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# Creating a Friendlier Syllabus

Course syllabi set the tone for the whole semester. With the help of a new tool kit, some instructors are overhauling theirs to make them more welcoming, inclusive and focused on student success.

By [Maria Carrasco \(/users/maria-carrasco\)](#) // April 21, 2022

A new tool kit that launches today aims to help college instructors revise their syllabi to include more supportive language and resources, in an effort to put students at ease and create a more welcoming learning environment.

[The First Day Toolkit \(https://library.studentexperienceproject.org/courses/syllabus\)](https://library.studentexperienceproject.org/courses/syllabus), developed by the Student Experience Project—a collaborative of university leaders, faculty, researchers and national education organizations dedicated to tackling student inequities—provides a revision module and guide for instructors to re-evaluate their syllabi. The module includes video demonstrations, sample syllabi and a instructor to lead professors through the revision process.

The goal is to promote equity, belonging and growth from the moment an instructor hands out the syllabus on the first day of class, said Samantha Levine, associate director of Coalition of Urban Serving Universities (USU), a member organization of the Student Experience Project.

“One way in which the tone in the classroom is set is on the first day of class,” Levine said. “And so much of that comes from the course syllabus, the way that the instructor talks about the course to students on the first day of class, and how they talk about expectations around coursework.”

The online tool kit also aims to make syllabus revisions easier for instructors so they can complete their revisions on their own time, Levine said. And for instructors who want to work collaboratively, the tool kit provides a guide for conducting workshops using different discussion prompts and activities.

Additionally, it offers a list of first-day practices for professors, such as framing the discussion about coursework expectations with student success in mind.

“The syllabus revision also impacted the messaging that faculty put in their lecture slides about utilizing academic resources, and it impacted how some faculty now send welcome emails at the start of the class,” Levine said. “It just really kind of set the tone, even before the class starts, that this is a learning environment where the instructor believes that all students are capable of succeeding.”

Levine said one of the most common revisions a pilot group of instructors made was to change the term “office hours” to “student drop-in hours,” which they explained to students is a time reserved for helping them succeed.

The test group also followed the tool kit’s advice to add a note to their syllabi telling students to reach out if they have trouble accessing textbooks, because of cost or any other reason. Levine said when she collected feedback from students on the revised syllabi, they appreciated that instructors acknowledged the barriers they might face when obtaining course materials.

“There was a student who circled that paragraph and wrote a note next to it that said, ‘Textbooks are so expensive and they can be really challenging for students who are already struggling to get by. So the fact that the professor put this in the syllabus shows me that this person is an ally, and a person who cares,’” Levine said. “It also shows students that there’s no shame in asking them if they need help with something like that.”

The COVID-19 pandemic dictated at least one common revision, Levine said—the tool kit prompts instructors to include statements recognizing that students might have responsibilities as caregivers, and reminding them that they should ask for support.

In fact, the whole idea for the tool kit took off in the pandemic summer of 2020, during a Zoom workshop with a group of professors from the Student Experience Project’s six cohort institutions: Colorado State University, the University of Colorado at Denver, the University of New Mexico, the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Portland State University and the University of Toledo.

The instructors were shown research from the past decade showing that establishing supportive learning environments is particularly important for structurally disadvantaged students, including Black, Latinx, first-generation and transfer students, as well as Pell Grant recipients. With that research in mind, the instructors were invited to revise their syllabi and come back in a week to share them.

Levine said those who participated in the workshop highly valued the experience, but some found it challenging to carve out time for two sessions over a two-week period.

So the Student Experience Project transformed the Zoom workshop into an online video module, which piloted in November 2020 and April 2021 at the six cohort institutions. Since then, members of the Student Experience Project have worked to fine-tune the module, ultimately creating the tool kit that debuted Thursday.

Laurel Hartley, a professor of biology at CU Denver, changed things up after she attended the initial workshop in the summer of 2020. In the past, she only altered her syllabi to change key dates, but since then she changes it every semester to make sure it’s inclusive. The tool kit helped her remove exclusive language from her syllabi, including the phrase “required textbook,” which she realized could be insensitive to students, she said.

“Is it necessary that they have the latest edition of this thing?” she asked herself. “What hardships might that put them under?”

Hartley said sometimes syllabi lack inclusive language because they're passed down from a much older generation.

"I'm not the first person to teach Introductory Biology at CU Denver," Hartley said. "And I think what happens when you get a new position is that they give you the syllabus that the person before you had, and that person got it from the person before them. And there are just little holdovers of things that you wouldn't want to say anymore."

One thing she added was a "belonging letter," which the tool kit described as a personal letter to students to welcome them to the course and demonstrate that the instructor cares about them. She and the rest of the biology department worked on creating these letters to introduce the class to the students and then tell them a story about themselves.

"In most of my undergraduate classes, I was the quiet student off to the side," Hartley wrote in her belonging letter, which she shared with *Inside Higher Ed*. "I was quiet because I was afraid of saying something stupid in front of other people. I wish someone had told me that anyone who is learning something new will be wrong a lot. If you are open with others, that gives them the opportunity to help you think more clearly and advance more efficiently. Helping others when you understand and they don't is the collegial thing to do, and it will strengthen your own skills. Sometimes you will need help and sometimes you will be in a position to offer help. In this class, I want you to be open, accept help, ask for help, and offer help. If we can do this, we will all rise to a very high level of achievement."

Hartley said she knows many students think of introductory STEM courses as "gatekeeper courses," which deter some students from pursuing a STEM degree. To help, she added to her syllabus a list of her beliefs to encourage students to stick with STEM:

These are my beliefs:

- Anyone can be a scientist.
- ALL students are capable of greatness.
- You are worthy of my best efforts as a teacher.
- I authentically care about your success, and I also care about your well-being.
- If you engage in the learning exercises in the course, you will pass the class and achieve a high level of content and skills mastery.

Laurel Hartley, a professor of biology at CU Denver, shared a list of beliefs she added to her syllabus to make it more inclusive.

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Out of the nearly 300 instructors who have already used the tool kit to revise their syllabi, more than 90 percent said they would recommend the training to a colleague. Ninety percent also said the training helped them

incorporate a growth mind-set into their syllabus, underscoring the idea that intelligence can be developed through practice and that failure is part of learning. The instructors were evenly divided among STEM, liberal arts and other disciplines.

Levine said none of the instructors opposed the syllabi revision tool kit, but some were ambivalent about it.

And out of the students who took courses with revised syllabi, 25 percent said the documents were more supportive, and 8 percent said they were clearer than previous syllabi from the same instructor.

Hartley said her students showed their enthusiasm for the revisions on the course evaluations they filled out.

“There were phrases that I saw from a lot of students that I didn’t see before,” Hartley said. “‘She really cares and wants us to succeed.’ ‘This class is not viewed as a weed out class’ and ‘Dr. Hartley really wants us to pass.’”

Levine said she hopes more instructors use the tool kit. USU, part of the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, will help promote the tool kit’s launch.

“We’ve gotten quite a bit of interest from talking about it at higher education conferences and in other spaces,” Levine said. “We’re really looking for people to see it as a great asset and an add-on to some of the work that they’re already doing on their campuses to engage faculty with inclusive teaching practices.”

*Read more by [Maria Carrasco \(/users/maria-carrasco\)](/users/maria-carrasco)*