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## #RealCollege Syllabus Design: Writing a Syllabus for the Students We Teach

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# #RealCollege Syllabus Design: Writing a Syllabus for the Students We Teach

Melissa Winchell

I'll never forget the first time I saw a syllabus with a colleague's photo embedded on its front page; my colleague was jumping into the air, arms outstretched, looking happy and quirky. But I was surprised to see it and wondered about its appropriateness for a college course. And the photo wasn't the only unusual component—the syllabus was graphically organized and looked more like a web page than a document. I thought it was creative and interesting, but I couldn't help feeling that the syllabus seemed unacademic and maybe even frivolous.

But now, after twelve years in higher education, I am one of those professors with an unusual-looking syllabus. I use graphics, photos, and text boxes. In addition, I design the syllabus to address issues of equity in the hopes that all my students find my syllabus welcoming and accessible. In this article, I will share a rationale and a how-to for creative, equitable syllabus design.

## A Rationale for Creative Syllabus Design: Student-Centered Learning

The adage that we teach students and not content remains true. The argument for creative, equitable syllabus design begins with this principle of student centeredness. If we assume that the syllabus is often the first artifact our students see from us, then the syllabus is the first “teaching moment” of our course.

The #RealCollege movement (now coalesced at Temple University's *The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice* [www.hope4college.com](http://www.hope4college.com))

has highlighted the particulars of who United States college students are. From Hope Center, we learn that more than ever before, college students experience food and housing insecurity, first-generation barriers, and economic deterrents. Hope Center's #RealCollege movement believes that we cannot teach our students unless we know who they are. Their work invites faculty to teach the students who are in their courses—not the ones we had thirty years ago nor the ones we wish we had.

Information about our BSU students is available in many places, including BSU's Factbook and the historical knowledge of our faculty and administrators. We can also learn a lot about our students by asking them. These questions have helped me to design student-centered syllabi:

- Who is the audience for my syllabus and what do I know about them? How have they changed? What do I still need to learn?

- Given that a syllabus is a written artifact, what forms of literacy are strengths for these students? What reading and media do they most often consume? What might those literacies teach me about how best my students will understand my syllabus?
- How can my syllabus provide information in a way that is as similar to and/or as accessible to them as their preferred forms of literacy?

## A Rationale for Equitable Syllabus Design: A Community of Learners

In addition to moving towards a more graphic, creative approach to my syllabi, I also use equity as a framework. My rationale is grounded in a constructivist approach to learning, which assumes that learning is social. Certainly, the goal of every one of our courses is to prepare our students to become members of our disciplinary communities. As the first teaching moment of my course, the syllabus becomes an opportunity to welcome students to a discipline-specific community and to establish the kinds of professional, working relationships that are the norm. Equity is foundational to these relationships, as it provides a way for every student to be invited to and assume membership in an academic community.

I ask many questions related to equity as I design my syllabi, including:

- How can my syllabus establish me as a practitioner who is committed to and passionate about the discipline? How can it welcome all students to that discipline?
- How can I welcome students with minoritized identities by: disclosing my own identities; representing multiple identities in the syllabus (through images,

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course texts, and reference list); ensuring that minoritized communities are represented as strong and resilient; and locating the problems the course will address as located in policies or systems rather than in individual people or communities?

- How can I increase the accessibility of my syllabus for students with disabilities?
- Does my syllabus detail how students can access course and university supports and encourage students to use them with destigmatizing language or shared experiences?

## Designing a #RealCollege Syllabus

My syllabus design has been through multiple iterations and major changes over the years. Here are five of the most important tips I've learned for designing creative, equitable syllabi.

**Design Tip #1: Use design tools, not document software.** In general, students are more accustomed to reading hypertext than traditional text. They are no longer linear readers who read page after page of information in the sequence the professor presents. Instead, they read online, clicking on any number of hyperlinked texts, sounds, or images to learn—and they do so in the order they choose.

I began using graphics and text boxes in keeping with my students' increasing literacies in digitized media. My syllabus now includes an infographic and appears more like a website with multiple fields and columns of texts rather than the single field a document provides, helped along by free photo websites like [www.pixabay.com](http://www.pixabay.com) and the graphic design website and app [www.canva.com](http://www.canva.com). This allows my students to read the information in the order they choose and to look for information that seems most important to them at the time.

**Design Tip #2: Use language that first-generation college students can understand.** First-generation college students often do not know what “office hours” are. They don't know what the “Registrar” does or who visits an “Academic Achievement Center.” As I design my syllabus, I try to use more student-friendly language. For example, I'll call my office hours “student hours” and write in my syllabus that students can drop in via Zoom or in person.

In addition, first-generation college students have not always learned to code switch between discourses. It's not uncommon for them to email us as if they are texting us and to expect a response within a few minutes. We can welcome students into our academic community by being explicit about the discourses of our community. For example, my syllabus lets students know that I usually respond to email within 24 hours during the week and that I do not respond at all on weekends.

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## In the end, our syllabi say as much about who we are as faculty as any piece of our scholarship does.

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Finally, many of our students feel like outsiders—often to academia in general and even more often to the communities of our disciplines. For that reason, I make a point to use invitational language such as “we” and “our” rather than “you” and “I” wherever I can.

**Design Tip #3: Assume positive behavior.** One of the most helpful things I've learned as an educator (and a parent) is that behavior is communication. Given that I hope to use unexpected behavior in my classroom as a teachable moment—for me and my students—I use my syllabus to state the expected behaviors as positively as I can.

I address behavioral expectations in a text box titled, “How can you help to create a classroom community?” I use “we” and “our” language to imply that the expectations are for all of us and benefit all of us. This subtle reframing of a list of “do's” rather than a list of “don'ts” allows me to communicate what I expect of them in a way that invites them into the community.

**Design Tip #4: Use the syllabus to generate curiosity about the course learning.** Most of us list assignment due dates and generate a course calendar of some kind. And while this can be helpful to students, it is more important to me that my students understand WHY they are learning. Why does learning matter to them, to the university, to the discipline, and/or to the world? A good syllabus should answer those questions.

I like to design each of my courses around large questions called *essential questions*. As students read our course assignment calendar (which I keep

brief to highlight the major topics and assignments), they see the weeks divided into units of learning, and each unit is guided by an essential question. Posing these essential questions helps my students to realize not just what they might learn, but why. They signal to my students that there are big ideas and big problems to solve and that we are going to engage with them. They pique curiosity.

**Design Tip #5: Use your course policies to minimize your own biases.** A couple of years ago, it occurred to me that one of my course policies of not accepting late work for major assignments was a) not exactly true, and b) leaving

lots of room for my implicit biases to have damaging effects for my students. Even with the stated policy, if a student requested an extension, I nearly always gave one. Thus, the policy-in-practice was that students could request an extension. But I was not making this option known to all students, even though some students did not know that academia often works this way. Worse, in very rare cases, I did not grant an extension, based usually on my perception of the student's deservedness. In addition, I noticed that I always provided extensions to students who shared personal details of their lives with me.



A page from Dr. Winchell's syllabus.

It struck me that my implicit biases were showing and, despite my otherwise good intentions, were having negative impacts for students who did not disclose their personal lives to me and/or with whom I was naturally most likely to empathize. That is, students who were most like me – first generation, white, academically inclined, a student athlete, economically disadvantaged – might be receiving more empathy and extensions than students who were not.

Now my late policy does better at keeping my own biases at bay. My new policy states that I will give an extension to

anyone who requests one before the due date. I can enact this policy with greater fidelity. In addition, it doesn't require students to prove their emergencies or disclose details of their personal lives to try to earn my empathy.

## Using a #RealCollege Syllabus

As much as we might design our syllabi for the #RealCollege students we have in our classrooms, our syllabi are nothing if we don't make time and space for those students to use them. We can't just tell our students to read our syllabi. They usually won't.

Instead, we need to require our students to engage with it. We can design an assignment around it or create guided small-group conversations during class time about aspects of the syllabus' policies or learning goals. We can plan a scavenger hunt assignment, leave a portion of the syllabus blank for our students' own community norms and expectations, or ask students to come to our office hours with two things they learned from the syllabus and one question they have about it.

In the end, our syllabi say as much about who we are as faculty as any piece of our scholarship does. Whether we are intentional about the implications of our syllabi design or not, we are communicating so much about who and what we value.

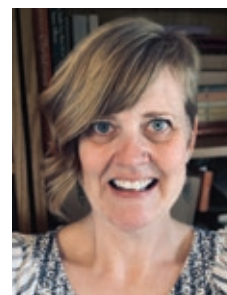
A wise teacher colleague once told me that teaching is a marathon, not a sprint. What I'm describing here has taken years of work. I've been writing syllabi since I was a high school English teacher in 1999. This work takes years and months, not weeks and days. For my part, I want my students to know how much I value them and will collaborate with them as they become robust and successful members of my discipline. And as the years go by, I hope my syllabi will change as I continue to learn what

experiences and resiliencies they bring to my courses, and what supports they need to succeed.

## Resources

Do you want to learn more? Try these resources:

- You'll find my most recent syllabus online at [bit.ly/EDMC530](http://bit.ly/EDMC530).
- If you'd like a template of that syllabus so that you can make the layout of it your own, visit [bit.ly/SyllabusTemp](http://bit.ly/SyllabusTemp).
- To increase the equity design of your syllabus, try using the "Social Justice Syllabus Design Tool" available in an article of the same name by Taylor et al., 2019, *Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity*.
- "The Syllabus: Creative Syllabi" website published by the Eberly Center of Carnegie Mellon University provides a few sample faculty syllabi with some creative ideas.
- I highly recommend reading "The 3 Essential Functions of Your Syllabus," an article in two parts by James M. Lang available from *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.
- Finally, check out the "Take the Syllabus Challenge" offered by Dr. Kim Case online at [www.drkimcase.com/resources/](http://www.drkimcase.com/resources/).



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