

Promoting Inclusion in the Geosciences with an Equity-Minded Syllabus

Cindy Shellito*, Susan Keenan, Cassandra Bergstrom, Lori Reinsvold, Jodie Novak, and Sharon Bywater-Reyes
*Corresponding author: jucinda.shellito@unco.edu; Department of Earth and Atmospheric Science, University of Northern Colorado



Abstract page: https://serc.carleton.edu/earth_rendezvous/2020/program/posters/wednesday/237471.html

Promoting Inclusion:

Looking at your syllabus through an equity lens
Geoscience disciplines are still among the least diverse fields in STEM. Changing the culture of the discipline as a whole ultimately begins in the classroom, and the syllabus can provide an opportunity to set the tone for your course and help you establish a partnership with your students in a way that serves the needs of students from diverse backgrounds. The language, tone, and content of your syllabus all have an impact on student impressions and can ultimately impact the sense of inclusion in your classroom. Here, we share strategies for reviewing and revising your syllabus through an equity lens that was inspired by work from the *Center for Urban Education*.

How can your syllabus promote equity and inclusion?

(1) Consider the *structure* of your syllabus and use it to help students understand how they can be successful

Avoid jargon: Giving students access to the language of the institution can improve their chances for success!

Provide students with the information they need to successfully complete the course and navigate college

Present information in such a way that a first-time college student can easily make sense of the syllabus

➤ Format and order your syllabus in a way that highlights what students need to know to maximize their learning and success

Example: Let's clarify *Office Hours*!

Here's what we usually write:

Instructor Office Hours: MWF 10-11am, 1000F Science Hall (If you need to contact me outside of my office hours, you may email me or call my office)

Alternative:

If you have questions stop by my office (1000 Science Hall) during office hours, which is time set specifically for your questions and concerns – Monday (M), Wednesday (W), and Friday (F): 10-11am. I am also available if you come to class a few minutes early or can stay a few minutes after class. You are also welcome to contact me outside of class and office hours.

R Learning Objectives
Weighted Grade
Syllabus Comprehensive Exam
Office Hours

(2) Use your syllabus to *demonstrate that you care about their academic success*

➤ Consider: Verbal immediacy

Create a partnership:

- Use "We" and "Our" rather than "I", "you" or "students"
- Share your pronouns with students and ask them to share their pronouns with you
- Learn and use students' names and ask about preferred names
- Tell the students a little about yourself and why you excited about this course.
- Clearly state what you expect from students as learners, and what they can expect for you as an instructor

When students believe language from a syllabus is **friendly** they view instructors as warm and approachable and believe that they are highly motivated to teach.

Harsh language can be intimidating and discouraging for some students and hinder their success

A SENSE OF BELONGING

➤ Consider: How can you show support for students and normalize their struggles?

Compare these syllabus statements – how do they support students?

Example #1: *Students who are struggling should seek help.*

Example #2: *As a student, there were concepts that I just didn't understand, so you might run across them too. I want you to feel comfortable coming to my office or sending me an email for help. My office hours this semester are listed on the syllabus. I highly encourage you to work with other students outside of class, and you might also consider creating a study group. If you want someone outside of the class to assist you, please consider visiting the Tutoring Services Center (it's free!). They even have some evening and weekend hours!*

➤ Consider the tone of your classroom policies - Are there policies you might want to rethink?

Some Classroom Policies to reconsider:

- Requiring a note from a doctor for an excused absence
- Having a no make-up exam policy
- Forbidding mobile phones



(3) Use your syllabus to *establish greater connection with students and relate to students on a personal level*

➤ Help students understand the *relevance* of course

Ensure course material is relevant to course objectives.

Help your students connect the course objectives, topics, and assessments to their own career and life goals and experiences.

- Include topics/assessments related to the local community or the communities of the students in your course
- Offer different forms of assessments that give students multiple ways to demonstrate their learning and strengths
- Include readings, activities, and assignments that are culturally relevant and inclusive

Communicate the value of students' racial/ethnic backgrounds, for example, as sources of learning and knowledge

➤ Deconstruct the historic perspective of higher education

- Consider the stereotypes of people in your field
- Consider the identities and intersectionalities of the students in your classroom



Above: Stereotype of a mad scientist. From Wikipedia (CC BY-SA 3.0)

Challenge students to become critically aware of their privileges and biases.

Provide opportunities for students to critically examine the norms in higher education and broader social discrimination

Include a classroom anti-discrimination policy

Feature work by scientists from a range of races, ethnicities and genders

Commit to discussing racist or discriminating comments and behavior as they arise in class or on campus



Above: Women scientists from around the world on a *Homeward Bound* expedition to Antarctica show their pride and defy stereotypes. (Photo courtesy of Team HB4)

For articles and other readings: Consider who did the work and where? And how the work was funded.

Resources:

- See the example Geology 101 syllabus revised through an equity lens and available for download on the conference page for this poster.
- The UNCO STEM Inclusive Excellence Collective provides a growing set of resources for considering how best to promote inclusivity in your classroom (<https://www.unco.edu/nhs/stem-inclusive-excellence-collective/>)

Acknowledgements:

Additional resources available on the SERC EER2020 site: https://serc.carleton.edu/earth_rendezvous/2020/program/posters/wednesday/237471.html