Syllabus-Policy.pdf

University of the Fraser Valley

https://www.ufv.ca/senate/standing-committees/uec/uec-resources/course-development/

University of Northern BC

https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/unbcfacultyorientation/chapter/syllabus-template/

University of Victoria

https://www.uvic.ca/learningandteaching/assets/docs/syllabus-guidelines-2021.pdf

Vancouver Community College

https://ctlr.vcc.ca/media/vcc-library/content-assets/ctlr-documents/curriculum/Course-syllabus-checklist.docx

Vancouver Island University

https://gov.viu.ca/sites/default/files/curriculum-committee-course-outline-template-2022_0.docx

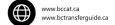# APPENDIX B: Frequency of Specific Types of Information on Course Outlines

Information	Number of Institutions with This Information in Course Outlines
Academic integrity statement and/or information on institution's academic integrity policy [full texts or links]	11
Whether course credit can be acquired through PLA (prior learning assessment)	7
Semester and/or year when course was last updated	6
Land or territorial acknowledgement	6
Semester and/or year when course was first offered	5
Method of assessing qualitative evaluation components [e.g. participation]	5
Grade required to pass course and/or additional requirements for passing [e.g. achieving a minimum grade on exam(s)]	4
Data privacy statement in relation to course components hosted on servers outside Canada	3
Technology and/or Internet access requirements	3
Procedure that will be followed if course structure, content, or schedule changes during the semester	3
Name of course author	2
Required citation style for written assignments	2
Relevant program or institutional grading scale	2
Course level or year [e.g. 1st year, 200-level]	2
Required materials (other than textbooks and/or readings)	2
Special activities [e.g. field trips]	2
Courses that are cross-listed with this course	2
Course delivery mode [e.g. in-person, online]	1
Instructor biography	1
How often the course meets per week, and the length of each meeting	1
Data privacy statement in relation to use of Turnitin [plagiarism checking platform] during the course	1
Precluded courses	1
Alternate forms of course to accommodate accessibility needs	1
Recommended materials [other than textbooks and/or readings]	1
Whether course fulfills program or institutional core curriculum requirement	1
Instructor qualifications	1
When and how alternative grades [e.g. I=incomplete] will be given	1
Information	Number of Institutions with This Information in Course Outlines

Former course name and/or code	1
If course is eligible for PLA, methods that will be used to assess knowledge of course content	1
Name of department head	1
Course methods/teaching strategies	1
Program-specific regulations	1
Definition of non-academic sources for the purpose of identifying appropriate sources for written assignments	1
Estimate of costs for required materials and/or special activities	1
Whether labs are scheduled separately from lectures	1
Required number of online logins and/or amount of online participation	1
Program-specific or department-specific resources for student support	1
Specific requirements for online-only course outlines [e.g. alt-text captions on images]	1

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