

Crafting Inclusive Syllabi

Tips for Bentley Instructors



Introduction

[Richmond, Morgan, et al. \(2018\)](#) highlight the impact of a well-crafted syllabus on an instructor's first impression with students. As both a road map for course expectations and a student's guide to course policies and deadlines, an effective syllabus can reduce faculty workload, relieve students' cognitive load, and set up students from a variety of backgrounds to succeed.

The [Bentley Equity Experience report](#) indicates that 23% of students self-identified as first-generation as of December, 2022, and 7% of the community disclosed that they had a disability. 32% of students identified as BIPOC. To ensure that these students succeed despite potential disadvantages outside of their control, it is doubly important to create a syllabus that is not only learner-centered, but also inclusive of our diverse community at Bentley.

Here, we have assembled some key points you should consider before writing your syllabus to ensure that you create an inclusive document that welcomes students from all backgrounds.

Key Points to Consider When Writing Your Syllabus:

Student Demographics

Are you teaching a first-year undergraduate course or a capstone course? Will there be a significant population of first-generation students? Is this an introductory course, or a course students take later in the curriculum? Have you created a syllabus that reflects the diverse population at Bentley by providing a variety of perspectives on the issues you will discuss with students?

When writing your syllabus content, you should aim to write at the level of students who will require the most assistance in your course. Avoid excessive jargon, especially if you are teaching a course that is frequently offered to first-year students and sophomores or as a general education requirement. By writing in language that all students can understand, you create an environment that invites students to explore a field or topic that is unfamiliar to them rather than alienating those who struggle to understand how they can succeed in your course.

Course Goals and Outcomes

When planning out your syllabus, you should identify a few aspirational goals that all students will be able to achieve by the end of the course. Identify goals that are specific to the course and align with the

level you are teaching. For example, students at a lower level may only need to identify definitions of key concepts, but more advanced students might be expected to analyze the concept, or even generate their own project based on previous knowledge. If you feel the need to identify subcategories of the skills, you can expand upon course goals at the weekly level by using Brightspace or course e-mails.

When reflecting on course goals, it can be easy to focus only on what students should understand. As you refine the course goals for your syllabus, examine the key concepts you want the students to learn and identify how they will demonstrate that knowledge. For example, if students understand the concept of a metaphor, they will be able to identify metaphors within a given text. If they understand the interactions between supply and demand, they will be able to predict the shift in supply if given the demand. These actions that students should be able to do by the end of your course are the outcomes that demonstrate achievement of course goals. Each course goal should have between one and three outcomes that tell students how they will be asked to demonstrate their knowledge. For more detailed examples, see the shell syllabi on the [Syllabus Design](#) page.

Key Policies

When articulating your course policies, you have an opportunity to establish a welcoming environment in addition to setting academic expectations. In this section of your syllabus, it is especially important to write clearly so that students understand how best to succeed in your course. If you are concerned about conveying nuances without overburdening students in the syllabus, consider posting a short video in Brightspace that explains that policy in detail, or encourage students to communicate any questions to you directly.

At the very least, your syllabus should include your contact info and preferred means of communication, grading policies, participation and attendance expectations, a schedule of assignments and other due dates, and policies for attendance and late or make-up work. Other, institutional policies can be hyperlinked on your syllabus, but you are welcome to include the full text if you so choose.

In this section, you can also contribute to the welcoming environment of your course by expressing an openness to partner with students in the event of a conflict or extenuating circumstances.

Positive Framing

In their study on learner-centered syllabi, [Richmond, Morgan, et al. \(2018\)](#) noted that “instead of the length of the syllabus as a factor associated with learner-centered design, the language [instructors] use in their syllabus may be more important.” When writing your syllabus, focus on the positive aspect of what you are trying to say. For example, instead of focusing on points that students lose for late work, rephrase the policy to indicate the maximum percentage of points students can earn on late assignments.

By creating an atmosphere that centers student growth and potential to succeed rather than punitive policies, you can further enhance the welcoming environment of your course. If students require ongoing care and support, you should guide them to seek help from Academic Services.

Accessibility

[Kevin Gannon \(2018\)](#) posits that “reframing ‘accessibility’ as a matter for the entire class — and not just a few student ‘exceptions’ who need to be ‘accommodated’ — can contribute to the inviting tone and motivational qualities that make for an effective syllabus.” Oftentimes, the changes required to accommodate students in need of additional support are as simple as more conscientious teaching practices. For example, breaking long readings into smaller chunks with short checkpoints along the way can help students with short attention spans or those who struggle to organize and prioritize content. This strategy not only supports those who need it, but also helps all students check in while reading the material to ensure understanding.

Visually, small adjustments can not only provide access for those who need extra support but can also make it easier for everyone to navigate the text. By utilizing white space and inserting adequate spacing between sections, you have created a clear hierarchy of content for all students. Using accessible fonts such as Arial, Calibri, or Times New Roman provides access for students with diverse learning needs and reduces cognitive load for everyone else. If students can do less work to read your text, they will be able to focus more energy on applying the policies and guidelines outlined in the syllabus.

Conclusion

By incorporating the key points described above, you can create an inclusive, learner-centered syllabus that helps create a positive first impression of your course. Currently, Bentley welcomes a large population of first-generation students and

students from other diverse backgrounds. According to the *Condition of Education* survey (2022), 40% of full-time undergraduate students and 74% of part-time students were employed while enrolled in higher education, which adds additional stressors and leaves less time to navigate lengthy syllabi. As we incorporate these considerations into future syllabi, we hope to create an environment where a greater number of students are not just encouraged to, but able to succeed.

Works Cited:

Gannon, K. (2018). How to create a syllabus: Advice guide. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved February 7, 2023, from <https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-to-create-a-syllabus/>

Office of Diversity and Inclusion (2022). *The Bentley Equity Experience*. <https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/institutional.research7108/viz/TheBentleyEquityExperience/Home>

Richmond, A. S., Morgan, R. K., Slattery, J. M., Mitchell, N. G., & Cooper, A. G. (2018). Project Syllabus: An Exploratory Study of Learner-Centered Syllabi. *Teaching of Psychology*, 46(1), 6–15. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0098628318816129>

Additional Resources:

[Bentley University Inclusive Pedagogy Page:](https://www.bentley.edu/academics/offices/provost/inclusive-teaching)

<https://www.bentley.edu/academics/offices/provost/inclusive-teaching>

[Board of Internet Accessibility blog on accessible fonts:](https://www.boia.org/blog/best-fonts-to-use-for-website-accessibility)

[https://www.boia.org/blog/best-fonts-to-use-for-website-accessibility.](https://www.boia.org/blog/best-fonts-to-use-for-website-accessibility)

[Syllabus Design](https://www.bentley.edu/academics/offices/provost/syllabus)

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