Designing an Inclusive Syllabus:   
A Guide for Faculty and Instructors at NIU

Committee for Academic Equity and Inclusive Excellence  
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This guide, presented by the Committee for Academic Equity and Inclusive Excellence, aims to provide a starting point for faculty interested in revising their syllabi to reach toward more inclusive course experiences by:

1. Intentionally ensuring fairness and equity for all students.
2. Enacting compassion and respect for students as individuals.
3. Representing and amplifying the experiences, knowledges, and perspectives of marginalized individuals and populations.
4. Interrogating and resisting structural inequities students may face inside and outside the classroom.

# Background

In 1970, Brazilian educator Paulo Freire released the groundbreaking text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* Freire declares that education can be either a tool of oppression or a tool of liberation, depending on educators’ pedagogies and instructional approaches. Central to the book’s argument is the notion of the banking model of education. The banking model encapsulates traditional approaches to education in which teachers “deposit” information into students which the students are then expected to retrieve during assessments. This approach is commonly devoid of critical thinking, ignores students’ backgrounds, experiences, and interests, and promotes the ideas of dominant groups over historically marginalized groups (i.e., banking maintains status quo ideologies, practices, expectations, etc.).

Historically, colleges and universities in the United States were founded and designed to serve white, male, middle- to upper-class, heterosexual, able-bodied, Christian students. We know this to be the case due to the history of exclusionary practices and policies in higher education throughout its history and the need for some to create their own higher education institutions, like the many Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Through policy and practice, institutions of higher education need to support, affirm, and ensure the success of an increasingly diverse American population of students, and to harness the power of teaching and learning spaces as vehicles for equity and social change. Recognition of this history and persistent reality makes us question some approaches of the idea of inclusion because simply adding more representation does not necessarily help us challenge the very foundations and practices of higher education that continue to privilege some students over others. This can include delegitimizing prior knowledge, experiences, and perspectives of students depending on a range of identity-based factors, such as gender; age; race and ethnicity; regionality; sexual orientation; ability; religion; and more.

Despite the importance of diversity and inclusion as concepts, they can sustain structures, approaches, and practices that continue to encourage and reinforce hierarchies of knowledge, experience, and identity. Simply, just because one is included does not necessarily mean that person (or group) “included” has the voice or ability to recreate practices that minimize historically marginalizing practices. Diversity and inclusion alone do not necessarily lead to equality or equity. In *On Being Included*, Sara Ahmed reveals the ways in which "being included” as students, staff, and faculty in higher education does not necessarily mean being able to change the structure and values of institutions and practices. Similarly, Jennifer Nash writes, “The work of diversity, then, is not meant to transform social institutions but to insert bodies into existing structures and even to engage in ‘rebranding an organization’” (*Black Feminism Reimagined* 24). It is important to draw a distinction between diversity-oriented inclusion efforts to rebrand institutions and courses versus transformative inclusion work.

James Banks, one of the leading architects of multicultural education promotes the idea that the theory of multicultural education outpaces its actual practice. This is evident in the idea that inclusion is primarily about curricular inclusion of historically marginalized groups. However, Banks identifies five essential aspects of multicultural education. Content integration of students’ diverse cultures into curriculum is a beginning. Equally important are creating learning environments to reduce prejudice and oppression; developing equitable pedagogy for all students; examining and/or considering the knowledge construction processes; and, promoting an empowering school culture and social structure (Banks, 2008). In short, it is essential to consider all of these practices for truly effective and empowering practices.

As we move further into the twenty-first century it is **essential for educators to consider and implement practices that not only minimize the marginalization of historically marginalized groups but also to create classroom spaces that affirm the experiences and perspectives of students from all backgrounds and support each student in reaching their educational goals**. We must continuously ask ourselves:

* *What are the purposes of higher education?*
* *Is it simply to prepare students for careers? Or, rather, is it also for other important ideals, like personal enrichment, promotion of critical thinking and democracy, building community, and liberation?*

# Why Course Syllabi?

Course syllabi are tools for recording the policies and practices utilized for a given course as well as for holding instructors and students accountable. **Course syllabi** can also become **communication pathways for sharing how teaching and learning will be approached as well as learning tools for a given class community**. Drawn from the work of Dr. Estelle Bensimon and the Center for Urban Education (*Equity-minded inquiry-series: Syllabus Review*, 2020), this guide considers course syllabi as one method, among others, for facilitating more inclusive and equity-minded teaching practices. This guide invites faculty to engage in inquiry into and self-examination of their own course syllabi with the goal of identifying and resisting sites, language, practices, and policies that can oppress, limit, or impede some students’ learning based on race, class, age, gender, sexual orientation, religion and/or ability. It aims to assist faculty and instructors to explore ways to foster inclusive teaching and learning experiences and build supportive learning environments for every student.

# What Is an Inclusive Syllabus?

An inclusive syllabus **expresses a commitment to making course content and experiences accessible to all students and providing every student with a safe, respectful experience conducive to learning**. It also explicitly encourages and appreciates expressions of diverse ideas, opinions, beliefs, and perspectives as opportunities for intellectual and personal enrichment for all students. Affirming all students’ perspectives and experiences is critical in fostering an inclusive, collaborative, and excellent learning community.

Designing an inclusive syllabus involves a conscious effort to consider how the content, structure, and policies of your course contribute to and/or challenge in/equity and inclusion and exclusion based on race, class, age, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and/or ability. Designing an inclusive syllabus is an ongoing and multi-faceted process. This guide is meant to begin the process, not provide definitive answers about how to increase equity and inclusion through the development of a syllabus. Rethinking your syllabus with these goals at the forefront requires moving beyond institutional requirements for syllabi and challenging power structures among faculty and students in the classroom. An inclusive syllabus does more than offer statements of intent: it requires changes to teaching practices. The effort can be transformative to your teaching, shifting your and your students’ thinking about the knowledge production, equitable practices, and structures for teaching and learning in significant ways.

# Goals for Designing an Inclusive Syllabus

We invite faculty to consider the following goals for creating learning spaces of mutual respect and for facilitating classrooms as vehicles for equity and inclusion.

1. **Intentionally Ensure Fairness and Equity**. Intentionally develop, articulate, and apply policies and practices that create equitable learning experiences and opportunities for all students. All students have equal opportunity to participate in all aspects of the course and have access to resources needed to support their success in the course.
2. **Enact Compassion and Respect**. Through words and actions, all students should feel respected as individuals in the course. Affirm students’ unique personal and cultural experiences and knowledge. Provide every student with a safe and respectful learning experience.
3. **Represent and Amplify**. Amplify the experiences, knowledges, and perspectives of marginalized individuals and populations through course content, topics, and readings. Perspectives of students marginalized based on categories of race, gender, age, ability, religion, gender, and/or sexual orientation are heard and valued.
4. **Interrogate and Resist**. Identify, interrogate, and challenge power structures and inequalities inside and outside the course. Ask students to critically examine history and current experiences to better understand broad inequities across social institutions.

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| **Goals for Inclusive Syllabi** | **Applications/Approaches** |
| 1. **Intentionally Ensure Fairness and Equity**. Intentionally develop, articulate, and apply policies and practices that create equitable learning experiences and opportunities for all students. All students have equal opportunity to participate in all aspects of the course and have access to resources needed to support their success in the course. | Develop open communication between instructor and students about class policies and procedures. Make sure policies are clearly and directly communicated in plain language.  Include an affirmative statement about students’ ability to achieve their educational goals. For instance, you can directly state that you are committed to supporting students in their learning process.  Offer a variety of types of instructional approaches, assignments, and assessment methods to accommodate learning styles, preferences, and students’ strengths.  Create more space for discussion, dialog, and sustained collaboration among students. Elicit participation in a variety of ways to diminish the possibility of a small number of students dominating the discussion.  Consider ways to flatten grading hierarchies, such as through student self-assessments, learning reflections, contract grading models, and/or students’ assigning grades to their own work.  Encourage students to use academic supports such as the disability resource center, writing center, tutoring center. Express sensitivity to students’ entering skill levels and explain benefits of using supports.  Build into the course methods for inviting and making use of feedback on approaches and teaching practices. |
| 1. **Enact Compassion and Respect**. Through words and actions, all students should feel respected as individuals in the course. Affirm students’ unique personal and cultural experiences and knowledge. Provide every student with a safe and respectful learning experience. | Address the whole person through statements of care and links to campus resources to promote students’ mental and social well-being, such as mental health support and diversity resource centers.  Use statements of inclusion (e.g., proper names and pronouns, anti-racism, first generation welcome, language diversity, undocumented students, disability accommodations, NIU land acknowledgement).  Express dedication and willingness to hear diverse perspectives, particularly from students on the margins, through developing plans or group agreements for participation. Establish clear ground rules for respectful class discussion.  Create an anti-discrimination policy that explicitly prohibit discriminatory acts, language, or unwelcome conduct based on a person’s age, body size, color, disability, employment status, ethnicity, gender, political perspective, race, religion, sexual orientation, or any other protected status. |
| 1. **Represent and Amplify**. Amplify the experiences, knowledges, and perspectives of marginalized individuals and populations through course content, topics, and readings. Perspectives of students marginalized based on categories of race, gender, age, ability, religion, gender, and/or sexual orientation are heard and valued. | Assign readings and texts that represent diverse scholars, perspectives, and cultures. Digress from the canon to decenter some perspectives and amplify others.  Develop assignments, activities, and discussions that bring in the knowledge of students from their own experiences and backgrounds to be presented alongside the instructor’s expertise.  Include materials and assignments that expose students to the real-life experiences of diverse individuals, communities, and populations, including community-oriented projects, guest speakers, media content, and more. |
| 1. **Interrogate and Resist**. Identify, interrogate, and challenge power structures and inequalities inside and outside the course. Ask students to critically examine history and current experiences to better understand broad inequities across social institutions. | Include readings, activities, and assignments that ask students to critically examine their own assumptions, beliefs, privileges.  Include readings, activities, and assignments that ask students to critically examine the history and current experiences of people and communities that face discrimination and marginalization.  Include reading, assignments, and activities that ask students to critically examine dominant norms and broader social inequities across institutions (education, healthcare, law, etc.).  State how assignments and activities will allow students to connect class and course objectives to real-world problems, to issues facing their communities, to their career goals, and to their life goals. |