Tips for Creating a More Inclusive Syllabus

Ginger R. Fisher, PhD, and Susan M. Keenan, PhD ▪ February 3, 2020

According to the National Center for Education Statistics' (2019) most recent data, 24 percent of college students are first in their families to attend college (p. 127). First-generation students bring a richness and depth to the student body, but navigating campus as a first-generation student can be arduous. Without the benefit of intergenerational guidance, campus culture can be complicated with barriers that negatively affect persistence and graduation.

The vast majority of campus faculty were not themselves first-generation students and do not respond as helpfully as they might to first-generation students' struggles. The Inclusive Excellence Teacher-Scholar (IE-TS) program was created to help faculty understand inequity on our campus, positively shape the experiences of marginalized students, and become agents of change.

When faculty think about equity and inclusive environments, most focus on the classroom and personal interactions with students. And yes, the culture that we create in the classroom is important, but there are other ways that students gain impressions of us as educators.

We invite your reconsideration of the course syllabus and its role in supporting first-generation students. It is often the first point of contact that students have with us, our courses, and the content we hope they will learn. In this article, we share Ginger Fisher's (GF) experience of developing an inclusive syllabus and provide concrete recommendations that have grown out of our professional development (Center for Urban Education, 2018; Dowd & Bensimon, 2015) and become part of our IE-TS program. Our goal is straightforward: to show how the syllabus can become a tool that supports equity and inclusion and at the same still provides all the course details that students need to know.

Viewing your current syllabus

When I (GF) started on the process of making my syllabus more inclusive, I had to take a step back and look at my current syllabus. I felt fairly good about the document. It laid out the course objectives, polices, assignments, grade breakdown, and schedule of topics. I felt like it had all the pieces that I needed, and it had been working well for quite a few years. But when I thought about how it might look to a first-generation student, I realized that there were some problems. The syllabus listed a number of rules and policies along with clearly stated consequences for not following them. It read more like a legal contract than a welcoming invitation to a learning experience. Changes were in order.

Starting with jargon

As in any culture, colleges and universities have their own language, rules, unwritten codes of conduct, and historical practices. The ability to rely on the knowledge of family members who have already navigated these experiences is akin to entering college with a guide and less like traveling solo to a new country where the language and customs are different and unfamiliar. In academia we use language and acronyms that are easy if you know them; we shorten Thursdays to R, we list our office hours and think that students know these hours are set aside for them, and we assume that students understand why they're getting a syllabus and how they should use it. Then there are the phrases regularly used on syllabi— "comprehensive exam," "learning objectives," "weighted grade." What those terms mean isn't obvious when you encounter them for the first time. It was clear that I could be more inclusive if I clarified how the course works and what all these terms mean. To do that, I added an overview of what we would be doing each class period and gave a more explicit list of required materials. I also used graphics, color, and formatting to highlight important information. I changed my list of weighted grades to a pie chart so that students could visually see how their work would be assessed. My revised syllabus also showed students the formative, low-stakes assessments in comparison to the summative, higher-stakes assessments.

We also often incorrectly assume that students know to call us "Dr." and not "Mr.," "Mrs.," or "Ms.," so another small but powerful change I made to my syllabus was to let students know my preferred title and pronouns. I also made it clear that I would use their preferred names and pronouns, explaining that I saw this as a way of validating each student's identity. I was surprised at the number of students who commented that this simple addition to the syllabus made them feel welcome and appreciated.

Creating a partnership and validating struggle

I have always viewed my course as a partnership. The students and I work together to reach a set of common goals (the course objectives). But I never made that clear in the syllabus. I started doing so by simply welcoming students to the course. I teach an introductory course taken primarily by first-semester students, and I wanted to acknowledge their achievement of getting into college and pledge my support for their continued success. I do that now at the beginning of my syllabus with a paragraph that congratulates them and shares my excitement at having them in a course that journeys through a topic I love. I close out that introduction with a statement validating their goals and stating my intention to be a resource for students as they make their way through the course. I highlight the partnership by using "we" and "us" rather than "you" or "students." This language makes it clear that we're in an environment that places the students and professor on the same team.

It is critically important to acknowledge that all students struggle at various points in their academic careers and this struggle is a normal part the college experience. Normalizing struggle is especially important for first-generation students, who tend to equate difficulty with a sense of not belonging or an inability to achieve academic goals. To convey this on the syllabus, I devote an entire page to student support. It includes suggestions on how to succeed in the course—what to do before, during, and after a class session—as well as information on getting help. The earlier version of my syllabus simply listed campus resources. Now there's a discussion of each, including what services they provide and how those can be beneficial. I also make sure to point out when a resource is free, something I've stopped assuming every student knows. For some time now, I've used low-stakes homework assignments that allow students to make mistakes. I also drop the lowest exam score. This approach gives students the chance to grow and does not penalize those who might not understand the rigors of college coursework or who have arrived on campus without strong study skills. It also shows that I expect students to hit obstacles during the course.

Welcoming tone and an increased understanding of relevance

Many institutions now require us to list the courses objectives in our syllabus. Historically, I made a list, leaving students to figure out their relevance. Now I list them as course goals and add a description of why each is important and involves skills relevant to future career plans. I hope that makes their value clearer to students.

Often professors <u>underscore</u> words or use **bold** or *italics* to highlight important information on the syllabus. Have you ever considered how students receive that added emphasis? It's often viewed negatively and conveys the idea that students can't figure out for themselves what's important.

It's a good idea to read your syllabus while asking yourself whether it's conveying the positive first impression you intend. I know that mine did not! So I worked to limit "shouting" in the syllabus and to explain policies clearly, collegially, and in a welcoming tone. It's worth noting here that being open and transparent about course policies is especially important for first-generation students. For example, if your syllabus states that no late work will be accepted but in practice you do accept it when there's a valid reason, consider changing the wording on your syllabus. Students used to college culture usually don't hesitate to ask for the extensions, but many first-generation students will not, assuming that the policy in the syllabus stands.

A final word on policies: required institutional policy information—such as (dis)ability or plagiarism statements—cannot always be changed. They cannot be rewritten in language that is welcoming and validating. In these cases, consider providing a preamble that describes the rationale and importance of these institutional policies.

First-generation students often feel immense pressure to do well academically for parents, siblings, and other loved ones who are supporting them personally and financially. The syllabus can be a resource that inclusively supports first-generation students as they pursue their academic goals. I was surprised by how these small changes to my syllabus made a big difference in the support and welcome I now extend to all students.

To see examples of syllabi before and after our IE-TS workshops and for additional resources, visit the University of Northern Colorado's STEM Inclusive Excellence Collective website.

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Ginger R. Fisher, PhD, is an associate professor of biology and director of the master's in biomedical science program at the University of Northern Colorado.

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Susan M. Keenan, PhD, is a professor of biology and director of the STEM Inclusive Excellence Collective at the University of Northern Colorado. She would like to acknowledge funding from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute Inclusive Excellence grant program and support for this work from the Center for Urban Education at the University of Southern California, with special thanks to Dr. Lindsey Malcom-Piqueux.