

## Workbook: An Equity-Minded Syllabus

### Workshop Prompts and Reflections

This workshop is designed to provide information and prompt reflection. It is not designed to force you to make change to your policies or structure your syllabus in a specific way. We hope what you learn will encourage you to view your syllabus through an equity-minded lens! We also want to add the caution that its tough to make a multitude of changes at once—it can feel over whelming, which can lead in action. Create a list of priorities using this workbook and tackle them one at a time. Every change you make will benefit the students!

Throughout the workshop, we are going to explore the following equity-minded approaches to the syllabus:

- **Academic Success** which includes identifying and explaining jargon, and how the structure of the syllabus can be used to demystify the college process and support student success.
- **Academic Care** which includes verbal immediacy, supporting and normalizing student struggle and clarifying policies through an inclusive lens
- **Connection**, which we use to describe the relevance of the curriculum to students' lives, experiences, and careers and the process of deconstructing the White, male norm which is pervasive in higher education.

Let the learning and journey begin!

### Why Review the Syllabus?

Its all about perspective! We are going to spend some time considering the syllabus from the student's perspective. One of the elements of being equity minded is considering how norms in higher education create unintended barriers. The syllabus is a staple in all of our classrooms, so its an opportunity to reconsider it through an equity lens.

What three words come to mind when you hear the word Syllabus? Jot them down here.

Think back to when you first created your syllabus. When did you create it? If you did not create it, where did it originate? When did you first start using it?

## Who Does the Syllabus Serve?

And now to one of the most important questions! Who does the syllabus serve? Who was it written for?

## Initial Impressions

Find an existing syllabus for a course you will be teaching next semester.

As you read through the syllabus, consider and respond to the following prompts. If you do not have an existing syllabus for the specific course perhaps you can ask colleagues who has taught the course in the past for a copy of their syllabus. Also use a syllabus of your own for a different course. The goal is for the participants to explore how the student might view them as an instructor as well as the structure, content and policies.

- Imagine you are a student reading your syllabus on the first day of class. Do you feel that the instructor is willing to provide opportunities and resources for you to gain the knowledge and skills that you need to succeed in this and subsequent courses? Why or why not?

- Imagine that you are a student reading your syllabus on the first day of class. Do you feel that the instructor assumes you want to learn and cares about your development as a student, a scholar and a human being? Why or why not?
  
- Imagine you are a student from a minoritized population, for example, a student of color, a queer student, or in some disciplines a woman, reading your syllabus on the first day of class. Do you feel represented in the syllabus? Do you feel that the instructor supports you and is invested in your success? Why or why not?

Choose one or more of the equity focused syllabi provided on the canvas page.

As you read through examples of equity minded syllabi, consider and respond to the same prompts:

- Imagine you are a student reading your syllabus on the first day of class. Do you feel that the instructor is willing to provide opportunities and resources for you to do well in the course and gain the knowledge and skills that you need to succeed in this and subsequent courses? Why or why not?



## Academic Success

Jargon: Giving your students access to the language of an institution can improve their chances of success—this means defining and explaining jargon.

**Highlight or circle some of the academic jargon in your working syllabus** that perhaps you have grown accustomed to on campus or within your field of study. For example, in academia, we shorten Thursdays to R.

**What additional terms came up in your group discussion?** Additional examples we provide include using terms such as learning objectives, office hours, comprehensive exams, and the term syllabus without explanation.

Defining jargon and explaining the relevance of the terms is an important step in creating an inclusive syllabus. **List a few terms or ideas below that you will come back to as you work to eliminate undefined jargon from your syllabus.**

Structure: Provide students with the information they need to successfully complete the course and navigate college

Demystifying Success.

The goal is to provide the information your students need to complete the course and navigate college, and to present it in a way that is clear to a first-time college student. Essentially demystify the information so it is accessible to all. Make sure that you have included all of the basic information about the course.

Explore your syllabus for opportunities to explain the why as well as the how. We explored the idea of adding additional ways that students have access to you when you list your office (student) hours in the syllabus. **What additional examples came up in your group discussions?**

**Highlight examples in your working syllabus and list one or two opportunities for change below that you plan to work on.**

Structure your Syllabus for Success.

Is your syllabus formatted and ordered in a way that highlights what students need to know to maximize their learning and success? Here are some ways of adding structure to the syllabus. Add any additional suggestions that came up in your discussions below. **Plan which approaches you will include in your syllabus revision.**

- What order is the information in? Is the important information towards the beginning or end of the syllabus? Putting content earlier in the document stresses its importance
- Use graphics, color, and formatting to highlight important information and help students navigate
- Consider adding a table of contents to help students navigate
- How do you describe your grading policies? Can you make the information easier for the students to interpret?
- Consider providing students with an overview of what you plan to accomplish in class each day—with the topics, relevant readings, homework, etc. clearly listed.
- Could you list required materials more explicitly with how-to use or get the items? If material is optional—why might a student choose to purchase the materials, how will they be used? Are the materials on reserve at the library? If so, what does that mean?

- Finally, discuss the syllabus in class—not reading through it, but rather explain what it is and why it is important and what information is found in it. Having a short syllabus quiz implemented through your learning management system is also a great idea as a treasure hunt approach to highlight information they have access to or emphasize further explanation of course policies and expectations.

**What additional examples came up in your group discussions?**

**Highlight examples in your working syllabus and list one or two opportunities for structural change below that you plan to work on.**

**Plan how will you present the syllabus to the students the next time you teach the course?**

## Academic Care

Verbal Immediacy includes among other things tone, using personal examples, addressing others by name, and using inclusive pronouns ("we" vs. "I").

Let's explore the tone of our syllabus and consider how the tone reflects us as educators and as people

Do you reflect differently to the statements in the upper panel verses the equity-minded statements in the lower panel?

The image contains four speech bubbles arranged in a 2x2 grid. The top-left bubble has a pointed bottom and contains text about mandatory attendance. The top-right bubble has a pointed bottom and contains text about disruptive behavior. The bottom-left bubble has a pointed top and contains text about class participation. The bottom-right bubble has a pointed top and contains text about community norms.

**Attendance is Mandatory!**  
There is no such thing as an excused absence. Up to 90% of your grade will be based your participation in activities that take place in class

**Behavior:** Engaging in any behavior that negatively affects the teacher's ability to teach and the students' ability to learn, is direct a violation of the Student Code of Conduct. If you are being disruptive, you will be asked to leave the classroom.

Attendance: we will be spend much of our time in class working together on activities. Your participation in these activities weighs heavily on your grade (*its worth 90%*), so to be successful you need to come to class. I have listed other tips for success on page 3 of the syllabus

We learn better as part of a community where everyone has the opportunity to participate and engage. One the first day of class, we will work together to develop norms for participation and together we will hold each other accountable for our actions in class.

Read your syllabus while asking yourself whether it's conveying the positive first impression you intend. Often, we underscore words or use **bold**, underline, or *italics* (or a **combination**) to highlight important information on the syllabus. Did you know that is way of communicating is often viewed negatively and can be thought of as shouting.

**Having re-read your syllabus how do you imagine your students will perceive you?**



**Consider two or three ways that We encourage you to work to limit *shouting* in the syllabus and to explain policies clearly, collegially, and in a welcoming tone.**

Creating a Partnership. When students believe language from a syllabus is friendly, they view instructors as warm and approachable and believe that they are highly motivated to teach. Harsh language can be intimidating and discouraging for some students and hinder their success.

We encourage you to see your syllabus as an opportunity to create a partnership with your students. Some ideas to consider:

- Use “we” and “our” rather than “I”, “you” or “students”
- Share your pronouns with students and ask them to share their pronouns with you
  - You can list your pronouns in your CANVAS settings
- Learn and use students’ names—learn to pronounce them correctly. Pay particular attention to using students preferred names. This latter point is important for the safety of our trans and queer students.
- Tell the students a little about yourself and why you excited about this course. Consider sharing is you have a marginalized identity
- Clearly state what you expect from students as learners, and what they can expect for you as an instructor. Having and expressing high expectations for students is an essential aspect of an inclusive classroom

Also, make sure to include statements about your belief that all students are expected to succeed. Through your statements, you content and style choices you can convey this belief to students.

**What additional examples came up in your group discussions?**

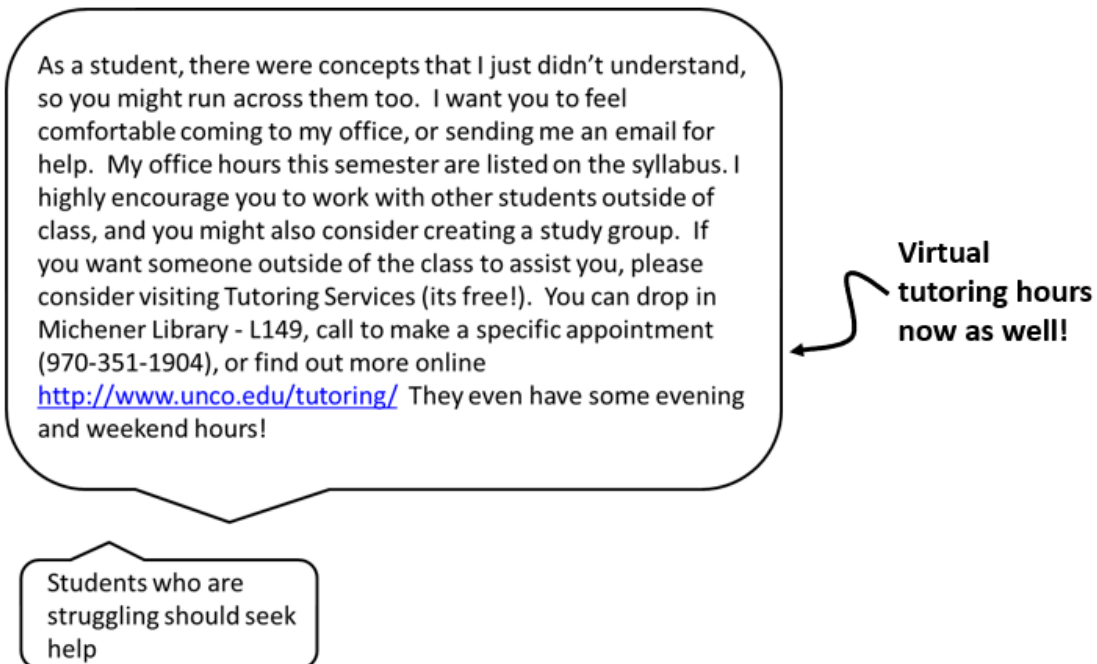
**Have you created a partnership with your students through the syllabus?**

### What changes will you make to positively impact this relationship?

#### Supporting Students

Having high expectations for all students in your course is an essential component of classroom equity. We also know many students will struggle with something in our courses or at some point in their academic career. It is important to let students know that struggle is a normal part of the college experience. Normalizing this 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. - This is ESPECIALLY important now, during the COVID crisis and the sudden move to online teaching.

For example: In a syllabus, we often use this phrase "Students who are struggling should seek help." Consider instead about providing information about resources that are available— and then go a step further. The revised version normalizes struggle, provides additional relevant information (including that the resource is free) and lets them know how to get additional information.



When students know assistance is available, their concerns and anxiety are often alleviated. You can convey this with explicit statement that invite students to resolve academic struggles with you—so reach out in the syllabus.

You can also consider offering tips on how to be successful—either by providing a list or explanations of what the student should be doing before, during and after class. These are some examples from the equity-minded syllabi available on the [go.unco.edu/STEM-IEC](http://go.unco.edu/STEM-IEC) website



## Student Support

### *What should I do to be successful in this course?*

- Expect to put **time** into this course. In higher education, it is expected that students dedicate two hours of time out of class for every one hour in class. That means six hours of time outside of class per week for Genetics! (*consider scheduling yourself*)
- Don't let yourself get behind. Each time you come to class unprepared (without having watched the video in advance), you are forgoing a valuable opportunity in class to learn the material in a deeper way.
- **Join in** with your group! While group work can be incredibly helpful, it can also go badly when one or more group members have a bad attitude. At the very minimum, if you are having a bad day (we all do, occasionally!) don't *interfere* with your groupmates' ability to work together.
- Consider starting a study group with your classmates.
- Log in to Canvas frequently, to keep track of all the assignment due dates—there are a lot of them! Use the Canvas calendar or assignment tab to keep track.
- Check your BEARS email—expect to see emails from me throughout the semester.

#### BEFORE CLASS

- Read the chapter
- Do the homework
- Note difficult concepts
- Print out the lectures

#### DURING CLASS

- Stay engaged
- Take notes
- Ask questions
- Discuss Clicker questions

#### AFTER CLASS

- Recopy notes in your own words
- Find answers to questions
- Study as if there was a weekly quiz

Finally, consider adding a what to do if I need help section to your syllabus. Here is an example to stimulate some ideas:



***What should I do if I need help?***

- Seek help early, as soon as you realize things are going badly. The longer you wait, the less likely it is that you can turn things around.
- If it is simply a matter of a time crunch, don't be shy about asking for an extension; generally I am pretty willing to give short extensions, as long as you talk to me about it *before* the deadline. Also, please let me know if you are encountering health or other difficulties that affect your classwork. Let's talk—hopefully we can work something out so that you can be successful in Genetics.
- Come to instructor office hours for students. They are listed on the first page of this syllabus. You may just show up, or you can sign up in advance by emailing me, or by signing up for a slot on my weekly schedule on my office door. I am also happy to make a different appointment time, if those times don't work for you. I like to meet each of you one-on-one, so stop by to simply introduce yourself as well! I have worked with a lot of students who struggle with genetics, so I may have some tips that help you.
- Go to the office hours of the in-class TA(s). These will be set within the first week or so of class, and will be posted on the “syllabus” page of Canvas.
- Go to the UNC tutoring center. Did you know it is **free**? The tutoring center is located in Michener L149. They offer appointments and also drop-in tutoring. Check their website for more details <http://www.unco.edu/tutoring/>.

**What additional examples came up in your group discussions?**

**Create a plan for normalizing struggle. How can you expand on existing information in your syllabus? Will you add a *What does a it take to be successful?* or a *What does it take to get through academic difficulties?* section—or, perhaps both?**

Policies.

Let's look quickly at both University wide policies and your own classroom policies.

We can add a preamble to require university policies that help explain the how and the why, and also normalize the use of the resource.

**Are there UNC policies you could explain with a preamble? Make a couple of notes on how you might approach the preamble.**

Consider the equity impact of your course policies for examples requiring a note from a doctor. (what happened if a student's child has a fever but is not sufficiently sick to require a doctor's visit with the requisite copay?) Having a "no make-up exam" policy (what happens when the bus a student takes to campus is 30 minutes late?).

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 accept it when there's a valid reason, could you modify 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.

**Are your classroom policies supporting equity? If not, make a note of what changes you plan to make.**

## Connection—Representation and Deconstruction

Relevance and deconstructing are more complicated, and both will require additional thought and attention than some of the topics we have covered so far. Both are essential to an inclusive syllabus and an inclusive classroom.

Helping the students connect with and find relevance in the topics you present is essential. There are a few ways to do this: Help your students connect the course objectives, topics, and assessments to their own lives as well as their future career and life goals

Consider:

- Including topics/assessments related to the local community of the communities of the students in your course
- Offering different forms of assessments that give students multiple ways to demonstrate their learning and strengths

**How can you connect the course material to student career and life goals and their life experiences?**

Higher education was designed by white, middle to upper class, heterosexual abled bodied cis-gendered men for white, middle to upper class, heterosexual abled bodied cis-gendered men. We want to conclude this workshop by asking you how your syllabus is continuing perpetuate this perspective?

Start by thinking about stereotypes of people in your field. This workbook was designed by scientists Studies have asked middle school students to describe or draw a scientist—in the classic experiment performed by Chambers in the 1960s, most students drew men with white hair in a lab coat. In a follow-up study by Miller of students in the 1980s, some girls drew pictures of women, but few students drew images of people of color or people from other marginalized populations.

**Spend a minute or two considering the stereotypes of people in your fields and then think about your students—who are they? Are they represented in your course? In your syllabus?**

Deconstructing the curriculum. At most predominantly white institutions (PWIs) the curriculum generally represents and privileges a white, male perspective.

Take a minute and consider the following questions:

- Whose ideas are highlighted in the syllabus and curriculum?
- Are BIPOC and women represented within in the curriculum—and not as exceptional individuals?

- Do you highlight multiple ways of knowing?
- Are the readings, activities, and assignments culturally relevant and inclusive?

Some ideas for you to consider:

- Challenge students to become critically aware of their privileges and biases. You can do this by including readings, activities, and assignments that ask students to critically examine their assumptions about race, ethnicity, gender, ableism, etc.
- Provide opportunities for students to critically examine the norms in higher education—white, male, able-bodied, Christian, etc.—and broader social discrimination by providing historical and contemporary experiences of people and communities that face discrimination, racism, and marginalization.
- Add a classroom anti-discrimination policy to your syllabus and communicate your commitment to discussing racist or discriminating comments or behavior when they arise in class or on campus
- When you discuss readings in class, create a norm that is articulated in your syllabus to explore who is doing the work? Where was the work done? And how the work was funded? Thinking about the assumptions and perspectives of the authors can shed light on racial and gender biases and possible limitations of the work or topic described.
- Avoid having exams or assignment due on religious holidays—and not just Christian holidays. Diversity Resources publishes an extensive interfaith calendar which you can use to identify dates to avoid. <https://www.diversityresources.com/interfaith-calendar-2021/>

- **What additional examples came up in your group discussions?**

- **How is your syllabus (and curriculum) continuing to perpetuate the White, male dominated norms of higher education?**

Let's dig a little deeper into antidiscrimination statement suggestion. Inclusive Excellence at Appalachian State University has collected examples of antidiscrimination or perhaps better called inclusion statements (to highlight what we want rather than what we do not!). You can find a lot of good information at their website: <https://cae.appstate.edu/inclusive-excellence/inclusive-teaching-lab/inclusive-syllabus-framework/sample-syllabi-statements>

They also pose seven questions that we can consider when creating our own syllabus statement:

- What are your discipline's conventions and assumptions? How might students with varying backgrounds respond to them?
- What role does your respect for and engagement with diversity in the classroom play in your personal teaching philosophy?
- What positive learning outcomes can come from respecting difference in the classroom? How can you highlight these?
- What do you want your students to know about your expectations regarding creating and maintaining a classroom space where differences are respected and valued?
- Is your statement inclusive of different types of diversity, including, but not limited to: race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, socioeconomic status, religion, and disability?
- Which campus resources would you like to direct your students to for further support?
- What kind of classroom environment would your students like to see? How might you include them in the conversation about standards for classroom civility?

**Consider two or three ways that you will change your syllabus to be more inclusive and deconstruct the norms**

- **Citation for Materials:**  
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