The Need for Equity and Inclusion in our Classrooms

A 2019 Pew study links the surge in the number of undergraduate students over the past two decades to increased enrollments by students of color and those from low-income families. The share of undergraduates from families at or below the poverty line went from 12 percent in 1996 to 20 percent in 2016, while the share of non-White undergraduates rose from 29 to 47 percent over the same period. As educators, we seek to welcome students from a variety of backgrounds, including those who are the first in their families to attend college, those who come from historically marginalized communities, and those of different religions and nationalities, of different abilities, or with different gender or sexual identities.

This document is intended to provide resources to assist in the design and implementation of courses in the Department of Political Science that are maximally respectful of diversity and that seek to promote equity and inclusion, wherever possible. We intend it to be a living document and welcome suggestions for edits and additions. We also understand that changing an entire course can take a lot of time and energy. If you find this list of suggestions overwhelming, consider making just one change to improve your course each time you teach it.

Course Design

- Although written with psychology courses in mind, this short article by Littleford and Nolan describes how we should think about cultural diversity when developing our courses. First, it encourages us to ask ourselves the following, possibly difficult questions:

    (a) What are **my own assumptions** about students from diverse backgrounds? (See the bottom of this page for some problematic assumptions.)

    (b) What do I need to **know about my students' worldviews** that will impact the way they engage with course material? (To better understand your students' perspectives, consider asking them to fill out an informative survey at the beginning of the semester.)

    (c) Am I using teaching **strategies that are inclusive** of students from a variety of backgrounds?

    To develop a more inclusive course, Littleford and Nolan suggest including: curricular activities that allow students to enhance their **awareness of their own backgrounds and beliefs about others**; empirical literature that allows students to **learn more about people from different backgrounds**; ways of highlighting **the diversity of researchers** that produced course content; and using **examples** throughout the course to highlight diversity. For each, they provide examples and tips.

- When designing your course, it may be helpful to work backwards: first, defining the **objectives** for the course; second, identifying what would count as **evidence of success**; and, finally, **planning each unit** with an eye towards building towards those

objectives and gathering that evidence. When doing this, it may be helpful to consider the <u>diversity</u> of the students you are <u>likely to be teaching</u>: majors and non-majors; first-year students to upperclassmen; <u>first-generation</u> students; those requiring <u>DRES accommodations</u>, including for <u>mental health</u> considerations; and those who vary in terms of their <u>nationality</u>, <u>immigration status</u>, <u>ethnicity</u>, <u>religion</u>, <u>gender identity</u>, and <u>sexuality</u>. Ensure that your goals, evidence, and units serve your students as equitably as possible. This <u>checklist</u> may also be helpful before finalizing course content.

- Although it hasn't been <u>rigorously tested</u>, there is a well-worn <u>framework</u> that encourages educators to diversify the ways in which they connect with students, specifically offering a variety of means of **engagement**, **representation**, and **action/expression**. There are a number of <u>resources</u> available to guide faculty through defining appropriate <u>learning goals</u>, designing varied means of <u>assessment</u>, and incorporating <u>Learning Management Systems</u> (LMS) into their overall course design.

- This <u>survey</u> may be helpful when considering how to align faculty style with student needs. It covers a number of topics, including learning objectives, assessment, and content. Perhaps more importantly, it encourages faculty to keep a number of different factors in mind when designing their course, such as the likely **student population**, the **relevance** of course material to their day-to-day lives, and the wide variety of pedagogical options available.

- If your course is held <u>online</u> or is hybrid, there are additional guidelines to keep in mind. Key to success in an online environment is **accessibility** – ensuring that the material is able to reach all students, including those with limited access to computers and the internet – and **flexibility** – updating your go-to pedagogical tools to take advantage of this new medium and the opportunities it provides. Recognize that students may behave differently towards you or one another in an online environment, so it is important to develop systems for handling conflicts that arise in chats or discussion boards. That said, online environments may also <u>support equity and inclusion</u>, so look for ways of promoting their benefits while minimizing their costs.

Writing an Inclusive Syllabus with Accessible Course Materials

- The Center for Innovation in Teaching and Learning at UIUC offers a set of <u>basic guidelines</u> for how to organize your syllabus. Beyond these basic requirements, there are <u>additional guidelines</u> from the Provost's office and an additional set from the <u>College of LAS</u> that should also be included in every syllabus: a clear **absence policy**; a statement about **academic integrity**; and lists of resources relating to **mental health**, students with **disabilities**, **religious** accommodations, and **sexual misconduct**, among others. These represent the minimum requirements. If we recognize that the syllabus serves as a <u>learning tool, as well as a contract</u>, we can use it to set the tone for the semester to come.

- The Accessible Syllabus project offers useful advice when it comes to constructing a syllabus, from the best ways to <u>phrase expectations and policies</u> – emphasizing positive

over punitive, invitations over commands, and cooperation over paternalism – to the ways in which policies can be designed with equity and inclusion in mind. They also make suggestions for the best way to format a syllabus and encourage the use of visual representations whenever possible.

- You may consider including an explicit diversity statement in your syllabus, in addition to a statement about your expectations for in-class civility. Feel free to list your pronouns in order to signal to your students that they can share theirs. You may also consider designing a set of policies for **students with childcare responsibilities**. Many UIUC faculty also include a land acknowledgement statement in their syllabi. Additional considerations for how to promote equity, diversity, and inclusion in your course syllabus are provided here.

- Studies (here, here, and here) show that syllabi often fail to include work from a diverse set of authors. After selecting reading materials for your course, you can use existing tools to confirm the racial and gender balance of your syllabus. For more on the tool's design, see here. Once you have created a balanced syllabus, you might consider highlighting its diversity to your students. Fuentes et al. (2021) suggest adding the following language to the Required Reading list: "The following text/articles for the course have been chosen in efforts to highlight the important work of historically underrepresented and marginalized scholars in the field" (p. 75).

- When selecting materials for your course, make sure all audio, video, and written files are available in accessible formats and that they can accommodate different reading and technology skills. CITL suggests that all audio files should come with transcripts, and all videos with captions. Any documents that are shared should be screen-reader friendly. They provide a set of guidelines for making Word documents, PDFs, PowerPoint slides, Excel spreadsheets, and HTML documents accessible. The DRES office has an additional set of guides and resources to explore.

Designing Appropriate Assessments

- In a series of randomized experiments, transparency in assignments was found to increase university students' learning, especially among underserved students, by boosting their academic confidence, sense of belonging, and mastery of skills in the short- and long-term.

  Transparency entails a discussion with students about assignments before they are distributed:

  (a) **Purpose**: Why the instructor has chosen this particular assignment; what the students stand to gain from completing the assignment; how these skills could be useful beyond the classroom setting.

  (b) Details about the specific **tasks** involved.

(c) Information about the **criteria** by which the work will be evaluated, including multiple examples of how these are applied in practice.

Winkelmas (2019) suggests making the purpose, tasks, and criteria explicit at the top of each assignment and provides helpful templates for faculty to use. Whenever possible, faculty are urged to connect tasks with data about "how people learn." After assignments are graded, lead students through a discussion of their performance, urging them to identify patterns in the particular tasks or criteria that they have a tendency to miss.

In addition to the cited material, here is a list of helpful resources from the Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TILT) project, including videos of varying lengths.

- In addition to transparency, this guide offers additional suggestions for creating inclusive assignments. It encourages faculty to offer students **different ways** of demonstrating their mastery of the material, which is especially important for students with disabilities and those for whom English is their second language. It also offers tips for **group assignments**, suggesting that roles (including leadership roles) are clearly defined and meant to rotate among group members. There are additional tips available for designing group work with cross-cultural diversity in mind.

- Once you have put together your set of assignments, consider working through this checklist. Ensure that you have: clearly described how students will be evaluated; **listed** all required assignments in the syllabus; offered different **types of assessments**, varying between product assessments, performance assessments, and process-focused ones; included an ungraded or **low-stakes assessment** early in the semester that builds towards larger assignments or exams; and written **exam questions** that reflect different sources of information, from in-class presentations and discussions, to assigned readings.

Designing Appropriate Evaluative Practices

- **Rubrics** have been shown to be an effective method for offering students regular feedback about the quality of their coursework. Specifically, rubrics seem to help improve students' self-esteem, motivating them to put in more effort towards effective learning. There is also evidence that rubrics improve feelings of fairness and reduce concerns about bias.

Rubrics make explicit how students will be assessed. To create a rubric, define the **criteria** to be evaluated. For each, determine the **levels of assessment** and describe each level for each criterion. Enter a set number of points (or a percentage) for each level within each criterion. Make this rubric **available** to students when they are given the assignment, and then make the scored rubric available to them when their grades are posted. Canvas supports the use of grading rubrics.

- The use of **anonymous grading** has been found to reduce "halo bias" – reflecting students' past performance – as well as (implicit) bias targeting students of a particular race or ethnicity. Canvas supports the use of anonymous grading of students'

assignments. Just ask that students leave all identifying information off their written work, including in filenames.

- A randomized experiment indicates the importance of "wise feedback," especially for motivating students of color. If critical feedback can be framed appropriately – by emphasizing our high **standards** and our belief that our students are **capable** of meeting these standards – students are more likely to remain motivated to complete assignments, and the quality of their work is likely to improve.

- Carefully consider how your evaluative practices may inadvertently harm **non-native English-speakers**. There is some evidence of grading bias against non-native English-speakers, and different factors predict high grades in native and non-native written work. Unfortunately, there is not (yet) a good set of guidelines for how to identify and correct this bias. We hope to add more information on this question as studies are fielded and results released.

- If you include in-class participation in your final assessment, be aware of well-established inequities in who participates: Yaylacı and Beauvais find that, among undergraduates in political science courses, participation varies with gender, race, and English proficiency. Our experience at UIUC also indicates that transfer students may struggle to speak up in class. To understand why some students may hesitate to participate, see here and here. Although faculty do not have full control over creating a welcoming environment for universal participation, there are steps we can take to encourage more students to feel comfortable speaking up. These include explaining why student contributions are so valuable, and defining explicit norms for how participation will be regulated and assessed.

  It is easy for implicit biases to impact all of our student assessments, but this is especially common in how we evaluate in-class participation. Some alternative ways of assessing participation include reframing it as skill-building or using an alternative, short (one-minute) written assignment to gather similar information.

- Consider including inclusive practices for addressing academic integrity: an open discussion about the **importance of citations**, as well as a conversation with students about their experiences and expectations around citation practices; a similar conversation about the difference between **individual- and group-work**; and discussion of the importance of **time-management** for success in the classroom.

Maximizing Accessibility and Supporting Accommodations

- Read up about campus protocols for supporting students with DRES accommodations. Accommodations may include (but are not limited to) extended time on assignments and exams, note-taking services, and the use of interpreters or live captioning. Encourage students to share their accommodations letter with you early in the semester, and be clear about how their needs will be accommodated in your course.

- Be considerate of <u>students who need accommodation</u> and approach them with the utmost respect. **Ask them** if they need help before offering assistance. Do not presume to touch mobility devices or service animals without permission. **Speak directly to students**, not through their companion or interpreter. Refer to their disability only if it is relevant to the conversation. Be mindful of **language** used to describe the person vis-a-vis their disability ("a person who uses a wheelchair" *vs.* "a person confined to a wheelchair"). Do your part not to **draw attention** to difference or to share private information. Do not ask for more information or details about their disability. Contact DRES if you encounter difficulties providing the needed accommodations.

- Once you are assigned a classroom, but before the start of the semester, check out the room. Ensure that everyone will have <u>physical access</u> to your classroom, and check out what <u>technology</u> will be available for you and students to use. Double-check that all students will be able to use the equipment provided, and consider whether you need to rearrange the instructional space to maximize inclusion and comfort. Get a sense of where the closest <u>gender-inclusive bathroom</u> is located.

Creating an Inclusive Classroom Environment

- First and foremost, do as much as you can to create a <u>welcoming environment</u>. Learn students' **names**. Allow and encourage **different perspectives** to be shared. Demonstrate **mutual respect**. Be approachable. Welcome questions, and respond patiently. Seek out students' points-of-view.

  All of this is especially important during periods of heightened anxiety, like the COVID-19 pandemic. Consider ways of integrating a <u>pedagogy of care</u> into your classroom. Be cognizant of the difficult experiences that our students have or are currently facing. CITL encourages us to develop a <u>trauma-informed pedagogy</u> in our classrooms.

- Do everything you can to avoid <u>stereotyping</u>. Extensive research shows the negative impact that <u>stereotype threat</u> can have on student self-esteem and achievement. Tips for <u>reducing stereotype threat</u> include: **removing cues** that trigger worries about stereotypes; making explicit mention of how diversity is valued; expressively valuing student diversity and individuality; presenting **positive models** from diverse groups; supporting a **growth mindset** about student intelligence and performance; and using affirmations to **reduce anxiety**.

- <u>Microaggressions</u> can also be harmful to student performance and self-esteem, whether this behavior comes from faculty or their peers, regardless of whether they are the <u>victims</u> of these behaviors or simply <u>witness</u> them. Though brief, and often implicit, these verbal or behavioral insults can have long-lasting psychological effects and are best avoided. **Self-reflection** is key here; and when students point out problematic behavior, put down your defenses and **listen**. If you witness microaggressions (or macroaggressions) in your classroom, **challenge the behavior** (not the person) immediately, and emphasize that the impact of our behavior is often more important than the intent.

- In Political Science, we must often ask our students to engage in difficult discussions in our classrooms, on weighty or divisive topics. Do not avoid these conversations; rather, set your students up for success by: **articulating the goals** before beginning; managing your own emotions and knee-jerk responses; and creating a **reflective environment** by communicating empathy and sensitivity towards students, by engaging in active listening practices, and by leading students to evaluate potential solutions to obstacles they come up against.

  This guide to managing "hot moments" in the classroom offers some additional tips and reflections. For explicit conversations about race, this may be a helpful resource.

- Encourage feedback from students throughout the semester. Midterm evaluations are a great way of collecting this feedback, especially if students can submit their responses anonymously. Canvas supports anonymous surveys. When distributing ICES evaluations, consider sharing information with students about known biases in course evaluations, especially on the dimensions of race and gender.