UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

College of Natural and Health Sciences
STEM Inclusive Excellence Collective

Six Steps towards a More Inclusive Syllabus

In our IE-TS workshops, we present a modified version of CUE's (1) approach to designing an equity-minded syllabus. We would encourage you to explore the CUE resources for this work (2).

Our participants often ask, where to begin if they only have an hour or so to start reconsidering their syllabus? Based on our experience, you can make significant changes to your syllabus—changes that will positively impact the students in your course—in a relatively short period of time.

Here are six concrete steps to get you started:

Step One: Identify and eliminate or explain jargon

We use a lot of jargon in academe. Here are a few examples of jargon that are often found in a syllabus and which can easily be addressed.

- Instead of listing course meeting times as T/R, explain the "R": this course meets on Tuesdays (T) and Thursdays (R). We also suggest the same approach for MWF classes and stating explicitly if attendance in a lab section is also required.
- The idea of office hours can be confusing. Is it time that faculty are in our office working? Make it clear that this time is for students to come to your office and ask questions, get advice, etc. You could also help students understand what they can expect in office hours and how to come prepared. Check out these resources for some good ideas:
  - ○ Cornell University Learning Strategies Center (3)
  - ○ The College Raptor (4)
  - ○ College Confidential (5)
- The syllabus can be confusing. What is it? Why is it important? You may even have overheard colleagues lament about students not referring to the syllabus for answers to their questions. But do we explain the relevance of the document to our students? Of course, you can do this verbally as you discuss the syllabus in class, but also consider providing a brief explanation about the importance of the syllabus in the syllabus.
- Other terms that might require additional explanation include comprehensive exam, learning objectives, weighted grade, credit hours—and we are sure you can think of others.

Take time to identify jargon in your syllabus. Highlight the terms, but don't change them yet. Before making changes, consider the importance of tone in Step 2.

Step 2: Think about tone.

By underlining, **bolding**, and *italicizing* words in our syllabus, we hope to convey something important—but this formatting approach can also be considered aggressive, unfriendly, and even condescending—and certainly not friendly.

Richard J. Harnish and K. Robert Bridges built on the work of many others when they explored the impact of the tone of a syllabus on student success (6). Their results "supported the hypothesis that a syllabus written in a friendly, rather than unfriendly, tone evoked perceptions of the instructor being more warm, more approachable, and more motivated to teach the course."

Here's an example from one of our workshop participants: "**Attendance is Mandatory!** There is no such thing as an excused absence. Up to 90% of your grade will be based on your participation in activities that take place in class."

Consider what a student's first impression might be of the professor and of the class in general after reading this statement.

The workshop participant reworded her policy as follows: "Attendance: we will spend much of our time in class working together on activities. Your participation in the activities weighs heavily on your grade (it's 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."

The revised statement is warm, collaborative, and explains the reason for the policy.

Look through your syllabus and pay special attention to the text where you have underlined, bolded, and/or italicized words. How might you reword these sections to communicate your care for students and which is more reflective of you as an instructor and your course in general? Taking a look at require policy statements is also a good idea, and while we cannot change the working, you could add a preamble. We encourage you to now go back to the jargon that you identified in Step 1 and consider tone as you reconsider jargon.

Step 3: Tell the students something about you as a person and a professor.

Consider adding a welcome statement to your syllabus. It's a great way of introducing yourself to the students and creating a partnership for success.

Here is an example from a workshop participant who was teaching an introductory freshman course: "Congratulations -you made it to college and to your first biology course! This is an amazing accomplishment and you should be proud that you are here. I am excited that I have the privilege to work with you as we start this journey together. I love biology (perhaps a bit too much) and can't wait to share with you how fascinating the study of living things really is. My goal for you is that by the end of this course you will be a successful college student and well on your way to becoming a great scientist. I am here to help so please let me know what I can do on my end to make this goal a reality."
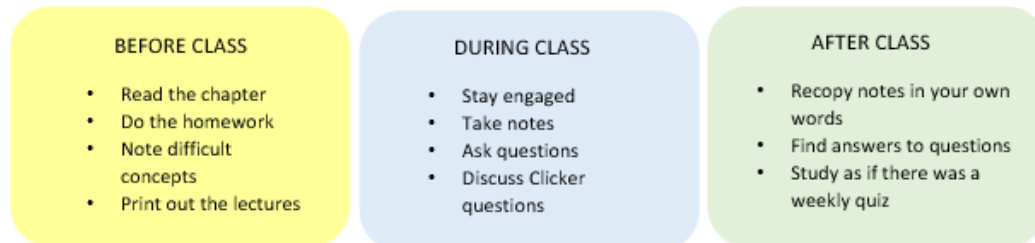
To help students, you can also:

- List your preferred pronouns. My Pronouns (7) is a good resource for additional information on preferred pronouns.
- Don't assume that students know to call you Dr. and not Mr., Mrs., or Ms. Include a short statement in your syllabus that lets students know how to address you.
- Ask students to tell you their preferred pronouns and/or names.

Step 4: Help students understand what it takes to be successful in your course

To help students succeed be explicit and transparent about what it takes to be successful. For example, provide information about what students need to do before, during, and after class, explain the time commitment associated with the course, and explain how to study effectively. Below is an example taken from a participant's reconsidered syllabus.

What should I do to be successful in this course?

❖ Recognize that this course will take a large amount of time. You will need to do readings, homework, attend class and lab, and study. It is expected that you will be spending 2-3 hours outside of class for every hour in class. College truly is a full time job.
❖ Study often and regularly. One of the biggest challenges will be how much material we cover and how quickly we do so. The solution to this is to keep up with the notes and study daily. Pretend that we have a test every Monday and study accordingly. If you wait until a few days before the exam to start studying, you will be overwhelmed by the amount of material and less likely to be successful.
❖ Be engaged. Come to class ready to learn, participate, take notes and discuss concepts. Leave that cell phone in your bag!
❖ Ask questions. Ask lots of people lots of questions. Ask those sitting near you, your lab partners, your lab instructor, tutors, supplemental instructors, ME!!!!

BEFORE CLASS	DURING CLASS	AFTER CLASS
• Read the chapter • Do the homework • Note difficult concepts • Print out the lectures	• Stay engaged • Take notes • Ask questions • Discuss Clicker questions	• Recopy notes in your own words • Find answers to questions • Study as if there was a weekly quiz

Step 5: Normalize struggle and provide information about how to get help.

Many of our students connect struggling with not belonging in our class and perhaps even not belonging on campus. Adding statements in your syllabus that normalizes struggle can be very powerful.

For example: "Please keep in mind that we will be learning a lot of new information and addressing some novel concepts throughout the semester—and at times you are likely to struggle. Know that this is absolutely normal and even expected! But please don't struggle unproductively; use your fellow learners as a resource, reach out to me for help, and use the tutoring services on campus."

Providing information about the where and when associated with each campus resource and whether the resource is free for students would be a good follow up statement.

Many of our participants have added a separate section to their syllabus to address the question "what should I do if I need help?" Consider what information you can provide for your students.

Step 6: Formatting and organization.

Finally, consider how you have organized your syllabus and how to help students identify important information. For example:

- Use color and add images to help orient a student to important information.
- Upfront items that are important to student success. For example, highlight the resources students are required to purchase
- If your syllabus is lengthy, consider adding a table of content so that students can easily find relevant sections and answers to their questions.

We hope you found these suggestions helpful as you begin to reconsider your syllabus. Creating a syllabus to support student success is a process, and we encourage you to make change incrementally and not try to create the perfect syllabus. Small changes can have a significant impact on student success!

Contact us at STEM.IEC@unco.edu with questions, thoughts or with additional resources. For additional information visit us at: www.go.unco.edu/STEM-IEC.

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