

Humanizing the Syllabus

Tips and Resources for Creating a More Equitable, Accessible, and Engaging Guide for Student Success

What does your syllabus say to your students about you and your course?

- What is the overall tone of your syllabus?
- Do negative commands overwhelm positive invitations?
- Is the premise of the syllabus that students are untrustworthy?
- Are your policies designed to punish more than support?
- Is equity a consideration in your syllabus design?

After answering these questions, would you feel welcome and supported if you took this course?

Faculty who attended the ATD Equity in Teaching and Learning Institute in May 2021 spent much time considering these questions and decided there were some opportunities for review and revision of their own syllabi.

As discussion continued, a small group continued to meet throughout the summer to create and collect resources to share what they learned about equitable syllabus design. What follows are some quick tips for you to consider as you prepare for the semester and a list of resources should you want to explore equitable syllabus design further.

We hope that this information serves as a starting point for further discussion and expect that this become a living document where additional ideas and resources can be shared.

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Tips to Make Syllabi More Inclusive

1. Develop a new mindset about the syllabus and its purpose(s):
 - a. While it needs to **inform** students about the course and its policies
 - b. It can also **invite and encourage** students in your class
 - c. It can also **introduce** students to you as a professor and a person
 - i. The syllabus begins the process of forming the teacher/student relationships in the course – ask yourself what you want that relationship to look like.
 - d. It can also set a **positive tone** for the class when you communicate that you believe your students can be successful and are willing to help them be so.
 - i. The syllabus will communicate a tone for your course – ask yourself what you want the tone to be.
2. Quick Fixes
 - a. Change Headings:
 - i. Office Hours to Student Hours
 - ii. Policies to FAQs
 - b. Change pronouns:
 - i. Third person (the student, the professor/instructor) to first (I, we) and second person (you)
 - ii. Where possible/clear, use first person plural: we, us, our.
3. Ensure the Calendar is well-framed out, thorough, clear, and consistent.
 - a. Long-term: ask for student feedback on how easily – or not – they can follow the calendar and on what adjustments would help them follow it better – students read this information differently than faculty do.
4. Provide a table of contents on the first page
5. Add graphics/minimize text (without losing accessibility)
 - a. Add inspiring, supportive quotes (in sidebars and such) throughout syllabus
6. Add information to help students connect with resources
 - a. To help them academically – tutoring, MS Office access, etc.
 - b. To help them personally – SAP contact info, Hope Food Pantry, etc.
 - c. Single Stop – new at FSCJ, more information coming soon (at Convocation)
7. Consider posting the syllabus as a pdf AND a webpage – webpages display better on mobile devices – using a webtool like Word Press (blogs.fscj.edu – log in with usual college credentials)
8. Consider recording and posting a brief welcome video message to verbalize the friendly tone of your syllabus.
9. Remove/minimize policies written specifically to prevent a one-off experience with a student in a prior semester.
10. Over time, revise language to
 - a. sound less restrictive/potentially punitive (while still being clear and consistent—don't overbalance!)
 - b. reflect your belief that your students can succeed and your willingness to (appropriately) help them succeed

Revised Phrasing Examples

Suggestions	Instead of	Source
To be successful	You are required to	ATD/ETL
Here are strategies that can help you	It is your responsibility to	ATD/ETL
I understand that things happen. Contact me if you have questions or need help.	There are no excuses. You should contact the instructor right away if	ATD/ETL
Late work is eligible for 70% of the original points.	Late work receives a 30% reduction.	ATD/ETL
You are encouraged to so that you can	Students are not allowed to	ATD/ETL
It is important to	It is mandatory	ATD/ETL
Together we will develop your skills by	You will need to do the following	ATD/ETL
Our common goal is to help you be successful	Any student who doesn't attend class for X days will be automatically dropped.	ATD/ETL
You have the right to	You are expected to	ATD/ETL
Student Hours	Office Hours	ATD/ETL
Please be respectful of the learning environment	You will not be allowed into the classroom late.	ATD/ETL
Student Hours: I welcome you to contact me outside of class and student hours. You may email me, call my office, or contact the department and leave a message.	Office Hours: If you need to contact me outside of office hours, you may email me, call my office, or contact the department and leave a message.	"The Syllabus"
You should attend every class but extenuating circumstances arise that can make this difficult. If you cannot attend a class, please let me know. If circumstances make you miss more than 3 classes during the semester, you may be overextended. I ask that you come see me to discuss your options.	I expect you to attend every class. If you cannot attend a class, please let me know. If circumstances make you miss more than 3 classes during the semester, I will drop you from the class roster in accordance with the college's attendance policy.	"The Syllabus"
All of us in the class, you, me, your peers, have a responsibility to create an environment in which we can all learn from each other. I expect everyone to participate in class so that we can all benefit from the insights and experiences that each person brings.	Come prepared to actively participate in this course. This is the best way to engage you in learning the material (and it makes the lectures more interesting).	"The Syllabus"

Sample Inspiring Quotes

(from ATD Equity in Teaching and Learning Institute)

Student Syllabus Likes

Welcome to MAT 085! I want you to succeed in this course. We all learn differently because we build knowledge differently. You are not in this alone, reach out to me or your classmates for support! You got this!

IF YOU HAVE
THE COURAGE
TO START,
YOU HAVE
THE COURAGE
TO SUCCEED.
Mel Robbins

BELIEVE IN YOURSELF and be prepared to work hard. ~Stella McCartney

*"Going to school, reading and doing our homework wasn't just a way of passing time, it was our future."
~ Malala Yousafzai, Pakistani Activist*

"I love being wrong because that means, in that instant, I learned something new that day." Neil deGrasse Tyson



I understand that technology problems can be a significant source of stress for students. I encourage you to contact me if you have difficulty accessing the necessary course materials or technology.

Basic Needs Sample Statement

We learn as whole people. To learn effectively you must have basic security: a roof over your head, a safe place to sleep, and enough food to eat. If you're having trouble with any of those things, or with transportation, childcare, or mental health, I can connect you to FSCJ's Single Stop. Together we can work to make sure those needs are met.

Resources

These resources (and many more) can be found in the [Guided Pathways LibGuide](#), developed in collaboration with the LLC.

Brandeis University. "Violent Language. Prevention, Advocacy & Resource Center."

Brantmeier, Ed, Andreas Borsheid, and Carl S. Moore. *Inclusion by Design: Survey Your Syllabus and Course Design*.

Center for Urban Education. (2017). *Syllabus Review Guide for Equity-Minded Practice*.

Fuentes, Milton A., David G. Zelaya, and Joshua W. Madsen. (2021). "Rethinking the Course Syllabus: Considerations for Promoting Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion." *The Science of Teaching and Learning Center*. 48(1).

Roberts, Maxine T. "The Syllabus: A Tool that Shapes Students' Academic Experiences." Center for Urban Education.