

# Tips for Creating a More Inclusive Syllabus

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February 3, 2020

According to the National Center for Education Statistics' (2019) most recent data, 24 percent of college students are first in their families to attend college (p. 127). First-generation students bring a richness and depth to the student body, but navigating campus as a first-generation student can be arduous. Without the benefit of intergenerational guidance, campus culture can be complicated with barriers that negatively affect persistence and graduation.

The vast majority of campus faculty were not themselves first-generation students and do not respond as helpfully as they might to first-generation students' struggles. The Inclusive Excellence Teacher-Scholar (IE-TS) program was created to help faculty understand inequity on our campus, positively shape the experiences of marginalized students, and become agents of change.

When faculty think about equity and inclusive environments, most focus on the classroom and personal interactions with students. And yes, the culture that we create in the classroom is important, but there are other ways that students gain impressions of us as educators.

We invite your reconsideration of the course syllabus and its role in supporting first-generation students. It is often the first point of contact that students have with us, our courses, and the content we hope they will learn. In this article, we share Ginger Fisher's (GF) experience of developing an inclusive syllabus and provide concrete recommendations that have grown out of our professional development (Center for Urban Education, 2018; Dowd & Bensimon, 2015) and become part of our IE-TS program. Our goal is straightforward: to show how the syllabus can become a tool that supports equity and inclusion and at the same still provides all the course details that students need to know.

[Viewing your current syllabus](#)

It is critically important to acknowledge that all students struggle at various points in their academic careers and this struggle is a normal part of the college experience. Normalizing struggle is especially important for first-generation students, who tend to equate difficulty with a sense of not belonging or an inability to achieve academic goals. To convey this on the syllabus, I devote an entire page to student support. It includes suggestions on how to succeed in the course—what to do before, during, and after a class session—as well as information on getting help. The earlier version of my syllabus simply listed campus resources. Now there's a discussion of each, including what services they provide and how those can be beneficial. I also make sure to point out when a resource is free, something I've stopped assuming every student knows. For some time now, I've used low-stakes homework assignments that allow students to make mistakes. I also drop the lowest exam score. This approach gives students the chance to grow and does not penalize those who might not understand the rigors of college coursework or who have arrived on campus without strong study skills. It also shows that I expect students to hit obstacles during the course.

### Welcoming tone and an increased understanding of relevance

Many institutions now require us to list the course objectives in our syllabus. Historically, I made a list, leaving students to figure out their relevance. Now I list them as course goals and add a description of why each is important and involves skills relevant to future career plans. I hope that makes their value clearer to students.

Often professors underscore words or use **bold** or *italics* to highlight important information on the syllabus. Have you ever considered how students receive that added emphasis? It's often viewed negatively and conveys the idea that students can't figure out for themselves what's important.

It's a good idea to read your syllabus while asking yourself whether it's conveying the positive first impression you intend. I know that mine did not! So I worked to limit "shouting" in the syllabus and to explain policies clearly, collegially, and in a welcoming tone. It's worth noting here that being open and transparent about course policies is especially important for first-generation students. For example, if your syllabus states that no late work will be accepted but in practice you do accept it when there's a valid reason, consider changing the wording on your syllabus. Students used to college culture usually don't hesitate to ask for the extensions, but many first-generation students will not, assuming that the policy in the syllabus stands.

A final word on policies: required institutional policy information—such as (dis)ability or plagiarism statements—cannot always be changed. They cannot be rewritten in language that is welcoming and validating. In these cases, consider providing a preamble that describes the rationale and importance of these institutional policies.

First-generation students often feel immense pressure to do well academically for parents, siblings, and other loved ones who are supporting them personally and financially. The syllabus can be a resource that inclusively supports first-generation students as they pursue their academic goals. I was surprised by how these small changes to my syllabus made a big difference in the support and welcome I now extend to all students.

To see examples of syllabi before and after our IE-TS workshops and for additional resources, visit

National Center for Education Statistics. (2019, January). **Profile**