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Fostering Inclusive Learning: A Guide for Faculty in Higher Education

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Course Syllabus

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Course Content



Learning Climate



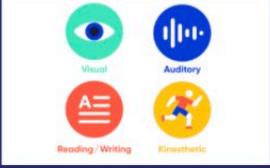
Fostering Inclusive Learning:

A Guide for Faculty in Higher Education

Learner Support



Teaching Strategies



Assessment of Learning



Fostering Inclusive Learning: A Guide for Faculty in Higher Education

This document has been developed to help faculty teaching at the college level prepare for and deliver courses that recognize differences in sociodemographic identities—gender, age, ethnicity, race, culture, religion, sexual orientation, and social class—and, in so doing, promote learning and a learning environment that is inclusive of these differences.

There are numerous scholarly articles in the higher education literature on the topics of diversity, equity, and inclusion, as well as practice-based directives on diversity, equity, and inclusion on the websites of colleges and universities. These websites offer a myriad of recommendations to foster inclusive learning in classrooms, covering everything from curricular design to specific student learning activities and beyond. However, no one source combined the principles and practices of inclusive learning into a single handbook for faculty who are considering a holistic approach to inclusion that touches all of the components of educational planning.

A series of strategies are suggested for faculty to consider. These strategies represent the major components of higher education learning and teaching, but are not exhaustive. The ideas in this guide are intended to help faculty move from intentions to actions in creating a new course or refining an existing one.

These various approaches to fostering inclusive learning are grouped into six sections:

- Course Syllabus
- Course Content
- Learning Climate
- Learner Support
- Teaching Strategies
- Assessment of Learning

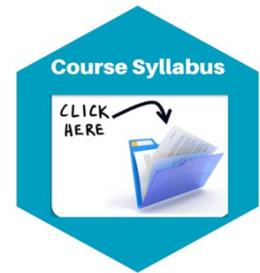
The six sections are interrelated, and thus suggestions may relate to more than one area. Each strategy appears only once, in the area in which it has the most significant impact. The intent is for faculty to use this document when developing courses, planning class sessions, and reflecting on their teaching and what their students have learned.

Numerous sources and resources were used to develop this guide, as listed in the references. Many of the online sources, especially those from college and university teaching and learning centers, include valuable additional materials for faculty to consider.

The authors would like to express their gratitude to colleagues Dr. Elizabeth B. Mahler and Dr. Merle J. Schwartz for their assistance in identifying source material and for their review of the preliminary versions of this guide.

—Ellen F. Goldman and Lisa S. Eiduson
June 2021

Course Syllabus



The syllabus is often the first connection learners have with a given course. In some colleges and universities, it can be accessed from the course registration website. It may also be available by simply “Googling” the course or it may be “passed down” from other learners. (It is beyond the scope of this document to discuss who owns a course syllabus; institutions of higher education vary in their views on this.) Regardless, the syllabus sets the tone for inclusivity through its language, content, and format.

Most institutions of higher education specify minimum requirements for syllabi. These include many features that foster learner-centered teaching:

- A statement of the course purpose and overview of the course
- Clear learning objectives that link to objectives of a program of study
- Required texts, supplemental readings, and other media and materials
- Assignment requirements, rubrics, deadlines, and grading values
- Faculty contact information and office hours
- Procedures for making up missed assignments due to religious holidays, emergency absences, etc.
- The institution’s code of academic integrity
- Institutional policies (if existing) on the observance of religious holidays, anti-discrimination, sexual harassment, diversity, equity, and inclusion, and universal design
- Accessibility support and services
- Mental health services
- Safety and security procedures

In addition to the items above, the following strategies foster a sense of inclusion:

1. *Use nonbinary language, referring to learners as the singular “they.”* A neutral descriptor avoids the use of pronouns that may be sociodemographically offensive.
2. *Consider adding a learning objective related to inclusion or infusing equity, diversity, and inclusion into all learning objectives.* In this way, multiple perspectives can be fostered in the course. A stand-alone learning objective could include text such as “By the end of this course, learners should be able to appraise sociodemographic aspects as they relate to the concepts and ideas covered in this course.”
3. *Consider including a statement that fosters an inclusive learning environment.* Such a statement can articulate your commitment to learners and establish expectations for respectful classroom conduct and an inclusive community for all learners. Possible content can include, but is not limited to, the following text:
 - a. An inclusive learning environment fosters learner confidence and inspires creativity.
 - b. Today’s challenges require learning from others with different backgrounds, experiences, thoughts, and opinions.

- c. I have made an effort to include diverse perspectives in the course materials but acknowledge that implicit and explicit biases may exist in the sources and welcome discussion of them.
 - d. I want you to feel comfortable in class. If anything is said or done by anyone—including myself—that makes you feel uncomfortable, please talk to me about it.
4. *State the perspectives and biases of the required and supplemental readings.* With this information, learners can understand how the topic/field has developed, and there is transparency about what is (and is not) included in the course.
 5. *Use the syllabus to explain course design decisions* (in addition to listing them). Explanations help learners new to the material understand the reasons behind your choices, reduce barriers to learning they may have previously experienced, and enhance learners' sense of belonging through transparency.
 6. *State expectations for learners to bring their personal experiences into the course.* This reinforces the value of their diverse sociodemographic identities as a strength to the community of learners.
 7. *Refer to office hours as a time to “chat”* (vs. only get help) to reinforce concern for learners as individuals and your desire to get to know them. Text could include a statement such as, “My office hours are an opportunity for us to connect, as well as for you to ask clarifying questions, discuss future plans, etc.”

Course Content



The careful selection of content (i.e., readings, authors, and class materials) fosters inclusive learning by acknowledging and presenting the contributions of diverse viewpoints and narratives on the subject matter. The following strategies foster a sense of inclusion:

1. *Incorporate authors and invited speakers with diverse sociodemographic perspectives.* To identify author perspectives, consider researching a given author's background; using literature search terms with different perspectives in them to locate materials (i.e., feminist views of [the topic], critical race theory and [the topic]); and asking learners to provide information on the topic from their own backgrounds or those that interest them.
2. *Discuss situational or systemic factors that contribute to the diverse perspectives.* For example, you could ask the class why they think the author may have their stated perspective, what factors might contribute to that perspective, and how each factor might have contributed.
3. *Identify missing or underrepresented sociodemographic perspectives in the course syllabus and class materials and among invited speakers.* Consider stating and/or asking the class to identify possible missing gender, ethnic, race, culture, religious, and/or sexual orientation perspectives.
4. *Incorporate a variety of human examples into class and other course materials (texts, cases, examples, images, etc.).* Review written, oral, and graphic materials used in the classroom, online, and for reference for inclusion of descriptors relevant to the content (i.e., being in certain racial or cultural groups has been proven to be relevant to certain, but not all, health issues) and inclusion of pictures of sociodemographic differences.
5. *Avoid stereotypical characteristics and behaviors as well as tokenism in class and in course materials (cases, examples, images, etc.).* Review written, oral, and graphic materials used in the classroom, online, and for reference to ensure they do not present a given sociodemographic group as they may have been historically typecast (i.e., as “lazy,” “smart,” “tall,” “skinny”).
6. *Present and offer examples of people with different sociodemographic identities as equal and active participants and leaders in class and other course materials (cases, examples, images, etc.).* Review written, oral, and graphic materials used in the classroom, online, and for reference to ensure that members of all sociodemographic groups are seen as equal contributors (i.e., no sociodemographic group is consistently portrayed as either “passive” or “prominent”).
7. *Use nonbinary language (the singular “they”).* For example, “They identify as _____. Their ancestry is _____. We need to find out more about them.”
8. *Provide context when idioms, metaphors, and pop culture references are used.* For example, In this article, the word “_____” is used to mean “_____” because “_____.”

9. *Provide an explanation if understanding the content requires a specific sociodemographic identity to be referenced.* For example, “To fully comprehend what was happening in ‘X,’ we need to consider how _____ [a specific sociodemographic group] was historically treated.”
10. *Incorporate feedback on the content from other faculty and staff, school diversity experts, instructional designers, and past learners.* Consider sharing your materials with peers and staff who are trained in educational design and delivery.

Learning Climate



The learning climate involves the relational aspect of the class—the interactions between the faculty member and learners, and among the learners themselves. The faculty member sets the climate at the beginning of the course, at the beginning of each class, and throughout the class time. The climate is a dynamic process in which the shared pursuit of “continuous improvement” enables every class member to have a hand in promoting a “respectful space where everyone can learn from each other and from each other’s mistakes” (Gamrat, 2020, Step #16). The enactment of the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education is modeled by the faculty member’s positive and caring connections, which are then imparted to and owned by learners as well. Creating a truly inclusive class climate is a deliberate decision by the faculty member. An inclusive classroom is not only based on academic content, but is also focused on the socioemotional well-being of the learners and the positive value that is placed on individual and group identities.

As noted in the Syllabus section, the climate is first introduced through the language used in the syllabus, well before the course begins. The following strategies help establish and maintain an inclusive learning climate:

1. *If possible, get to know the learners before the course starts.* This sets the tone of a caring climate. Send learners a welcome email or post on the course learning system; hold an online “meet and greet”; or administer a brief survey to get to know learners’ backgrounds, prior experiences with the course content, concerns, etc.
2. *Build climate and rapport on an ongoing basis.* Provide opportunities for learners to get to know one another through ice-breakers and check-ins; be in the classroom early to greet learners and interact informally; stay in the room during breaks and after class.
3. *Acknowledge individual identities important to learners.* This reduces anonymity. Inquire about and use learners’ preferred names, nicknames, and pronouns.
4. *Set clear expectations for an inclusive environment and respectful interactions—both inside and outside the classroom.* Learners may bring with them different expectations based on their experiences, their backgrounds, and where they are in their educational trajectories. Articulate your expectations and then involve the learners in establishing and practicing the policies (aka ground rules) of the classroom. These policies may include items such as avoiding interrupting, suspending judgment, and calling out expressions of bias or unintended microaggressions. These guidelines should be put into writing and shared on an ongoing basis as reminders (i.e., hanging them on the wall, repeating them at the beginning of online sessions).
5. *Model and reinforce expectations for an inclusive climate.* Show respect for all comments and questions and facilitate active listening (i.e., paraphrasing to check understanding, asking questions to clarify meaning).

6. *Hold learners accountable for identifying stereotyping comments and/or behaviors and for challenging conscious or unconscious expressions of bias.* Procedures for doing this should be in the class policies/ground rules and should be positively acknowledged when used by learners. In this way, you and the learners become partners in demonstrating sensitivity toward the sociodemographic diversity of the class.
7. *Discuss (rather than disregard) difficult/uncomfortable sociodemographic conversations to gain insight about how gender, ethnicity, race, culture, religion, sexual orientation, and social class influence one's viewpoint on a given topic.* Sharing differences can feel threatening and raise anxiety; it is human nature to avoid uncomfortable conversations and situations. However, once a safe climate for communication is established, these moments have the potential to positively contribute to the emotional growth of individuals and to the harmonious coalescence of the group. Have a tip sheet for difficult discussions; include it in class policies/ground rules on how to engage constructively in difficult conversations.
8. *Respond to classroom conflict promptly, consistently, and respectfully.* Plan ahead by thinking about what might cause tensions and how you will respond in a challenging moment. Maintain the role of a facilitator (instead of expressing your own perspective or remaining silent). Encourage learners to connect their feelings to course materials (vs. individuals) and content. Normalize the learners' experiences of conflict through explicit discussion of past occurrences and lessons learned for handling conflict.
9. *Provide opportunities for you and your learners to deliberately practice self-reflection regarding implicit biases and help one another recognize unintentional microaggressions.* This will foster a climate of accountability and repair, signaling that there is an expectation that faculty and learners may make mistakes in these areas and that such errors are positive lessons for personal growth.
10. *Provide opportunities throughout the course for learners to offer safe, anonymous, and constructive feedback.* Getting ongoing feedback is important to building an inclusive classroom. Guidance provided to or developed with learners on how to offer appropriate feedback (i.e., being specific; making factual, not personal comments; describing how whatever occurred made them feel and why) will also provide additional growth opportunities.

Learner Support

Faculty members are not expected to know the sociodemographic details of every learner, but they should be open to listening and showing interest in learners' multicultural customs and practices. While the faculty member and learners may get to know one another in class, more frequently, such interpersonal connections emerge outside of the classroom, through informal conversations.



Sometimes learners approach a faculty member directly, seeking academic support; however, learners may feel uncomfortable reaching out or may be embarrassed by their perceived limitations. This discomfort may be due to the traditional power dynamics at work between the faculty member and learners—dynamics that are exacerbated by sociodemographic disparities.

The faculty member should consider offering a variety of ways for learners to share their individual stories, seek additional encouragement, and discover and express their authentic voices. The following suggestions may be used specifically for promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion, but also may increase and improve the extent to which learners become advocates for their own educational objectives and grow to empower themselves in the classroom and beyond.

1. *Pay attention to individual learning and communication differences during class discussions.* Enable learners to participate in class according to their personalities and preferences. Consider tracking learner participation in class discussions to achieve balance between individuals who dominate the class and those who are less likely to speak up.
2. *Recognize differences in learners' comfort levels with power dynamics and responses to authority figures in educational settings.* Consider shifting the power dynamic (i.e., the learners' self-perceptions of being weaker than the faculty member) by alternating sitting and standing during class so that you and the learners are looking at one another eye-to-eye and at the same level.
3. *Prioritize equity over equality when discussing and implementing individualized learner support plans.* Reassure learners that their educational plans, accessibility accommodations, and any other individualized modifications are handled privately and confidentially.
4. *Reduce the stigma associated with office hours.* Clarify where and when office hours take place, whether learners need to notify you or just “drop in” for visits, and for what purposes office hours should be utilized. Invite learners to schedule conferences by appointment if they are unable to attend posted office hours. Consider requiring all learners to make one-on-one appointments with you early in the term so you can get to know each other outside of the academic setting.
5. *Encourage learners to reflect on and articulate their attitudes toward learning, previous classroom experiences, instructional preferences, learning styles, and educational challenges.* Consider asking learners to write a brief, ungraded biography to help you ascertain how learners believe they learn best.

6. *Observe patterns of individual learner behavior and decide whether and how to respond to tacit messaging from learners who may be struggling.* Absenteeism, tardiness, late submission of assignments, and failure to complete class requirements are all reasons for you to be concerned about the well-being of a learner. Consider reaching out directly to learners who display these behaviors and inquiring as to their physical and emotional welfare. Be prepared with a list of health and wellness resources to share with the learner.
7. *If possible and consistent with course learning objectives, give learners opportunities to teach as well as to learn.* This can be accomplished through the exploration of topics that are new to both you and the learners. In this way, teaching and learning happen horizontally as well as vertically.
8. *Recognize and honor the religious holidays and cultural traditions of those outside the majority group.* Remind learners that they will not be penalized for missing class for holidays or observances that are not included among those that the institution observes. Consider setting up a specific place in which all learners can expect to find class notes, slides, communications, readings, and homework assignments following class, and/or secure learners' permission to record the class session.
9. *Adopt flexible policies around graded "attendance" and "participation."* This flexibility can reduce the likelihood of "identity threat" and can promote inclusivity among all learners. Consider modifying policies that require medical notes to "excuse" absences, reduce learners' grades for tardiness, and define "class participation" too narrowly. These adjustments in protocol can mitigate against the appearance of classism, lessen the anxiety of those who have chronic physical or mental conditions, and reduce marginalization among learners who have difficulty accessing health care services or are dependent on others for transportation.
10. *Ensure accessibility for those with learning challenges.* Provide approved accommodations for students (i.e., extra processing and/or examination time, flexibility on assignment deadlines); ensure course materials are accessible via screen readers and visible captions; consider variations in computer access/stable service.

Teaching Strategies



Given that this guide is intended for use by faculty teaching college-level learners, the general orientations to learning fostered by the suggested teaching strategies include dimensions that are cognitivist (involving individual mental processing), social learning (interacting with and observing others), and constructivist (focused on making meaning from the learning experiences) in nature (Merriam & Bierema, 2014).

It should be noted that faculty can use many general activities to promote learner-centered teaching, and not all are detailed here. These include actions such as aligning teaching strategies with clear class session objectives (which in turn are based on clear course and program objectives) and scaffolding the learners' responsibility for learning as the course progresses (Blumberg, 2019).

The teaching strategies listed below are those that most closely relate to fostering inclusion. These strategies will help ensure that all learners feel encouraged and inspired to engage with the material, participate in discussions and activities, and challenge their own thinking as well as that of others.

1. *Identify any prior (individual or collective) circumstances that might make learning challenging.* Consider surveying the learners regarding their prior experiences with the course content and challenges they anticipate and conferring with faculty who have previously taught the course and/or the particular group of learners.
2. *Use a variety of teaching strategies.* This will promote learning across the different preferences and learning styles of learners. Teaching strategies should be aligned with the specific learning objectives of the class session. For example, if the learning objective is for learners to be able to “apply” content, teaching strategies could include case-based discussion, group projects, role plays, and simulations (Goldman, 2019). When possible, invite learners to choose among different teaching strategies.
3. *Ask learners how different sociodemographic identities impact the topic or issue being considered.* This will help learners understand the implicit assumptions and frames of reference and perspectives.
4. *Invite learners to share authentically from their lived experiences.* Ask learners if they have insight or expertise on a given topic. (Avoid asking for a specific perspective—e.g., a woman's perspective.)
5. *Encourage multiple approaches, perspectives, and solutions to problems and issues discussed.* Actively ask learners to develop multiple responses in oral arguments and written work.
6. *In discussions:*
 - a. Encourage different ways learners can contribute, such as by writing comments on cards or in a chat or by participating in real-time class polls.

- b. Check that all learners are participating (i.e., no individual or group is dominating) and that each learner has completed their contribution before others offer theirs.

7. *For group work:*

- a. Place learners into groups with interest in and diverse perspectives on a topic; encourage self-forming groups to do the same.
- b. Encourage a rotation for the roles needed for group work (i.e., moderator, note taker, reporter).
- c. Encourage all learners to participate in group presentations.

8. *Ask a colleague or instructional design staff to observe your teaching and provide feedback specific to inclusion.*

9. *Offer learners the opportunity to anonymously provide feedback mid-course.*

10. *Attend/participate in conferences and/or workshops to enhance inclusive teaching strategies.*

Assessment of Learning



For college-level learners, assessment is viewed as a developmental process; that is, intelligence can change and grow over time, and such growth is reflected in grading. Accordingly, feedback should include self and peer assessments and ample formative opportunities to ensure the learning objectives of the course are met (Blumberg, 2019). It should be noted that the general activities of faculty to assess learners—such as using fair and consistent standards and authentic assessment measures with clear grading rubrics and grading scales made transparent at the beginning of the course—are assumed and are not detailed here.

The strategies listed below provide learners with ongoing feedback throughout the course and options for demonstrating what they have learned. This fosters inclusion by providing individualized support to help learners develop a growth mindset, embrace “mistakes” as learning opportunities, and acknowledge that there are different means of expressing what one knows.

1. *Align assessment measures with the variety of teaching strategies used* (see Teaching Strategy #2). Learners can then understand the rationale behind assignments and relate to the learning objectives. A table that lines up course learning objectives, teaching strategies, and assessment measures will elucidate the instructional integrity of the course for the learners (and also provide you with a framework for decisions regarding assessment methods).
2. *Include assignments where learners can pursue ideas and concepts that challenge dominant narratives in the topic/field.* This strategy will both acknowledge any historical biases regarding the topic/field and foster learner self-direction. Such assignments should not be random; they should be consistent with the course learning objectives and teaching strategies (#1 above), and include a clearly stated grading rubric.
3. *Use assignments that are low or no stakes in terms of grade point values prior to those that are high stakes.* In this way, learners will gain a sense of how they are meeting expectations and have an opportunity to have follow-up discussions with you. Low or no stakes assignments could include polls or quizzes before exams, 1-minute “thoughts” before 5-page reflection papers, and outlines before literature reviews. Such assignments should not be random; they should be consistent with the course learning objectives and teaching strategies (#1 above) and include a clearly stated grading rubric.
4. *Triangulate the formats (written, oral, tests, papers, video) in which you assess learners and provide choice if possible.* This will reduce learners’ anxieties regarding certain assessment methods (i.e., test-taking, large group facilitation). The assignment choices should be consistent with the learning objectives and teaching strategies (#1 above) and include clearly stated grading rubrics.
5. *If “participation in discussion” is part of the course requirements, implement practices that provide equal opportunities.* Practices could include eye contact prompting, using an

alphabetical or numbering system, or having a requirement to wait to comment a second time until a certain number of others have commented.

6. *If “group work” is part of the course requirements, consider asking the group to develop a charter identifying roles and responsibilities of each member and solicit input from each learner about the contributions of others.* These actions signal to learners that they are equals; they need to behave as a team, respect others’ contributions, and help each other.
7. *Encourage self-assessment and peer feedback.* Self-assessment builds learner self-direction capacity. Peer feedback helps learners connect with one another, enhances creativity and motivation, and improves confidence and sense of belonging. These can be incorporated into any in-class/online activity or assignment.
8. *Provide opportunities for learners to share their learning.* Besides sending a message of solidarity (vs. competition for grades), this strategy reinforces the importance of learning from everyone, and not just those in teaching positions. Large amounts of class time are not needed; concept maps, posters, short videos, and other artifacts can be used to share quickly.
9. *Use name-blind grading or inter-rater grading when possible.* This will help eliminate any implicit biases or assumptions you may hold about learners’ social identities and their learning capacities (i.e., learners with certain backgrounds are good/poor writers, good/poor with numbers, or have a certain view on an issue).
10. *Provide feedback that is encouraging, constructive, and focused on improvement.* Feedback fosters inclusion by letting learners know you have confidence that they can meet the required standards, indicating that your feedback is critical to help them meet those standards and identifying specific areas and ways to improve.

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