



# Ensure Students Are Learning:

## Guidelines for Creating an Equity-Minded Syllabus

**Suggested Citation:** Keist, J. A. & Dyer-Barr, R. (2020). *Ensure students are learning: Guidelines for creating an equity-minded syllabus*. Center for Community College Student Engagement & Office of Community College Research and Leadership.

## What is an equity-minded syllabus and why is it important?

An equity-minded syllabus, like all syllabi, is a guide for a course and a contract between instructors and students that determines how students are evaluated. However, equity-minded syllabi are purposefully developed to be equitable in both their design and efforts to foster equitable learning outcomes. Equity-minded syllabi are culturally responsive and inclusive, incorporating culturally responsive pedagogy, which consists of teaching in a way that centers multiethnic cultural frames of reference (Gay, 2000); they are tacitly conscious of race and informed by teaching and learning practices that recognize, respect, and utilize the diverse lived experiences and cultural and linguistic knowledge of students.

As instructors plan how they will engage students within a specific discipline of study, there are myriad variables that must be considered and reflected upon if the instructor is to effectively employ equity-mindedness within the classroom, including the instructor's epistemological knowledge claims (i.e., "where does valid knowledge come from?") (Clayton, 2007) and the unique (and intersectional) backgrounds of minoritized student groups.

Ross-Gordon (1993) reminds us that, even though "many groups share in the subordinate social status and selective discrimination that 'minorities' often implies, each cultural group has its own history, values, and customs" (p. 53). In structuring an inclusive classroom, Tisdell (1995) prompts us to ask, "inclusive of whom" and "in what context(s)?" (p. 3). Furthermore, Tisdell (1995) asks us to consider inclusivity at three levels when creating learning environments that: (1) "reflect the diversity of those present in the learning activity itself in the curriculum and pedagogical/andragogical style; (2) attend to the wider and immediate institutional contexts in which the participants work and live; and (3) in some way reflect the changing needs of an increasingly diverse society" (p. 4).

Working to develop an equity-minded syllabus is a wonderful opportunity for instructors to foster and promote racial equity and equity-minded practices. Developing an equity-minded syllabus requires instructors to engage in some degree of introspection and self-reflection around their teaching practices and course content, and to pay specific attention to the effects on students and their learning outcomes—especially racially

or ethnically minoritized students. It is an opportunity for instructors to purposefully evaluate and establish the goals of the course, the norms and rules of the classroom, the expectations for students, and the supports offered within the course—and to assess whether these elements are appropriately focused on equity.

Ultimately, the course syllabus should be both equity-minded and culturally inclusive, as should the classroom more broadly. Instructors must strive to ensure this by actively seeking to identify their own assumptions and biases about students and the world. Educators must also recognize and address the ways in which their own positionality impacts their pedagogy. This encompasses what they teach, how they teach, the resources they utilize, and their interactions with students, particularly their racially and ethnically minoritized students. For an expanded discussion on this topic, see Keist and Dyer-Barr (2020).

## References

- Clayton, C. D. (2007). Curriculum making as novice professional development: Practical risk taking as learning in high-stakes times. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 58(3), 216-230.
- Gay, G. (2018). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice* (3rd ed.). Teachers College Press.
- Keist, J. A., & Dyer-Barr, R. (2020). *Centering Equity-Mindedness in Syllabus Construction* (Issue Brief 2). Office of Community College Research and Leadership; Center for Community College Student Engagement.
- Ross-Gordon, J. (1993). Multicultural issues in adult education: Where we've come from, where we are now, where we're going. *PAACE Journal of Lifelong Learning*, 2, 43-56.
- Tisdell, E. (1995). *Creating inclusive adult learning environments: Insights from multicultural education and feminist pedagogy*. Information Series No. 361. ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, Center on Education and Training for Employment, The Ohio State University.