



EQUITY-MINDED SYLLABI REVIEW GUIDE

USC Race and
Equity Center



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Our mission is to illuminate, disrupt, and dismantle racism in all its forms. We do this through rigorous interdisciplinary research, high-quality professional learning experiences, the production and wide dissemination of useful tools, trustworthy consultations and strategy advising, and substantive partnerships. While race and ethnicity are at the epicenter of our work, we also value their intersectionality with other identities, and therefore aim to advance equity for all persons experiencing marginalization.

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EQUITY-MINDED SYLLABI REVIEW GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

From campus-wide strategic plans to instructional handouts, institutions of higher education communicate values, beliefs, and priorities through a myriad of artifacts. All of these artifacts work to communicate who and what matter to the campus community and therefore it's important to take time to examine these artifacts and reflect on the messages they give and how they align with practices that support racial equity. This is necessary because, with few exceptions (like historically black colleges and universities), institutions of higher education were founded by and designed to serve white, male, middle-to-upper income, heterosexual, and able-bodied students (Center for Urban Education, 2020). As this group does not have a lived experience with racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, or ableism, it shouldn't be surprising that higher education's most common structures, policies, practices, belief systems, norms, etc. were not designed to consider or mitigate these forms of oppression. Re-envisioning our campus practices and belief systems, especially as communicated in institutional artifacts, is one tangible way to counter how 'isms' operate and better support equitable experiences and success for our increasingly diverse campus community.

This guide was designed to support the race-conscious examination of one particular artifact, syllabi. Please note that this guide will be intentional about focusing on race and racism, not because other social identities like gender, sexual identity, or ability status do not matter—or that the intersection of these identities do not matter. They do. But we focus on race because racism and racial inequity are especially persistent (Smedley & Smedley, 2005) and people avoid meaningful conversations about race and actions to address racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000). So, this guide intentionally focuses on racial equity and what syllabi communicate to students from minoritized racial groups—Asian, Black, Latinx/Latiné, and Indigenous students, and students from other minoritized racial/ethnic groups.

GUIDE GOALS:

- Build an understanding of the ways race is made salient and racism can operate in syllabi;
- Support race-conscious inquiry as an institutional practice; and
- 'Uproot' and replace messages perpetuating or enabling racism with messages that are intentionally equity-minded (Greer, 2022).

WHAT IS EQUITY-MINDEDNESS?

According to Estela Bensimon and colleagues (Bensimon, 2012; Dowd & Bensimon, 2015), achieving racial equity requires that practitioners develop equity-minded competence that is characterized as being:

- Critically race-conscious, recognizing that race has no biological reality (Smedley & Smedley, 2005) in determining skills or abilities but is still made salient due to racist ideas and the ways they have and continue to be built into institutional structures;
- Aware that practitioner beliefs, assumptions, knowledge, and approaches are racialized and can have racial consequences, whether intended or not, typically to the disadvantage of students from minoritized racial groups;
- Aware that norms, policies, and practices that are taken-for-granted in higher education can perpetuate racial hierarchies and inequalities, even in the absence of explicit racism; and
- Willing to reflect on racialized outcomes and exercise agency to produce racial equity.

Read Bensimon's [What is Equity-Mindedness](#) to learn more.

EQUITY-MINDEDNESS IS IN ACTION WHEN WE SEARCH FOR AND 'UPROOT' ANY FORMS OF RACISM BEING PERPETUATED IN CAMPUS ARTIFACTS LIKE SYLLABI:

FORM OF RACISM*

RACIAL HOSTILITY

Explicit and implicit forms of racial discrimination like harassment, racial profiling, bullying, racial slurs, and over-policing.

HOW RACISM CAN TAKE 'ROOT' IN SYLLABI

“
Syllabus Example
If you are disruptive in anyway, you will be asked to leave. If it happens twice, I will insist that you do not return to class.
”

Environments in which students of color are over-policed, or where they fear they can be over-policed, are not welcoming or conducive to racial equity in student success. Syllabi communicate and perpetuate 'over-policing' when they 'scold' or list the different types of infractions that can result in points lost and other forms of punishment. Instructors with syllabi that over-police are also perceived by students of color as mistrustful and unlikely to expect them to be capable of succeeding (Collins, 1997).

*The forms of racism referenced in this handout are adapted from Museus, S. D., Ledesma, M. C., & Parker, T. L. (2015). Racism and racial equity in higher education: ASHE Volume 42, Number 1. John Wiley & Sons.

CULTURAL DISSONANCE

Tensions students from minoritized racial/ethnic groups experience as a result of the incongruence between their racialized backgrounds or meaning-making systems and race-evasive, white-serving college environments.

“

Go to the tutoring center if you need help.

”

Syllabus
Example

The historical discrimination of individuals from minoritized racial / ethnic groups in education resulted in their unjust exclusion from educational opportunities (Ledesma & Fránquiz, 2015; Martin, 2000). As college access increases for Asian, Black, Latinx/Latiné, and Indigenous students, it’s important that they’re provided a “full-disclosure of the terms of success” (Collins, 1997, p.2). Syllabi contribute to cultural dissonance when they are ambiguous and fail to provide details about effective work and study habits, definitions of terms like ‘office hours’, and locations of important places like the advising and tutoring centers.

RACIAL STEREOTYPES, PREJUDICE, & DISCRIMINATION

Stereotypes are oversimplified generalizations about social identity groups that do not take individual difference into account. Prejudice is the incorporation of stereotypes into a person’s beliefs, feelings, and attitudes. Discrimination is the prejudice-fueled unequal treatment of a person from a stereotyped social identity group.

“

Daily participation points are assigned as follows: Students who are silent or ill-prepared (2 points); students making okay contributions (3 points); students making quality contributions (4 points).

”

Syllabus
Example

Any policy that assigns points to students based on the teacher-determined quality of classroom participation can enable discrimination if instructors don’t critically examine whether they use stereotypes when deciding who is ‘ill-prepared’ vs. ‘highly-prepared’ or the qualities they use to make point assignments (Malouff & Thorsteinnsson, 2016; Payne & Vuletich, 2018). Stereotype threat, or the fear felt by a student that they may accidentally validate a stereotype for an identity they hold and therefore change or inhibit their behavior, can also be a factor in whether or not a student speaks up in class. This can lead to students of color being more inclined to stay silent (Steele, 2011). So, for example, if a class participation policy disproportionately rewards speaking in class, without providing other opportunities for students to participate in meaningful and low stakes ways, a syllabi’s (and instructor’s) policies can perpetuate racial inequities.

RACIAL INVISIBILITY & SILENCING

The lack of representation in physical structures, curriculums, voices, and more experienced by minoritized racial/ethnic groups, and usually in contrast to white over-representation.

“

All assigned readings are written by white authors and focus on white lived experiences.

”

Syllabus
Example

Syllabi can perpetuate racial invisibility and silencing when Asian, Black, Indigenous, and Latinx/Latiné students find voices and lived experiences from their communities completely absent and therefore silenced.

MARGINALIZATION & ISOLATION

The sense of disconnect resulting from the treatment of a person or group as insignificant or peripheral.

“

Diverse authors or content about racism are only incorporated into one week or lesson.

”

Syllabus
Example

Cultural marginalization can occur when students from minoritized racial/ethnic groups feel they are the only one on their campus/ classroom or when issues pertaining to race and racism are marginalized.

CONTRADICTIONARY CULTURAL PRESSURES

Contradictory pressures prompting internal conflicts for students from minoritized racial/ethnic groups, like tensions to assimilate into or resist predominantly white campus cultures or tensions to conform to or resist stereotypes.

“

Students will choose their own work groups.

”

Syllabus
Example

Classrooms that are structured to utilize a lot of group work are one way that students from minoritized racial groups can be positioned to experience contradictory cultural pressures. For example, students themselves can hold biases against their peers and not invite Asian, Black, Indigenous, or Latinx/Latiné students into group work. This doesn't mean that you shouldn't have group work, but it should be accompanied with attention to whether students from minoritized racial/ethnic groups are more likely to choose to work alone or if they're being treated differently by group members. Help mitigate this by setting standards for group work in the syllabus that prioritize inclusion and say that racism (and other isms) cannot be a part of a functional, successful team.

RACIAL SEGREGATION

The act of or state of separation based on race/ethnicity in daily life.

Syllabus
Example

“If you experience any forms of bias or harassment, please visit the Office of Diversity and Inclusion.”

Racial segregation can occur when people from different racial / ethnic groups operate in separate campus spaces, organizations, and more. Segregation can occur among people as well as perceived responsibility for addressing racism. For example, a syllabus can communicate that action to address racial bias or harassment or action to support people experiencing racial bias or harassment is solely the responsibility of the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, not the instructor themselves. Of course, DEI professionals are trained in ways that faculty often are not and they are a valuable resource. But if syllabi communicate that the DEI office is the sole holder of acknowledgement or action to address racial incidents, and do not offer a denouncement of bias or harassment on the instructor's behalf, it problematically presents the instructor as entirely without any role or responsibility.

EQUITY-MINDED SYLLABI REVIEW GUIDE

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Locate a syllabus from a recent course you taught or an example syllabus. You can also exchange syllabi with a colleague to conduct peer reviews.
2. Read through each equity-minded practice listed below (Welcoming, Demystifying, Partnering, etc.) and the forms of racism they counter.
3. Read/skim your syllabus and answer the questions guiding reflection for each equity-minded practice. If you are not able to answer all of the prompts, that is okay.
4. Identify possible syllabi changes based on your reflections. If applicable, be ready to discuss your observations and recommendations with your peer review colleague.

EQUITY-MINDED PRACTICES* AND THE FORMS OF RACISM THEY UPROOT

PRACTICES...	PAGE #	THAT ATTEND TO...	AND 'UPROOT'...
WELCOMING	7	Welcoming students and creating a classroom culture in which they feel cared for	RACIAL HOSTILITY
DEMYSTIFYING	8	Creating a partnership where faculty and students work together to ensure success	CULTURAL DISSONANCE
PARTNERING	9	Communicating policies, processes, and content in clear and approachable ways	
VALIDATING	10	Communicating a belief that all students are expected to succeed	RACIAL STEREOTYPES, PREJUDICE & DISCRIMINATION
REPRESENTING	11	Representing a range of racial/ethnic experiences and backgrounds in assignments, readings, and other materials	RACIAL INVISIBILITY, SILENCING, ISOLATION, & MARGINALIZATION
DECONSTRUCTING	12	Countering the presentation of 'whiteness' as the norm	CONTRADICTORY CULTURAL PRESSURES & RACIAL SEGREGATION
DISTRIBUTING LABOR	13	Mitigating the disproportionate emotional & cognitive labor demanded of students from minoritized racial/ethnic groups	

*The equity-minded practices referenced in this handout are from the Center for Urban Education. (2020). Equity-minded inquiry series: Syllabus Review. Rossier School of Education, University of Southern California.

WELCOMING

The syllabus welcomes students and creates a classroom culture in which they feel cared for

1. **First impression: How is the reader of the document greeted?**

Now examine your syllabus for language that is unwelcoming and can enable or exacerbate racial hostility (i.e. racial harassment, profiling, bullying, and policing).

2. Does the syllabus use language or a tone that feels punitive?
3. Does the syllabus use language or a tone that communicates the instructor will be closely monitoring or policing student behavior?
4. Does the syllabus use language or a tone that communicates the instructor doesn't trust students?

YES	NO
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please elaborate, share evidence from the document, and recommend equity-minded edits or additions (here or on the syllabus):

Examine your syllabus for language that is welcoming and creating a classroom culture in which students, and especially students from minoritized racial/ethnic groups, feel cared for.

5. Does the syllabus use language or a tone that makes students feel cared for and valued?
6. Does the syllabus communicate that it is acceptable and beneficial for students to seek out the instructor and other forms of help, whether or not they're struggling?
7. Does the syllabus set ground rules for respectful class discussion?
8. Does the syllabus include a class anti-discrimination policy?
9. Does the syllabus communicate a commitment to talking through racist and discriminatory comments or behavior that arise in class or on campus?

YES	NO
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please elaborate, share evidence from the document, and recommend equity-minded edits or additions (here or on the syllabus):

DEMYSTIFYING

The syllabus communicates policies, processes, and content in clear and approachable ways

Examine your syllabus for language that is confusing and can enable or exacerbate cultural dissonance (i.e. tensions students from minoritized racial/ethnic groups experience as a result of the incongruence between their lived experiences and meaning-making systems and new college environments).

1. Does the syllabus use jargon (i.e. acronyms)?
2. Are there any policies, processes, or content in the syllabus that are unclear or confusing?
3. Are there any policies, processes, or content in the syllabus that a new college student would find unclear or confusing?

YES	NO
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please elaborate, share evidence from the document, and recommend equity-minded edits or additions (here or on the syllabus):

Examine your syllabus for language that is demystifying and communicates policies (at the program, department, and institutional levels), processes, and content in clear and approachable ways.

4. Does the syllabus provide necessary information about the course (e.g. course description, objectives, instructor contact information and office hours / student hours, grading scheme, etc.) in a clear and approachable way?
5. Is the syllabus written in plain language, with limited academic jargon?
6. Does the syllabus counteract 'assumed knowledge' by breaking down and detailing expectations (i.e. does the syllabus make the 'hidden curriculum' transparent)?
7. Is the syllabus formatted and ordered in a way that highlights what students need to know to maximize their learning and success?

YES	NO
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please elaborate, share evidence from the document, and recommend equity-minded edits or additions (here or on the syllabus):

PARTNERING

The syllabus signals faculty and students will work together to ensure students' success

Examine your syllabus for language that is alienating and can enable or exacerbate cultural dissonance (i.e. tensions students from minoritized racial/ethnic groups experience as a result of the incongruence between their lived experiences and meaning-making systems and new college environments).

1. Does the syllabus communicate an assumption that students should already know how to engage with and meet the expectations of this particular class/classroom?
2. Does the syllabus disproportionately use third person, disaffiliating language (ex. the student, students, the instructor) rather than first person language that signals a partnership (ex. I, you, we)?
3. If first person language is predominant, is 'you' used disproportionately more than 'I'?

YES	NO
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please elaborate, share evidence from the document, and recommend equity-minded edits or additions (here or on the syllabus):

Examine your syllabus for language that communicates you will intentionally build a partnership with students and work together with them to ensure their success.

4. Does the syllabus state what you expect of students as learners and what students can expect from you as an instructor?
5. Does the syllabus communicate a structure in which students will be invited and welcomed to provide feedback about your teaching practices?
6. Does the syllabus articulate a willingness to use a variety of teaching approaches to foster learning?
7. Does the syllabus articulate respect for students as autonomous, critical, and reflective learners?
8. Does the syllabus state how class and course objectives will help students succeed in future academic work, and advance career and life goals?

YES	NO
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please elaborate, share evidence from the document, and recommend equity-minded edits or additions (here or on the syllabus):

VALIDATING

The syllabus communicates a belief that all students are expected to succeed

Examine your syllabus for language that is not inclusive of individual difference and can enable or exacerbate racial stereotypes, prejudice, & discrimination.

1. Does the syllabus communicate that students and/or their work will be evaluated in subjective ways?
2. Does the syllabus indicate that students with a particular lived experience or set of skills will be privileged over others with different lived experiences or skills?

YES	NO
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please elaborate, share evidence from the document, and recommend equity-minded edits or additions (here or on the syllabus):

Examine your syllabus for language that communicates a belief that all students are expected to succeed.

3. Does the syllabus articulate that students are capable of obtaining their educational goals (for this class and beyond)?
4. Does the syllabus offer different types of assignments and forms of assessment that give students multiple ways to demonstrate their learning and strengths?
5. Does the syllabus signal that students play an active role in defining success and, in the process, communicate that there are multiple ways of being successful in the course?

YES	NO
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please elaborate, share evidence from the document, and recommend equity-minded edits or additions (here or on the syllabus):

REPRESENTING

The syllabus (& other classroom materials) represent a range of racial/ethnic experiences

Examine your syllabus for language that perpetuates racial invisibility & silencing (i.e. a lack of representation in physical structures, curriculums, voices, & more experienced by minoritized racial/ethnic groups).

YES	NO
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

1. Does the syllabus disproportionately showcase white voices?
2. Does the syllabus disproportionately showcase white lived experiences?

Please elaborate, share evidence from the document, and recommend equity-minded edits or additions (here or on the syllabus):

Examine your syllabus for language that represents a range of racial/ethnic experiences and backgrounds in assignments, readings, and other materials.

YES	NO
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

3. Does the syllabus include readings from a racially diverse range of authors, researchers, and historical figures?
4. Does the syllabus include readings, activities, and assignments that are culturally relevant and inclusive?
5. Does the syllabus include assignments that ask students to draw on their experiential knowledge and/or knowledge from their communities?
6. Does the syllabus include assignments that ask students to investigate real-world problems affecting the communities they come from?

Please elaborate, share evidence from the document, and recommend equity-minded edits or additions (here or on the syllabus):

DECONSTRUCTING

The syllabus counters the presentation of 'whiteness' as the norm

Examine your syllabus for language that perpetuates contradictory cultural pressures (i.e. the sense of disconnect resulting from the treatment of a person or group as insignificant or peripheral).

1. Does the syllabus exclude and ignore the realities of racism, both historically and contemporarily?
2. Does the syllabus exclude and ignore the realities of racism in your academic field?

YES NO

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please elaborate, share evidence from the document, and recommend equity-minded edits or additions (here or on the syllabus):

Examine your syllabus for language that counters the presentation of 'whiteness' as the norm.

3. Does the syllabus include readings, activities, and assignments that ask students to critically examine their assumptions about different racial/ethnic groups, and the privileges or disadvantages that accrue by virtue of their race/ethnicity?
4. Does the syllabus include readings, activities, and assignments that ask students to examine the history and contemporary experiences of people and communities that face discrimination, racism, and marginalization---broadly and within your academic field?
5. Does the syllabus highlight community leaders taking action to address discrimination, racism, and marginalization?

YES NO

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please elaborate, share evidence from the document, and recommend equity-minded edits or additions (here or on the syllabus):

DISTRIBUTING LABOR

The syllabus aims to reduce the extra emotional and mental burden experienced by students from minoritized racial/ethnic groups due to racism

Examine your syllabus for language that perpetuates contradictory cultural pressures (i.e. internal conflicts, like tensions to assimilate into or resist predominantly white campus cultures by ignoring racism) or signals that students from minoritized racial groups should handle racialized harm alone or elsewhere (racial segregation).

1. Does the syllabus ignore the existence and impact of the extra emotional and mental burden experienced by students from minoritized racial/ethnic groups due to racism?
2. Does the syllabus communicate that students are solely on their own to navigate the extra emotional and mental burden of racism (for example, are students from minoritized racial groups expected to just accept any penalties if they are absent, late, or disengaged due to racism's effects?)

YES	NO
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please elaborate, share evidence from the document, and recommend equity-minded edits or additions (here or on the syllabus):

Examine your syllabus for language that aims to reduce the extra emotional and mental burden experienced by students from minoritized racial/ethnic groups due to racism.

3. Does the syllabus signal that the faculty member is addressing racism inside and outside of the classroom?
4. Does the syllabus offer students opportunities to process the ways they are positioned on campus with considerations of both invisibility and hyper-visibility?
5. Does the syllabus say you care about students' emotional health and well-being and will support students as appropriate when they are navigating racism?
6. Does the syllabus signal to students from minoritized racial/ethnic groups that they can show up as they are (ex. language and presentations of self) and be valued?

YES	NO
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please elaborate, share evidence from the document, and recommend equity-minded edits or additions (here or on the syllabus):

WHAT SHOULD I DO NOW?

First, thank you for prioritizing racial equity and examining what your syllabus communicates to your Asian, Black, Latinx/Latiné, and Indigenous students and students from other minoritized racial/ethnic groups. You may be wondering now: what do I do next? Below are a series of recommendations. Some will fit your needs, some will not. But what matters is that you identify at least one next step and take action to support racial equity.

1. The Syllabus Review Guide worksheets (pages 7-14) were designed to highlight areas where you can take next steps:

- Any 'Yes' responses on the top half of a worksheet indicates areas needing equity-minded improvement.
- Any 'No' responses on the bottom half of the worksheet also indicates areas needing equity-minded improvement.

Review your filled-in worksheets and identify where your responses indicate opportunities to:

- Uproot racism: Focus on any 'yes' response on the top half of the worksheets.
- Embed equity-minded practices: Address any 'no' response on the bottom half of the worksheets.
- Take a moment too to acknowledge where you are supporting equity-minded practices ('no' responses on the top half of the worksheet and 'yes' responses on the bottom half).

2. Next, reflect on a past teacher who embodied the equity-minded practice you want to develop. For example, if 'welcoming' is the practice, think about what that instructor did and said to make you feel welcome. How could you mirror that in your syllabi language? Grab some paper and start writing.

3. If no past teacher comes to mind who embodies the equity-minded practice you aim to further develop, consider: Is there an instructor at your current institution who embodies that practice? If yes, ask if you could see their syllabus or even sit in on a classroom lesson to listen to the language they use. You can also reach out to your campus's office for professional learning and development or office for diversity, equity, and inclusion to ask for example syllabi or for fellow colleagues who'd be willing to serve as thought partners (who may also wish to engage in this guide with you as well).

4. Engage with a community of practitioners by sharing your syllabi and working together through the Syllabus Review Guide. Identify the equity-minded practices you want to build and brainstorm possible language together.

5. Stay current with developments in the field of racial equity and race-conscious pedagogies by reading the work of experts or attending conferences. Although not a comprehensive list, let us recommend seeking out the readings of Beverly Daniel Tatum, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Estela Bensimon, Django Paris, and Norma González.

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