Interface Task Force Best Practice Recommendations

Executive Summary
This report provides recommendations of best practices to be used for the upcoming Canvas implementation. These recommendations are based on the results of a large survey of students that examined the impacts of inconsistent user interfaces on student learning experiences, and an audit of courses by multiple eLearning units.

The Charge
The Interface Task force is a cross-unit team comprising members from central support units such as ITS and World Campus as well as design shops from the campuses and colleges. Charged through the Penn State Online Coordinating Council as well as the e-Education Council, this group used the results of the Online Interface Study to make recommendations for best practices in the following areas:
- Placement of assignment due dates,
- Location of the course syllabus,
- Instructions for activities and assignments, and
- Course Orientation.

Recommendations
The interface task force has met regularly to review data, explore the Canvas LMS, and identify recommendations and best practices. At this time, the Interface Task force makes the following recommendations in areas of course content organization (including recommended home page), navigation, assignment instructions, due dates, syllabus, and naming conventions for items in Canvas.

Course Content Organization
We recommend using the “Modules” feature of Canvas to organize all course content such as discussions, pages, assignments, and quizzes. In addition, while many faculty members like to use “buckets” to organize their course (e.g., putting folders for Discussions, Assignments, Quizzes, and the like together), a better student experience is to organize these items chronologically. That way, everything a student needs during a particular time period (week, Lesson, Unit) can be found in one place.
Because all material can be organized under the Modules section of the course, and because students can easily become overwhelmed with the abundance of links available in Canvas, we recommend that the following menu items be hidden:

- Assignments
- Quizzes
- Pages
- Conferences

For Discussions, we recommend leaving it unhidden if you need students to begin a new discussion, or if you want the students to use the “Manually mark discussions as read” in their settings.

In addition, we recommend that Attendance, Outcomes, Chat, Files, and Conferences also be hidden unless they are being used in the course. This leads to a cleaner interface with less confusion for the students.

Assignment Instructions and Due Dates
Students in the survey indicated that the location of assignment instructions and due dates varied widely across courses. Because Canvas has a “change it one place, it changes everywhere” structure (calendar, assignment page, syllabus), the Interface Task Force recommends that all faculty members utilize these features of Canvas and place assignment instructions and due dates in Canvas. Where longer instructions may need to reside outside the Learning Management System (LMS), we recommend including a brief description of any assignments as well as providing a link back to more detailed instructions (if needed) in Canvas.

Syllabus
Students in the survey noted that syllabi varied widely across courses, both in naming conventions and location. Some faculty use the term “syllabus” while others use “schedule” or “to do list,” and the contents of such vary widely across the institution. The Interface task force recommends that the standard term “syllabus” be used in all courses. The Canvas “Syllabus” tab automatically generates a syllabus.
table with a schedule of assignments listed according to assignment due dates, and using this feature is recommended for all courses.

Likewise, the location of the syllabus should be inside the LMS. In situations where students need to view the syllabus prior to enrolling in the course (as with World Campus students), we recommend that the syllabus be made public (a feature also available in Canvas).

In order to make the syllabus table with the schedule of assignments easy for the students to find, consider splitting the syllabus as shown:  
http://canvas.psu.edu/2016/01/06/split-syllabus-into-two-sections/

**Orientation**  
The Interface Task Force recommends that an Orientation be included in the modules section of all courses that explains what features will be used in the LMS for that course. In addition, the orientation should be customized to include an introduction to any specialized software, equipment, or materials used in a particular course or program.

**Recommended “Home” Page**  
The Interface Task Force recommends that one of the following be set as the course home page:
   - Page (consider adding an introductory video)
   - Recent Activity
   - Modules
   - Syllabus

**Naming Conventions**  
Finally, we recommend consistent naming conventions throughout each course. If an assignment is called “lab work,” it should be called “lab work” everywhere it is referenced. In addition, we recommend attempting to use Canvas’ terminology wherever possible (for example, using “quiz” instead of “assessment,” and “group” rather than “team”), and providing definitions for non-standard terminology.