Narrative: AAC&U Student Success: What is an Equity-Minded Syllabus?

Slide One: Title Slide

Slide Two: Introductions (All)
My name is Susan Keenan; I am the Director of the STEM Inclusive Excellence Collective and Professor of Biological Sciences. My pronouns are She/Her/Hers.

I am joined by my colleagues Drs. Talia Carroll and Lori Reinsvold. We are all from the University of Northern Colorado.

I am Talia Carroll, my pronouns are she/her/hers, and I serve as Director of the Marcus Garvey Cultural Center and Adjunct Faculty in the Higher Education and Student Affairs Leadership Program.

I am Lori Reinsvold. I am the Co-Director of the STEM Inclusive Excellence Collective and Associate Director of the Math & Science Teaching (MAST) Institute. My pronouns are She/Her/Hers.

We are using Slido to gather feedback and as a way for you to ask questions—so please go ahead and log into the event now at Slido.com and enter event number 6758. We will check the Slido responses throughout the Virtual meeting, and if you leave contact information, we will do our best to address any questions that you might have.

Slide Three: Acknowledgements (Lori)
Our work was inspired by the Center for Urban Education’s Syllabus Review Guide for Equity-Minded Practice. We had the privilege of participating in a series of workshops facilitated by Dr. Lindsey Malcom-Piqueux to implement the Equity Scorecard on our campus. It is additionally informed by other attitudinal and cognitive effects and assumptions, including metacognition, mindset, motivation, and a sense of belonging, along with the core idea that faculty are utilizing learner-centered teaching approaches in the classroom. An equity syllabus workshop is also an integral part of our Inclusive Excellence Teacher-Scholar program, which is funded by an Inclusive Excellence Grant from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute.

Slide Four: Our Plan for Today (Lori)
We suggest that you have your current syllabus at hand—one of the advantages of having this workshop asynchronously is that you can pause the video and locate an electronic or paper version of your syllabus! Together, we are going to explore some of the ways that your syllabus can demonstrate equity for students through three lenses: academic success— and specifically jargon and Structure, academic care—through verbal immediacy, supporting and normalizing struggle, and polices and connection—which includes relevance and deconstructing white students and their experiences as the norm.
Slide Five: Academic Success: Jargon (Talia)

As in any culture, colleges and universities have their own language, rules, unwritten codes of conduct, and historical practices. In academia, we use language, acronyms and other types of jargon that are easy to understand—but only if you know them and have been socialized into a particular way of being and acting.

Take a minute and jot down some of the academic jargon that we have perhaps grown used to on campus. For example, we shorten Thursdays to R. (Wait 30-60 seconds)

Here are a few thoughts that we have heard from our workshop participants: In addition to shortening Thursdays to R, we list office hours in our syllabus—and expect that students know that these hours are set aside for them. We hand out the syllabus and assume that students understand what it is for. Other terms, such as weighted grades, learning objectives, and many more, are listed in the syllabus with no explanation. By giving students access to the language of the institution, you are improving their chances of success.

We would encourage you to pause the video here and highlight the jargon in your syllabus. In addition to the general academic jargon, what are terms that are specific to your field that might also need to be explained?

Slide Six: Academic Success: Structure (Susan)

We can think about Structure in a couple of ways—structure of your course and Structure of your syllabus. The goal here is to provide the information your students need to complete the course and present it in a way that is clear to a first-time college student. Essentially demystifying the information.

Here are a few examples: Expand the section of your syllabus that provides the students with basic information. Rather than simply listing your office hours and contact information, provide additional details—in a friendly tone—to demystify the relevance of the information. We encourage you to think about writing clearly, in plain language—and as we mentioned with limited academic jargon. We also suggest that you think about arranging your syllabus such that important information is towards the beginning of the syllabus—and is highlighted to bring it to students’ attention.

Slide Seven: Academic Success: Structure (Susan)

Other ways of adding Structure include providing students with an overview of what you plan to do each class period—with the topic, relevant chapters, homework etc., giving a more explicit list of required materials, and changing the list of weighted grades to a pie chart so that students could visually see how their work would be assessed.

We would encourage you to use graphics, color, and formatting to highlight important information—and if you are concerned with the length of the syllabus, consider adding a table of content to help students navigate.
Finally, discuss the syllabus in class—not reading through it, but rather explain what it is and why it is important and what information is found in it. Having a short syllabus quiz implemented through your learning management system is also a great idea.

Take five or ten minutes now to consider these ideas and how you might implement them in your syllabus. If you have ways that you add structure to your syllabus or ways to demystify your syllabus for academic success, share them with us through Slido (www.slido.com Event 6758)

**Slide Eight: Academic Care: Verbal Immediacy (Lori)**

Our next topic is Academic care, and we will start with verbal immediacy which includes among other things tone, using personal examples, addressing others by name, and using inclusive pronouns ("we" vs. "I")

Take a look at these statements—what are your impressions? Of the instructor? Of the Course?

{Wait 30-60 seconds and then remove the white box on the slide}

Now consider the rewritten statements. How does tone differ? How does the message differ?

It's a good idea to read your syllabus while asking yourself whether it's conveying the positive first impression you intend. Often, we underscore words or use **bold** or _italics (or a combination)_ to highlight important information on the syllabus. It’s often viewed negatively and can be thought of as shouting.

We encourage you to work to limit "shouting" in the syllabus and to explain policies clearly, collegially, and in a welcoming tone.

**Slide Nine: Academic Care: Verbal Immediacy (Susan)**

Other ways you can communicate academic care is by creating a partnership—use "We" and "Our" rather than "I", "you" or the often used "students." Share your pronouns with students and ask them to share their pronouns with you. Ask about preferred names and then learn and use students’ names—making sure that you pronounce the names correctly. While this point last is not part of a syllabus it is an important part of academic care. Tell the students a little about yourself and why you excited about this course and clearly state what you expect from students as learners, and what they can expect for you as an instructor.

Again, we would encourage you to consider these suggestions in terms of your syllabus. Consider pausing the video and exploring verbal immediacy within your document.

**Slide Ten: Academic Care: Supporting and Normalizing Struggle (Talia)**

Having high expectations for all students in your course is an essential component of classroom equity. But we also know that many students will struggle with something in our courses or at some point in their academic career—so it's important to let students know that struggle is a normal part of the college experience. Normalizing struggle is especially important for first-generation students, who tend to equate difficulty with a sense of not belonging or an inability to achieve academic goals.
To convey this on the syllabus rather than simply suggesting that students who are struggling seek help. In a syllabus, we often use this phrase "Students who are struggling should seek help," think instead about providing information about resources that are available — and then go a step further. Rather than just listing the resources, put the resources in a context that normalizes struggle.

Notice that we point out the resource is free — which is something I've assumed that every student knows — but have found that that is not always the case.

Slide Eleven: Academic Care: Supporting and Normalizing Struggle/Difficulty/Challenges (Talia)
Providing resources in your syllabus that help your students understand what it takes to be successful in the course and, through academic difficulties are both important. Consider adding these as separate sections to your syllabus and even adding information on what students should be doing before, during, and after class. For example,

Slide Twelve: Academic Care: Policies (Lori)
Take a look at the Disability Resources Statement for our institution. It is better than some that I've seen — but is still lacking in some respects. While we might not be able to make changes to the statements, we can add preambles to normalize struggle, create a partnership with the student, and validate their experiences. Here is an example.

Some other policies that have equity impacts might be requiring a note from a doctor (what happened if a student's child has a fever but is not sufficiently sick to require a doctor's visit with the requisite copay? Having a "no make-up exam" policy (what happens when the bus a student takes to campus is 30 minutes late?).

I am sure that you can think of others — and we encourage you to share them with us on Slido!

It's worth noting here that being open and transparent about course policies is especially important for first-generation students. For example, if your syllabus states that no late work will be accepted, but in practice you do accept it when there's a valid reason, consider changing the wording on your syllabus. Students used to college culture usually don't hesitate to ask for the extensions, but many first-generation students will not, assuming that the policy in the syllabus stands.

It's time to think about how you plan to use your syllabus to normalize struggle and help students by providing a clear road to success, exploring resources, and redefining policies. Addressing this section will take a little time — but spend five minutes or so to make some notes about where you might begin.
Slide Thirteen: Connection: Relevance (Lori)
Helping the students connect with and find relevance in the topics you present is essential. There are a few ways to do this: connecting the material in your course to other courses in their major is important—and something that is often in a syllabus. We challenge you to think about other kinds of connection. First, how can you connect the material that you will be presenting to the course learning objectives to help students gain a better understanding of the relevance of the material? How can you connect the material to student career and life goals and their life experiences? It's important here to communicate the value of student's racial and ethnic backgrounds and to view them as sources of learning and knowledge and to offer different forms of assessment and culturally relevant and inclusive materials, readings, and assignments.

Slide Fourteen: Connection: Deconstructing (Susan)
The second consideration for Connection is Deconstructing. Higher education was designed by white, middle to upper class, heterosexual abled bodied men for white, middle to upper class, heterosexual abled bodied men. We want to conclude this workshop by asking you how your syllabus is continuing to perpetuate this perspective?

Start by thinking about stereotypes of people in your field—I am a scientist and studies have asked middle school students to describe or draw a scientist—in the classic experiment performed by Chambers in the 1960s, most students drew men with white hair in a lab coat. In a follow-up study by Miller of students in the 1980s, some girls drew pictures of women, but few students drew images of people of color or people from other marginalized populations.

Spend a minute or two considering the stereotypes of people in your fields and then think about your students—who are they? Are they represented in your course? In the Syllabus?

Slide Fifteen: Connection: Deconstructing (Talia)
Some ideas for you to consider:

• Challenge students to become critically aware of their privileges and biases. You can do this by including readings, activities, and assignments that ask students to critically examine their assumptions about race, ethnicity, gender, ableism, etc.

• Provide opportunities for students to critically examine the norms in higher education—white, male, able-bodied, Christian, etc.—and broader social discrimination by providing historical and contemporary experiences of people and communities that face discrimination, racism, and marginalization.

• Add a classroom anti-discrimination policy to your syllabus and communicate your commitment to discussing racist or discriminating comments or behavior when they arise in class or on campus

• Another approach: When you discuss readings in class, create a norm that is articulated in your syllabus to explore who is doing the work? Where was the work done? And how the work was funded? Thinking about the assumptions and perspectives of the authors can shed light on racial and gender biases and possible limitations of the work or topic described.
Slide Sixteen: Questions and Comments (Susan)

We welcome your questions and comments through Slido—please include your contact information so that we can connect back with you. Please visit the Stem Inclusive Excellence Collective Website (go.unco.edu/STEM dash IEC for additional information and for examples of before and after syllabi. You can also check out our recently published article, where we describe the experience of Dr. Ginger Fisher, a participant in our Inclusive Excellence Teacher-Scholar program as she reconsidered her syllabus through an equity lens.