

Inclusive Syllabi

An Essential Tool for the Inclusive Online Classroom

The syllabus is often overlooked as a tool to build equitable and inclusive classes. The course syllabus is an essential tool that can support an inclusive classroom culture from day one. Online counselor educators must be intentional about creating a sense of community and “being together” in the digital space, particularly for learners from marginalized communities. In this teaching practice brief, the authors describe their experience of developing a scalable inclusive syllabi protocol for a CACREP-accredited online counselor education program, using language that conveys a growth mindset, connection, support for diverse populations, and normalization of resource usage for success. Implications, best practices, and implementation strategies are discussed.

CYNTHIA A. BRIGGS, REBECCA BOYLE,
AND K. ELIZABETH MCDONALD

School of Counseling, Walden University

Author Note:

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Cynthia Briggs, Walden University, email: Cynthia.briggs@mail.waldenu.edu

Introduction

The syllabus is often the first exposure learners have to a course and their instructor. In online programs with many sections of the same course, the syllabus may be created by one counselor educator and taught by the other. This means that the syllabus is posted to the classroom without personalization from the faculty member teaching the course. Syllabi typically document the assignments, materials, and grading rubrics or penalties so that the university meets accreditation and legal requirements. It also contains language that is required by the accrediting body, university, and laws. As a result, syllabi are often seen merely as a stale and obligatory contract crowded with boilerplate verbiage; students may disregard the syllabus instead of engaging with it.

Engagement in an online environment is vital to having an inviting, inclusive atmosphere that helps to mitigate attrition and keep students involved in the course. Creating an inclusive syllabus that promotes a growth mindset (Dweck, 2017) and belonging has gained support in the past few years (Orr & Hamming, 2009; Womack, 2017; Fuentes, Zelaya & Madsen, 2021; and Yarosh, 2021). The concept of growth mindset has trended in education, particularly in K-12 and STEM education, for two decades. However, there is a dearth of research about its application in counselor education. Dweck (2017) defined the growth mindset as the belief that intelligence, ability, and competence are not fixed nor finite, but can be cultivated through effort, practice, and trial and error. In contrast, the fixed mindset asserts that these qualities are firmly set and fundamentally unchangeable (Dweck, 2017). Effective communication in the online classroom includes the growth mindset attitude that learners may struggle with but ultimately can grow, develop, and achieve mastery. The inclusive syllabus provides a solid introduction to the growth mindset in an online classroom. Below is a brief literature review that explores the current scholarly support for inclusive syllabi.

RELEVANT RESEARCH AND LITERATURE SUPPORT

Across all levels of academia, there has been a push in recent years toward diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in terms of curriculum, pedagogy, and andragogy and there is ample literature and training for promoting DEI in the curriculum. Syllabi are a universal expectation in academe, but there is little research on them (Gin, Scott., Pfeiffer, Zheng, Cooper, & Brownwell, 2021) and fewer studies yet that specifically examine how the syllabus can contribute to equitable and inclusive classes.

Ludy et al., (2016) found that students preferred graphic-focused engaging syllabi over text-focused contractual syllabi. Further, they contend that students in the class with the engaging syllabus were more motivated and interested. Yarosh (2021) found similar results when comparing text rich and more visual syllabi, concluding that visual syllabi may help some students access material. Saville et al., (2010) researched the relationship between the

amount of information in a syllabus and students' perspective of faculty competence. Students who received a detailed in-depth syllabus rated their faculty member higher in competence than those with a less detailed syllabus and students demonstrated a greater willingness to recommend the teacher to others and to take a future course from them. The authors found that students perceive faculty with detailed syllabi as competent, caring, and supportive.

Gin, Scott., Pfeiffer, Zheng, Cooper, & Brownwell (2021) examined 75 biology syllabi at university for inclusive content. While syllabi included information about course content, information about creating a safe and positive course climate was rarely addressed unless the university explicitly required inclusive content. Although not research driven, Fuentes et.al. (2021) offered eight theoretically supported considerations for creating syllabi which include: (a) engaging in reflexivity; (b) adopting a diversity-centered approach; (c) highlighting diversity in the course description and acknowledging intersectionality; (d) developing diversity-centered learning objectives; (e) including a diversity statement; (f) decolonizing the syllabus; (g) fostering a family-friendly syllabus; and (h) establishing ground rules for communication. The authors believe that becoming more culturally competent is ongoing, and faculty members should always engage in self-reflection when creating their syllabi.

Many of these considerations are reflected in the Student Experience Project's (SEP) online module titled "Your Syllabus as a Tool to Promote Student Equity, Belonging, and Growth" (n.d.a). SEP is a collaborative effort involving university faculty, researchers, and academic organizations to establish and promote evidence-based practices that support inclusion in higher education. The SEP asserts that when learners feel supported and have access to resources, they are more likely to persist and succeed (SEP, n.d.b).

SEP (n.d.c) piloted the module at 16 public research universities and nearly 300 instructors took part in this training. When surveyed at the end, 90% of the participating faculty reported that the module assisted them in developing a revised syllabus with a growth mindset, and students who were surveyed on faculty's revised syllabi reported that the syllabus was more clear and more supportive of the student (SEP, n.d.c).

THE RATIONALE FOR INCLUSIVE SYLLABI

When counselors meet their clients for the first time, one of the most important tasks is to build a trusting relationship. This includes active listening, joining, building rapport, and gaining their trust. One could argue that the syllabus is a parallel process; it is our first interaction with students, so it serves the same goal of building a trusting relationship. Having an inclusive syllabus that uses welcoming language to promote a growth mindset sets the stage for a strong relationship during the course.

One of the greatest challenges in online education is building a sense of community and connection in the classroom (Foster, Neuer-Colburn, & Briggs, 2018). In an in-person classroom, communication is fluid, continual, and adaptive to various circumstances. However, in the

online classroom, communication is constrained, requiring deliberate effort on the part of instructors to effectively convey support to learners (Sarsar & Harmon, 2017).

Students from marginalized populations may be further inhibited by a lack of multicultural competence on the part of the faculty member (Foster, Neuer-Colburn, & Briggs, 2018). These students may be drawn to online education because it seems to be a more culturally neutral learning space than land-based institutions (Bawa, 2016). However, even faculty members who consider themselves accepting of diverse populations may perpetuate unconscious bias toward students with ethnically identifiable names (Conoway & Bethune, 2015). Thus, instructors must take explicit measures to ensure a welcoming, growth-minded classroom, and this effort can begin with the language presented in the syllabus.

Lack of training for faculty members can also be a barrier to effective online instruction. Faculty members must learn new technological applications and effective communication and engagement tools for online platforms (Mohamed & Zainal, 2013). In other words, in the absence of the faculty member's in-person persona, written words on a screen become the primary means of communication. A blunt message communicated face-to-face with warmth and humor will be received more favorably by learners than the same message written without that interpersonal emphasis. Thus, faculty members must intentionally use language in written form to build connections, convey support, and inspire a growth mindset.

Student engagement continues to be a struggle for online educators, particularly concerning attrition. While attrition is a problem regardless of the educational format, it is particularly problematic for online or distance learning. Persistence rates are significantly lower for distance education than face-to-face settings (Delnoij, Dirkx, Janssen & Martins, 2020). Attrition can be attributed to academic causes, such as lack of preparation. However, issues of engagement and support are the primary causes of student attrition (Mohamed & Zainal, 2013). A study of 5323 online learners revealed that students primarily desire instructor interaction and presence in the classroom (Mandernach, 2020). The authors assert that a syllabus can serve as a transformative classroom tool, and therefore must be written intentionally to increase a sense of faculty presence, connection, and support.

HOW INCLUSIVE SYLLABI ADDRESS THE NEED

To overcome obstacles to learner engagement and success, counselor educators must consider the process of online education, not just content delivery. Effective online counselor education includes language that connects with the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of both learners and instructors to bridge the technological divide and create community and a sense of connection. "Being together" in the online classroom begins with social presence and the syllabus is often the first encounter between the learner and the instructor. Intentional language and communication within the syllabus set the stage for a productive learning experience (Foster, Neuer-Colburn, & Briggs, 2018). Motivational messages that convey emotion are among the most effective communication tools for online instructors and can increase learners' motivation and engagement (Sarsar & Harmon, 2017).

Positively affecting learners' experience of the online classroom can lead to lowered attrition, improved academic outcomes, and increased engagement, particularly for learners from marginalized populations, including people of color and people experiencing financial stress (Student Experience Project, 2022). Creating a sense of belonging within the classroom is a critical component of enhancing learners' experience, and creating inclusive syllabi is the one step toward that goal.

Description of Inclusive Syllabi

The syllabus establishes the norms for the classroom and sets the tone and expectations for the term (SEP, n.d.a). Ultimately, the inclusive syllabus described below was created to follow the call to, "...ensure that students' earliest experiences in their courses promote a sense of belonging and self-efficacy that will support equity, belonging, and growth" (SEP n.d.a, para. 4). The SEP module was used as a framework to review and revise existing boilerplate language in syllabi with language that: (a) supports a growth mindset; (b) creates a sense of belonging; (c) communicates care; (d) communicates the value of diversity, equity, and inclusion; and (e) normalizes the use of university resources.

APPLICATION OF INCLUSIVE SYLLABI TO COUNSELOR EDUCATION

The authors work full-time for an online, CACREP-accredited counselor education program that attracts a diverse student body. Our counseling programs aspire to embody the *Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies* (MSJCC) by practicing inclusivity throughout our curriculum, communication, and climate (Ratts, Singh, & Butler, 2016). After taking the SEP (n.d.a) module, one of the authors invited all core faculty in the university's School of Counseling to participate in reviewing and revising existing syllabi. Five faculty and one administrator committed to a five-hour time frame to take the 90-minute SEP module, engage in one one-hour meeting, two 30-minute meetings, and 90 minutes of independent work revising boilerplate language to attend to the five goals.

Specific examples that can be used in an inclusive syllabus are as follows:

1. Support a Growth mindset: Support a growth mindset: "Each person in this course has had access to different opportunities and experiences; we are all learning together. Be open to feedback about behaviors or comments a peer or professor identifies as racist, homophobic, transphobic, ableist, or otherwise biased."
2. Create a Sense of Belonging: "When I took my first research course, I was quickly overwhelmed and wondered if I belonged in the counseling profession. I overcame these fears by..."

3. Communicate Care: “Please reach out to me if you find yourself struggling to complete the work in this course due to life events or are feeling overwhelmed by the class.” (Gin et al., 2020)
4. Communicate the value of diversity, equity, and inclusion: a land acknowledgment or digital land acknowledgement based on self-reflection and relationships with Indigenous people. For example, “[School Name] is located on the traditional and ancestral land of the Ohlone and the Muwekma Ohlone people. This region holds great historical, spiritual, and personal significance for its original stewards, the Native nations and peoples of this area. We acknowledge their connection to this land, and give thanks for the opportunity to live, work, and learn on their traditional homeland,” (Equity Accelerator, n.d., Example Syllabus, para. 1).
5. Normalize the use of university resources: “If you would like to explore accommodations and other supports to fully realize your potential, please reach out to Disability Services....”

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Inclusive syllabi that emphasize a growth mindset, connection, and inclusion align with relational ethics and promote well-being within the classroom per the current *ACA Code of Ethics*. Dispositional issues that may have been seen as problematic (e.g., reactive behavior because of lack of inclusion) may be alleviated by the more intentional use of inclusive, supportive language in syllabi.

Traditional syllabi often rely on principle ethics expectations in addressing classroom behaviors, *Principle ethics* reflect these cultural roots, resulting in rules-based standards based on a presumed sense of shared morality (Mifsud & Herlihy, 2022). For example, a traditional syllabus based on principle ethics may present a rigid late work policy that does not accommodate students’ diverse needs.

Relational ethics may prove a more culturally sensitive approach. Grounded in relational-cultural theory (RCT), relational ethics acknowledges that growth occurs through human connection and interdependence, disconnection causes distress, power dynamics cause disconnection, and interconnectedness can facilitate healing (Mifsud & Herlihy, 2022). Thus, inclusive syllabi typically apply the relational ethics perspective regarding classroom expectations and culture. In contrast to the late policy described earlier in the paragraph, a relational ethics approach would include a flexible late policy that honors the diverse circumstances of individual students while still promoting accountability.

While the American Counseling Association *Code of Ethics* (ACA, 2014) requires counselor educators uphold standards for academic, skill, and dispositional appropriateness for the profession, it also expects counselor educators to recruit and maintain diverse faculty and student populations. Thus, counselor educators may perpetuate a lack of inclusion without

a roadmap for best practices. Implementing the inclusive syllabus in the classroom can set the stage for increased engagement and consistent accountability.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

The authors recommend that counselor educators interested in creating more inclusive syllabi begin with the SEP project's numerous resources, including SEP's (n.d.a) free online module included in the first-day toolkit (SEP, n.d.b). This module includes guidance, research, and evidence-based tips to make simple yet powerful adjustments to the language and intention behind the syllabus.

While individual faculty can review and implement the tools described in this module, the authors recommend implementation within a small group or team setting. At our university, which has a large pool of counselor education faculty, a small group of seven faculty volunteers (including the three authors) completed the module, discussed it together, and created plans for implementation on a larger level including revision of an existing syllabus in our program. The collaboration created opportunities to explore blind spots and to adjust the inclusive syllabi concept based on the opportunities and restrictions within our department (e.g., we use a universal syllabus template for all sections of each course, thus any changes made need to be program-wide and general enough to apply to all courses and faculty members).

Another resource that faculty can use is the suggestions offered by Gin et al., (2021). These authors present a comprehensive table that reviews the elements of a syllabus with definitions, which students are likely to benefit from each element, how these elements can be used to promote inclusion, and supporting literature for each element. This allows the faculty to see how each section of the syllabus can promote a more inclusive environment. Gin and colleagues (2021) provide examples of inclusive language for different sections of the syllabi. For example they suggest changing, "...students should arrive on time and stay for the entire class..." to "We want to build a classroom climate that is comfortable for all, it is important that we..." (Gin et al., 2021, p. 236). Softening the tone so that it promotes a "we" mentality may resonate more with all students.

Evaluation of Effectiveness of Inclusive Syllabi

The practice of inclusive syllabi is new and there is little research to date that demonstrates how to evaluate the effectiveness of syllabi revision. However, there are related studies that provide important insight into how such evaluation might take place (Ludy et al., 2016; Saville et al., 2010; Yarosh, 2021; and SEP, 2022). These studies often have a small sample size but do offer some support for the use of inclusive language.

ASSESSMENT METHODS TO ASSESS THE IMPACT OF INCLUSIVE SYLLABI ON STUDENT LEARNING

Expectations for CACREP programs include assessment measures. Alignment with these expectations is recommended in assessing the impact of inclusive syllabi on student learning. Data must be gathered on two levels: Program evaluation and student assessment (CACREP, 2016). Inclusive syllabi can impact data collected at both levels.

First, program evaluation data include student assessment data, student demographics, and follow-up studies to examine student success and satisfaction (CACREP, 2016). These data should align with the program objectives. Examining evaluation data from pre- and post-inclusive syllabi implementation using existing program practices may yield shifts in retention of diverse students, and overall program satisfaction.

At the student assessment level, key performance indicators (KPIs) assess the attainment of knowledge and skill in core CACREP areas. In addition to KPIs, learners in counseling programs are expected to demonstrate professional dispositions appropriate to the profession (CACREP, 2016). Via the syllabus, communicating a growth vs. fixed mindset, normalizing the use of resources to attain success, and using inclusive language to create belonging should create a ripple effect that may positively impact both the attainment of KPIs and the demonstration of professional dispositions. Per CACREP expectations, examining multiple data points at critical moments in the program (e.g., during pre-practicum or field experience) and comparing those points to pre-inclusive syllabi teaching may reveal positive trends.

In addition, the SEP (2022) recommends real-time data using an iterative approach in the classroom. This data collection approach empowers faculty members to more readily support students who may be struggling and to highlight gains made in the classroom because of their teaching practice. Real-time data collection can also highlight disparities in achievement among various demographic groups, which can indicate areas for improvement and change at the programmatic level (SEP, 2022). Real-time data can be gathered via digital anonymous surveys, exit slips (written responses to a prompt that are given to the faculty member at the end of class), small or focus group discussions, or documenting classroom observations (Alber, 2017). The authors' university intends to pilot a more inclusive syllabus in multiple courses in our CACREP accredited program as well as non-counseling programs in the Spring 2023 term. To date, assessment methods in previous studies have used a simple t-test to compare syllabi or used a short survey to gain information about the syllabus (Yarosh, 2021; SEP, 2022).

Discussion & Implications

The use of inclusive syllabi in the counselor education classroom is a novel approach that lacks profession-specific data. However, adopting these practices is a simple, accessible, creative, and potentially transformative approach to building an inclusive community of learners that in

turn will enrich our profession with diverse viewpoints. While there are unanswered questions to be explored, there exists the potential for future research and application.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS AND/OR LIMITATIONS

Creating inclusive syllabi is a novel concept and little research exists to support best practices or universal standards counselor educators might rely upon to develop their syllabi. However, research on the impact of inclusivity in the classroom is more robust, and the inclusive syllabus is a natural extension (Fuentes et al., 2021). Thus, the authors feel counselor educators can adopt these principles with confidence that inclusive language in the syllabus meets both pedagogical best practices and the counseling profession's commitment to social justice.

Another limitation relates to the structure of the counseling program. The authors' program, for example, is large and online. Syllabi are created from a standard template and are the same across all sections of a course. Thus, faculty members can't individualize the syllabus to facilitate relational connections with students (e.g., faculty members cannot include a personal bio in the syllabus as recommended by the SEP).

In smaller programs where faculty members can personalize their syllabi, the question of standards re-emerges. What parameters should faculty exercise around self-disclosure? What microaggressions may occur through unexamined bias? Faculty must enact care and self-awareness to create syllabi that achieve the desired intent.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

The authors and their colleagues are in the early stages of implementing inclusive syllabi concepts university wide. Evaluation and feedback gleaned from student outcome data and faculty experience will inform our future efforts. From a larger perspective, creating culture change in higher education toward a more inclusive, supported, and resourced landscape aligns with the counseling profession's commitment to multicultural equity and social justice. In addition, the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic disrupted many established norms and expectations in higher education, for example, face-to-face learning as the default. The pandemic also exposed and exacerbated the financial strain felt by many learners, resulting in partial student loan debt forgiveness at the national level. These changes have created an extraordinary opportunity for faculty members to reinvent traditional ways of teaching and administering educational programs.

Thus, future directions for research and practice in counselor education include examination of outside influences that may prove detrimental to academic success, including the strain of poverty and resource limitation, the burdens of caregiving, and/or the absence of basic needs (e.g., secure housing). While higher education cannot solve these problems, awareness of their influence on academic attainment, and creating a culture of inclusion through policies and practice may further enrich the diversity of our profession and the success of our students (SEP, 2022).

References

- Alber, R. (2017, March). Three ways student data can inform your teaching. *Edutopia*. Retrieved from <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/using-student-data-inform-teaching-rebecca-alber>
- American Counseling Association. (2014). *ACA code of ethics*. Retrieved from <https://www.counseling.org/resources/aca-code-of-ethics.pdf>
- Bawa, P. (2016). Retention in online courses: Exploring issues and solutions - A literature review. *SAGE Open*, 6(1), 1-11. doi: 10.1177/2158244015621777
- CACREP. (2016). Guiding principles for program evaluation and student assessment: Section 4 of the 2016 CACREP standards. Retrieved from <http://www.cacrep.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Guiding-Principles-for-Program-Evaluation-and-Student-Assessment.pdf>
- Conoway, W., & Bethune, S. (2015). Implicit bias and first name stereotypes: What are the implications for online instruction? *Online Learning*, 19, 162-178.
- Delnoij, L. E., Dirkx, K. J., Janssen, J. P., & Martens, R. L. (2020). Predicting and resolving non-completion in higher (online) education—A literature review. *Educational Research Review*, 29, 100313. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2020.100313>
- Equity Accelerator. (n.d.). *Example syllabus: Attuned to syllabus experience*. <https://collegetransitioncollaborative.org/example-syllabus-attuned/>
- Foster, L., Neuer-Colburn, A., & Briggs, C. (2018). Language and online learning: Inform, inspire, and engage virtual learning communities. *The Journal of Counselor Preparation and Supervision*, 11(1). Retrieved from <https://repository.wcsu.edu/jcps/vol11/iss1/6>
- Fuentes, M. A., Zelaya, D. G., & Madsen, J. W. (2021). Rethinking the course syllabus: Considerations for promoting equity, diversity, and inclusion. *Teaching of Psychology*, 48(1), 69–79. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0098628320959979>
- Gin, L.E, Scott, R.A., Pfeiffer, L.D., Zheng, Y., Cooper, K.M., & Brownwell, S. E. (2021). It's in the syllabus...or is it? How biology syllabi can serve as communication tools for creating inclusive classrooms at a large-enrollment research institution. *Advances in Physiology Education*, 45, 224-240. <https://doi:10.1152/advan.00119.2020>
- Ludy, M; Brackenbury, T., Folkins, J. W., Peet, S. H., Langendorfer, S. J., & Beining, K. (2016). Student impressions of syllabus design: Engaging versus contractual syllabus. *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 10(2). Article 6. <https://doi.org/10.20429/ijstol.2016.100206>
- Mandernach, B. J. (2020, February). *Teach smarter: Five strategies for effective (and efficient) online teaching* [Conference Presentation]. Transforming the Teaching & Learning Environment Virtual Conference, Northeastern University, United States. Retrieved from <https://ducmediasite.passhe.edu/Mediasite/Play/f177cf72bbc940ce9ebf8e9d6d1057e21d>
- Mifsud, A., & Herlihy, B. (2022). Ethical standards for a post-COVID-19 world. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*, 44(1), 82-96.
- Mohamed, N.H.B., & Zainal, A. (2013, May). *Factors influencing attrition rate among online adult learners: A guide to counselling services for adult learners in open and distance learning (ODL) institutions*. Presented at the 3rd Malindo International Counseling Conference, University of Malaysia Sabah. Retrieved from file:///Users/cyndibriggs/Downloads/FactorsInfluencingAttritionRateAmongOnlineAdultLearners.pdf
- Orr, A. C., & Hammig, S. B. (2009). Inclusive postsecondary strategies for teaching students with learning disabilities: A review of the literature. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 32(3), 181–196. <https://doi.org/10.2307/27740367>
- Sarsar, F. & Harmon, S. (2017). Student and instructor responses to emotional motivational feedback messages in an online instructional environment. *The Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology*, 16(1), 115-127.
- Saville, B. K., Zinn, T. E., Brown, A. R., & Marchuk, K. A. (2010). Syllabus detail and students' perceptions of teacher effectiveness. *Teaching of Psychology*, 37(3), 186–189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00986283.2010.488523>
- Student Experience Project (SEP). (n.d.a). *Your syllabus as a tool to promote student equity, belonging, and growth*. Retrieved from <https://library.studentexperienceproject.org/courses/syllabus>
- Student Experience Project (SEP). (n.d.b). *Our work*. Retrieved from <https://studentexperienceproject.org/our-work/#our-work-research-base>
- Student Experience Project (SEP). (n.d.c). *First day toolkit*. Retrieved from <https://studentexperienceproject.org/firstdaytoolkit/>

Student Experience Project (SEP). (2022). *Increasing equity in college student experience: Findings from a national collaborative*. Retrieved from <https://studentexperienceproject.org/report/>

Womack, A.-M. (2017). Teaching is accommodation: Universally designing composition classrooms and syllabi. *College Composition and Communication*, 68(3), 494–525. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44783578>

Yarosh, J. H. (2021). The syllabus reconstructed: An analysis of traditional and visual syllabi for information retention and inclusiveness. *Teaching Sociology*, 49(2), 173–183. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0092055X21996784>