




## *Special Issue: Inclusive Learning*

# Creating Inclusive Syllabi: Recommendations From the Field

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## Abstract

Attrition is a persistent concern across online campuses. Because online programs often attract greater numbers of nontraditional, diverse students, attrition issues can especially impact learners from underrepresented groups. Modifications in language and communication, starting with the course syllabus, can create a foundation for an inclusive and supportive learning community. We describe our own process of revising the syllabus template within a counselor education program at a large, online university, via the Student Experience Project (SEP). We offer recommendations for current and future practice and concrete suggestions for higher education faculty members across disciplines.

**Keywords:** *inclusive, syllabi, DEI, social change*

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## Introduction

Student retention concerns all educators, particularly those who work in an online or distance environment (Mohamed & Zainal, 2013). Persistence rates in online courses are consistently lower than in on-campus courses, and premature drop-out can result in feelings of inadequacy, failure, and stigma for learners (Shaikh & Asif, 2022). One contributor to attrition is a lack of community and communication within the online classroom (Foster et al., 2018). In an in-person classroom, communication is fluid, continual, and adaptive to

various circumstances. However, in the online classroom, communication requires deliberate effort on the part of instructors to effectively convey support to learners; it can feel constrained due to a lack of nonverbal input (Sarsar & Harmon, 2017).

Building a sense of community through communication may be particularly lacking for students from underrepresented groups (Foster et al., 2018). These students may be drawn to online education because it may seem a more culturally neutral learning space than land-based institutions (Bawa, 2016). However, even faculty members who consider themselves supportive of diverse populations may perpetuate unconscious bias toward students; for example, instructors may exhibit a preconception toward those with ethnically identifiable names (Conoway & Bethune, 2015). Thus, instructors must take explicit measures to ensure a welcoming, growth-minded classroom through deliberate communication.

Online faculty members can build support within a diverse learning community by adopting a growth mindset. Dweck (2017) defined the growth mindset as the belief that intelligence, ability, and competence are neither fixed nor finite but can be cultivated through effort, practice, and trial and error. In contrast, the *fixed mindset* asserts that intelligence is static and fundamentally unchangeable (Dweck, 2017). By adopting a growth mindset, instructors convey the attitude that struggle is normal, asking for help is an effective learning skill, and a community of scholars can work together to achieve academic success. Thus, faculty members must intentionally use growth-mindset language in written form to build connections, convey support, and inspire a growth mindset. This effort can begin with the language presented in the syllabus.

The course syllabus is an often-overlooked tool for establishing a learning foundation in the online environment. We assert that the syllabus is the point at which a growth mindset can be introduced to the classroom to promote inclusion efforts and create a thriving learning community. To accomplish this goal, the syllabus must be intentionally written to increase a sense of faculty presence, connection, and support, and it can serve as a transformative classroom tool.

## Review of the Literature

Across all levels of academia, there has been a push in recent years toward Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in terms of curriculum and teaching pedagogy. However, the syllabus is often overlooked as a critical yet fundamental tool for addressing these issues, particularly in the online environment, which tends to attract more diverse student populations (Foster et al., 2018). Fuentes et al. (2021) explored this topic and offered a comprehensive list of eight recommendations for implementation: (a) engaging in reflexivity; (b) adopting a diversity-centered approach; (c) highlighting diversity in the course description and acknowledging intersectionality; (d) developing diversity-centered learning objectives; (e) including a diversity statement; (f) decolonizing the syllabus; (g) fostering a family-friendly syllabus; and (h) establishing ground rules for communication. Implementing these recommendations in the syllabus lays the groundwork for DEI efforts in the online classroom.

While the recommendations from Fuentes et al. (2021) apply to the development of syllabi, there have been numerous studies that assessed the effectiveness of several types of syllabi (Ludy et al., 2016; Saville et al., 2010; Yarosh, 2021; Student Experience Project [SEP], 2022). Ludy et al. (2016) compared text-focused contractual syllabi versus graphic-focused engaging syllabi. They found that students preferred an engaging syllabus, and students were more motivated and interested in the class with the engaging syllabus. Yarosh (2021) found similar results when comparing text-rich with more visual syllabi. Their results demonstrate support for the use of a more visual syllabus. Modifications from text-rich to graphic-inclusive syllabi may further support DEI efforts, particularly for students with disabilities.

Saville et al. (2010) looked at the syllabus to evaluate perceived teacher effectiveness. They hypothesized that the type of syllabus may change the way learners perceive the competence of the instructor. Saville et al. (2010) compared two types of syllabi—a detailed one and a brief version. Students in undergraduate psychology courses were given the two types of syllabi and were asked to evaluate the teachers based on the content of the syllabus. Students rated the teachers of the detailed syllabus higher in competence. Students also demonstrated a greater willingness to recommend the teacher to others and to take a future course from those teachers. Saville and colleagues contend that a detailed syllabus may show the students that the teacher is competent, cares, and wants them to do well. Going into a course with this perception may motivate students to do well in the course.

Another study (Gin et al., 2021) examined 75 biology syllabi at a research-intensive university for inclusive content. While syllabi included information about course content, information about creating a positive course climate was not always addressed. However, when the university explicitly required inclusive content, it was usually included in the syllabus. This study indicates that university culture matters, and the expectation of inclusion can lead to more detailed and engaging syllabi.

Finally, the SEP piloted an online module at 16 public research universities where 300 instructors participated. The online module entitled “Your Syllabus as a Tool to Promote Student Equity, Belonging, and Growth” demonstrated simple yet effective techniques for enhancing the syllabus. Such suggestions included, for example, incorporating a land acknowledgment statement, a statement about extensions due to COVID-19 or health barriers, and verbiage that demonstrated the instructor’s growth mindset and normalized asking for help. Students were surveyed on the revised syllabi and reported that the syllabus was clearer and more supportive of student success (SEP, 2021a).

These studies, including the SEP outcomes, indicate the syllabus is an important starting point for creating an inclusive online classroom. We participated in the SEP course and developed an inclusive syllabus template for courses in an online program. Our process as collaborators will be described in the next section.

## Our Process and Application of the Inclusive Syllabi

In the summer of 2022, a small group from our program within a large, online university opted to engage in the SEP inclusive syllabi course (Your Syllabus as a Tool to Promote Student Equity, Belonging, and Growth available at <https://studentexperienceproject.org/firstdaytoolkit/>). The SEP is a collaborative effort involving university faculty, researchers, and academic organizations to establish and promote evidence-based practices that support inclusion in higher education. The SEP mission asserts that when learners feel supported and have access to resources, they are more likely to persist and succeed (SEP, 2021b).

We are all full-time faculty members and/or administrators for an online, CACREP-accredited counselor education program that attracts a diverse student body. Our program aspires to embody the ethical mandate of the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC; Ratts et al., 2016) by practicing inclusivity throughout the curriculum. We chose to take the SEP course to enhance the effectiveness of our syllabi throughout the curriculum.

Our small group of seven faculty volunteers completed the course, discussed it together, and created plans for implementation on a larger level, including revision of an existing syllabus template in our courses. While individual faculty members can review and implement the tools described in this module, we recommend implementation within a small group or team setting. The collaboration created opportunities to explore blind spots and to adjust the inclusive syllabi concept based on the opportunities and restrictions within our department (e.g., we use a universal syllabus template for all sections of each course; thus, any changes made need to be program wide and general enough to apply to all courses and faculty members).

The syllabus is usually the first exposure learners have to a course and their instructor. As the saying goes, “You never get a second chance to make a first impression.” In online courses, if this first introduction, the syllabus, is made without personalization, the faculty member misses an opportunity to begin to build an inclusive learning community. Because the syllabus is often crowded with boilerplate verbiage that does not engage or include the learner, it can be overlooked in the online classroom. Syllabi typically document assignments, materials, and grading rubrics or penalties so that the university meets accreditation and legal requirements. It is often seen only as a contract between the university and the student, not as a tool for engagement.

However, if the syllabus is used as a tool for engagement, faculty members can convey a welcoming growth mindset from day one of the course. Faculty engagement in an online environment is vital to having an inviting, inclusive atmosphere that helps mitigate attrition and keep students involved in the course. Creating an inclusive syllabus promotes a growth mindset and belonging (Orr & Hamming, 2009; Womack, 2017; Fuentes et al., 2021; Yarosh, 2021).

As learners begin a new course, the syllabus serves as a guide both for the pragmatic details of the course (e.g., What textbook should I buy?) and the more subtle considerations that are also more profound. As they read the syllabus, learners wonder if they belong in the course, the program, or in the field. According to the SEP website, “using an evidence-based approach to syllabus development and messaging, instructors can ensure that students’ earliest experiences in their courses promote a sense of belonging and self-efficacy that will support equity, belonging, and growth” (SEP First Day Toolkit, para. 4).

## Implementation

Our team of seven faculty members collaborated over the summer quarter to increase inclusivity via our syllabi. Each member addressed a section of the syllabus template and shared the work with the group. Once the modified syllabus was complete, the group presented it to the Dean of Inclusive Teaching and Learning. Changing syllabi in a large, accredited institution involves many different stakeholders and approvals. Some of these stakeholders included the Academic Advisory Counsel, Deans, Student Affairs, University Curriculum and Academic Policy Committee, Legal, and Institutional Research Board. Once the syllabus receives the requisite approvals, a pilot of the syllabus will occur in selected classes. Instructors in these courses will survey their students to gauge the effectiveness of the revised, inclusive syllabus.

Our guiding principle was to create a document that engaged students as their first introduction to the course. As counselor educators, one cannot help but see the parallels to counseling. When counselors meet their clients for the first time, one of the most important tasks is to build a trusting relationship. This includes active listening, joining, building rapport, and gaining their trust. As the syllabus is our first interaction with the student, it should serve the same goals. Counselor educators model how to build relationships with counselors-in-training. Having an inclusive syllabus that uses welcoming language to promote a growth mindset sets the stage for a strong relationship during the course.

Specific recommendations for creating an inclusive syllabus include the following:

- *Conveying a growth mindset*: “we understand that graduate school can be challenging...” (Gin et al., 2020). “Every learner is unique....”
- *Creating a culture of social belonging*: faculty can share a time when they felt they did not belong in a course, and how they overcame it. For example, “when I took my first statistics course, I was quickly overwhelmed and wondered if I belonged in that course. I overcame these fears by....”
- *Communicating care*: “please reach out to me if you are feeling overwhelmed by the class” (Gin et al., 2020).

- *Valuing diversity*: One way to demonstrate this value is to include a land acknowledgment in the syllabus to honor the indigenous people who originally inhabited the campus. Another example is to acknowledge racial injustice in the community and how that injustice might take an emotional toll on learners.
- Normalizing the use of campus and program resources: for example, “we understand that the online environment can be lonely and isolating, to promote a sense of belonging and community, please visit the.... to find information about....”

Faculty members also used the suggestions offered by Gin et al. (2021). One of these was a comprehensive table that reviews the elements of a syllabus with definitions, which students are likely to benefit from each element, how these elements can be used to promote inclusion, and supporting literature for each element. This allows the faculty members to see how each section of the syllabus can promote a more inclusive environment. Gin and colleagues provide examples of inclusive language for different sections of the syllabi. For example, the policy of “Expected Classroom Behavior” is changed from “Students should arrive on time and stay for the entire class....” to “We want to build a classroom climate that is comfortable for all. It is important that we...” (Gin et al., 2021). Softening the tone so that it promotes a “we” mentality may resonate more with all students.

### **Ethical Considerations**

As counselor educators, we abide by specific ethical standards that define the counseling profession. Not every academic department includes such specific ethical mandates. However, we feel sharing our ethical perspectives about DEI considerations in the online classroom can shed light on the larger systemic issues that may impact inclusion in the classroom.

At the 2021 Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) annual conference, Singh (2021) asserted that “gatekeeping... is an artifact of white supremacy.” While the American Counseling Association Code of Ethics (ACA, 2014) requires counselor educators to engage in gatekeeping for academic, skill, and dispositional appropriateness for the profession, it also expects counselor educators to recruit and maintain diverse faculty and student populations. If gatekeeping is both a mandate and a relic of systemic racism, counselor educators may perpetuate a lack of inclusion without a roadmap for best practices.

Despite revisions, ethical standards remain rooted in individualistic and Eurocentric values via *principle ethics* (e.g., beneficence, nonmaleficence, autonomy, and justice). *Relational ethics* may prove a more culturally sensitive approach to counselor education. Grounded in relational-cultural theory, relational ethics acknowledges that growth occurs through human connection and interdependence, disconnection causes distress, power dynamics cause disconnection, and interconnectedness can facilitate healing (Mifsud & Herlihy, 2022). Thus, syllabi that emphasize a growth mindset, connection, and inclusion align with relational ethics and promote well-being within the classroom per the current ACA Code of Ethics. Dispositional issues that may have been seen as problematic (e.g., reactive behavior due to lack of inclusion) may be alleviated by the more intentional use of inclusive, supportive language in syllabi.

### **Evaluation of Effectiveness of Inclusive Syllabi**

The practice of inclusive syllabi is new, and there is little research to date showing how to evaluate its effectiveness. However, there are related studies that provide important insight into how such evaluation might take place (Ludy et al., 2016; Saville et al., 2010; Yarosh, 2021; SEP, 2022). These studies often have a small sample size but offer some support for inclusive language.

Expectations for CACREP-accredited counselor education programs include assessment measures. Alignment with these expectations is recommended in assessing the impact of inclusive syllabi on student learning. Data must be gathered on two levels: (a) program evaluation and (b) student assessment (CACREP, 2016). Inclusive syllabi can impact data collected at both levels.

First, program evaluation data includes student assessment data, student demographics, and follow-up studies to examine student success and satisfaction (CACREP, 2016). This data should align with the program objectives. Examining evaluation data from preinclusive and postinclusive syllabi implementation using existing program practices may yield shifts in retention of diverse students and overall program satisfaction.

At the student assessment level, key performance indicators (KPIs) assess the attainment of knowledge and skill in core areas. In addition to KPIs, learners in counseling programs are expected to demonstrate professional dispositions appropriate to the profession (CACREP, 2016). Via the syllabus, communicating a growth versus a fixed mindset, normalizing the use of resources to attain success, and using inclusive language to create belonging should create a ripple effect that may positively impact both the attainment of KPIs and the demonstration of professional dispositions. Per CACREP expectations, examining multiple data points at critical moments in the program (e.g., during Pre-Practicum or field experience) and comparing those points with preinclusive syllabi teaching may reveal positive trends.

In addition, the SEP recommends real-time data using an iterative approach in the classroom (SEP, 2022). This data collection approach empowers faculty members to more readily support students who may be struggling and to highlight gains made in the classroom because of their teaching practice. Real-time data collection can also highlight disparities in achievement among various demographic groups, which can indicate areas for improvement and change at the programmatic level (SEP, 2022). Real-time data can be gathered via digital anonymous surveys, exit slips (written responses to a prompt that are given to the faculty member at the end of class), small or focus group discussions, or documenting classroom observations (Alber, 2017). Our university intends to pilot a more inclusive syllabus in several different courses in our CACREP-accredited program in the spring quarter. To date, assessment methods in previous studies have used a simple *t*-test to compare syllabi or used a brief survey to gain information about the syllabus (Yarosh, 2021; SEP, 2022).

## Future Directions

For an inclusive environment to come to fruition, it first takes a group of culturally humble individuals advocating for change. Cultural humility is the first step in this entire process where we begin to look outside ourselves and turn to our students as the experts on their intersecting cultures (Hook et al., 2013). Thus, developing an inclusive syllabus should be done by a group of stakeholders willing to hold one another accountable, identify blind spots, and aspire to the ethical application of DEI concepts within the syllabus language.

Providing an environment where all students, staff, and faculty feel welcome, supported, and heard is imperative in higher education. A syllabus that includes inclusive language to support various cultural groups and diverse learners is a first step in the online classroom. Additionally, we can acknowledge different learning styles by providing the syllabus in different or inclusive formats. This may include audio, video, or even pictures (SEP, 2021a), making it something that students want to read and engage in. The syllabus welcomes students to the course and prepares them for what is expected while encouraging a partnership for the adult learner, classmates, and faculty members. Knowledge gained from writing an inclusive syllabus may inspire other changes to the traditional online classroom structure.

For example, pronouns can become the norm in signature lines, online learning systems, and video conferencing. Faculty and staff can start to investigate the Original Peoples who were on the land in which they live and pay respect by acknowledging this in their signature line (SEP, 2021a). Schools can use students' preferred names and identities when creating credentials and usernames. The possibilities are endless when people feel they have a voice and will be heard. Students seeing these changes will begin to speak up, share who they are with others, and that is when much more learning can occur.

As the movement grows to more awareness of the impact inclusivity has on the learning environment, changes start to happen that honor and respect diverse peoples. This may increase participation in student unions to the point that students feel empowered and proud to be at their institution. In turn, students begin to take up causes that further promote DEI. By providing this one step toward inclusivity, we hope this inspires more discussions, more direction, and more perseverance toward an inclusive learning environment.

## Conclusion

As educators committed to welcoming and supporting diverse learners, we encourage others to examine the syllabus as a potential tool for creating a welcoming online environment. Faculty members can set the stage for a vibrant community of scholars through the communication of a growth mindset, normalizing asking for help and using campus resources, and acknowledging the struggles that impede adult learners. In doing so, faculty members can cultivate persistence, lower attrition, and contribute to campus-wide DEI efforts.

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