

Three Approaches to Revising Your Syllabus with Equity, Belonging, and Growth in Mind

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When students feel as though they are valued and connected to others in their learning community and like their instructor believes that they are capable of learning new things and growing their academic abilities, they are more likely to stay academically engaged and utilize the resources and supports provided by their institution that will ultimately help them graduate with their degree (Canning et. al., 2019, Murdock-Perriera et al., 2019). Students from structurally disadvantaged backgrounds and those who have been historically underserved in higher education are especially likely to benefit from cues from course instructors that indicate growth mindset and that counter uncertainty they might have about belonging in college (Walton and Cohen, 2007, 2011).

By ensuring that the messages, policies, and practices included in course syllabi communicate confidence in students' abilities to learn, and promote a sense of belonging, course instructors can support student achievement, foster well-being, and contribute to equity in education. This resource provides three suggestions for ways that instructors can consider revising their syllabi to promote equity, belonging, and growth in college courses.

1. **Provide a plan for learning that empowers students to respond proactively and productively to difficulty.** By acknowledging and normalizing this experience for students, communicating confidence in students' abilities to learn, sharing tips for how students can overcome these challenges, and point them to resources to support their learning, instructors can help students respond productively and proactively to academic setbacks.

What Does This Look Like?

The passage below, which can be included in a course description or objectives statement in syllabi communicates a belief that students can and will grow their abilities over time and identifies specific actions that students can take to most

effectively grow their skills and learning over the term, while also establishing that struggling with material does not indicate that a student is incapable, but instead is a sign that they need to review past material, or reach out for help.

Example: “The material we will cover in this course is challenging, both in terms of the breadth of the subject matter, and its complexity. Nearly every student will be challenged by course material at some point in this term. I have found that students who are most successful in this course are those who attend class consistently, complete all assignments, thoughtfully review feedback, develop good study strategies, and take advantage of the academic support resources made available by the university, which are listed at the end of this syllabus. Students who grow their abilities the most also make use of my and the TA’s drop-in hours, and are quick to reach out when they find themselves struggling. If you are having a hard time with course material or keeping up with the pace of the class, please do not wait until the end of the term to seek guidance. We will be in a much better position to support your learning if you seek support as soon as you are experiencing difficulty.”

- 2. Create flexible policies that acknowledge, and take into account the diversity and complexity of students' lived experiences.** Policies that provide reasonable flexibility for students while also maintaining expectations for student work and accountability (i.e., not changing the content, but allowing for reasonable flexibility for when all work can be done), communicate care and support to students, while also helping to ensure that students’ academic achievement is not undermined by challenges or obstacles outside of students’ control. Include these policies in your syllabi so that they are equally available to all students. In order to ensure that these flexible policies are not taken advantage of by only those students who are comfortable asking for flexibility, make sure to explicitly state policies in your syllabi. This will ensure that they are equally available to all students.

What Does This Look Like?

When reflecting on ways that you can better support the learning of all students, be sure to consider how you might be limited by your own perspective. Think about the student groups that make up your school's demographics, and try to see course policies through their eyes. Are there any places in your syllabi or policies that may unintentionally create barriers that hinder learning and abilities to demonstrate it for particular student groups? When deciding what type of flexibility to offer in your course policies, ask yourself what grace and flexibility have you appreciated in your own, professional life. How can you extend these same flexible options to your students?

Options to consider when creating flexible policies for the course:

- Offer grace periods for a limited number of assignments in the term, and do not require students to provide an explanation for using them in order to ensure students are not forced to divulge sensitive or personal information.
- Replace large, high-stakes assignments with smaller, more frequent assignments that allow students to track their learning more consistently throughout the course, and consider dropping the lowest score at the end of the term.
- For online courses, acknowledge and provide reasonable accommodations for difficulties due to unreliable internet connections or other technological difficulties, such as allowing for one quiz or test restart in the event of a technology glitch or outage.
- Acknowledge the financial costs associated with purchasing course texts, and choose texts that can be acquired in multiple ways (e.g., open source, through the library, in multiple formats through the publisher) or allow students to use older editions to help ease the financial burden on economically strained students.

3. **Encourage students to connect with you, and your instructional team.** While large course sizes can make it difficult to form personal relationships with each student in a course, there are steps that instructors can take to help students feel greater connection to their learning team - even if one on one engagement is not possible. Instructors can increase the likelihood that students will reach out when needed by

employing practices that help students overcome the intimidation of approaching professors.

What Does This Look Like?

One way to make the instructional team seem more accessible, and boost students' confidence in reaching out is to help students see you, and their TAs, as real people with lives that extend beyond the classroom through short bios in the syllabus about the members of the instructional team. Further encourage students to make connections by providing guidance on common conventions for addressing professors, or specific instructions about how you would like to be addressed to help them feel more prepared and empowered to reach out.

Example: "My name is Amara Cooper - you may call me Professor Cooper. I first developed a passion for Applied Engineering in college, and am looking forward to sharing that passion with you. My research focuses on [topics], and I teach X, Y and Z courses. I also run the [X] lab on campus. Feel free to reach out via email or come to my drop-in hours if our class prompts you to want to get more involved in research on [X]; this is my favorite part about teaching. When I'm not working, I enjoy hiking and biking with my partner and labradoodle, Soni. "

References:

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