

Utilizing the Syllabus to Reinforce Belonging

First impressions matter. The syllabus is often a student's first introduction to the instructor and their course. For many students, this initial impression can shape their expectations and comfort level. Some may feel uncertain or anxious about what lies ahead. Instructors can help ease these concerns by using language that demonstrates respect, support, and encouragement. Framing the syllabus in a way that emphasizes shared success, and the availability of support services sends a positive message (ACUE, n.d.)

Effective structure and organization of the syllabus are also critical to fostering student belonging, particularly to neurodivergent students. For a more thorough examination of how the syllabus can foster a sense of student belonging, consider signing up for the [CETL's syllabus review service](#).

Here are some suggestions for phrases or statements instructors can include in their syllabi to help foster an environment of welcome and engagement for all students:

- **Community and Respect:** The University of Detroit Mercy recognizes that our differences can deepen our understanding of one another and the world around us, rather than divide us. In this class, all students are encouraged to bring their full selves to the learning experience. Our multiplicity strengthens our shared exploration of the subject because we come from a variety of backgrounds, life paths, and perspectives. If you ever feel uncertain about how your experiences may affect your participation or success in this course, I encourage you to speak with me so we can work together toward your success.
- **Office Hours:** Office hours are an opportunity for you to connect with me, a chance to ask clarifying questions about content, explore what you may want to do after you graduate, find support, or talk about anything (Mio, 2022).
- **School-Life Balance:** Many students face obstacles to their education as a result of work, family obligations, or unforeseen personal difficulties. If you are experiencing challenges throughout the term that are impacting your ability to succeed in this course, or in your undergraduate career more broadly, please reach out to me immediately so that we can work together to form a plan for your academic success. If you are unable to attend my office hours, please email me to set up a time that works for you (Mio, 2022).

Other Strategies for a Welcoming Syllabus



- Include required syllabus statements regarding University resources (including Student Accessibility Services).
- Acknowledge that course material may be challenging but reiterate how utilization of the resources above can assist students in overcoming challenges.
- Provide options for students to access the content based on technology, Wi-Fi, and/or time zone.
- When possible, provide low-cost or no-cost learning materials (such as Open Educational Resources) so that all students have access to materials, regardless of economic circumstances.
- Make sure materials are accessible to all learners.
- Include as much information as possible about assignments in Blackboard and in class. For example, it may be helpful to think through the following: what you are asking students to do, why you are asking them to do it (e.g. what will they learn from it), and how you will evaluate their work. Try to give as much information as possible regarding assignment requirements and expectations, grading, and evaluation criteria (e.g., will rubrics and/or previous examples be provided).

References

ACUE (n.d.) *Ensure Your Syllabus Sets the Tone for Diversity and Inclusion*. Retrieved September 19, 2023, from <https://acue.org/ensure-your-syllabus-sets-the-tone-for-diversity-and-inclusion/>.

Mio, M. (2022) CHM 2290: Organic Chemistry II [Syllabus]. Detroit, MI. University of Detroit Mercy

Additional Resources

See also UCLA Davis' work on equitable syllabi. *A DEI Course Design Rubric: Supporting Teaching and Learning in Uncertain Times*. (n.d.). Retrieved September 19, 2023, from <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2023/3/a-dei-course-design-rubric-supporting-teaching-and-learning-in-uncertain-times>.

Samples materials available at <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/12reTyJukL5NpnMWz6gyhucyEIw72KkQ> and <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/12reTyJukL5NpnMWz6gyhucyEIw72KkQF>