Inclusive Course Checklist

# Equity is an important consideration when developing new courses or updating existing ones. This guide is designed to help instructors make their courses more inclusive so they can better support the learning needs of all students. At UNL, we are committed to improving educational outcomes for historically underrepresented students. To help instructors work toward that goal, we have compiled a list of high impact best-practices for supporting all students, which are organized into the checklist below. As you’ll notice, we focus particular attention on ensuring that courses are accessible and follow principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

# It is important to remember that every course is unique, and each instructor has a different style. Not all suggestions on the list will be applicable to every course, and it certainly isn’t necessary to do everything listed below to serve the needs of your students. We recommend that you read through the list and look for opportunities to enhance the equity of your course design and delivery. As you work on your course, you may want to [reach](https://teaching.unl.edu/contact-us/) out to your Instructional Designer for assistance.

# Syllabus / Policies

* **Articulate clear course policies.** Ensure all written course policies reflect what you do in practice. If you’re more lenient on deadlines or attendance than your written policy states, it may disadvantage 1st generation & underrepresented students who tend to assume that all policies are enforced exactly as written. Those students are therefore less likely to ask for unstated leniency in emergency situations than continuing generation students.  Tell your students about your late policy. Consider [using flexible due dates](https://app.vidgrid.com/view/2DHbLDOZJhMe) when possible or incorporate ‘oops tokens’ or ‘late passes.’ Make a syllabus quiz or use an interactive class activity to ensure students pick up the key details for how your course will run.
* **Ensure your syllabus follows the best practices for accessibility**. Use defined styles, descriptive hyperlinks, tables for tabular data only, etc. Use the accessibility checker in the program you’re using (Canvas, Word, etc.) to check for additional accessibility issues which may impact visually impaired students or others that may rely on a screen reader. For a quick list for implementing accessibility in specific programs, visit the [CTT Accessibility Resource](https://canvas.unl.edu/courses/120076/pages/making-course-material-more-accessible).   Consider using this LISTS [Accessibility Essentials Checklist](https://teaching.unl.edu/classroom-climate/dei/accessibility-checklist/) to learn the general accessibility rules that apply across all programs and course materials.
* **Make the syllabus available.** Post your syllabus as early as possible so students know exactly what workload to expect. This is particularly important for students with disabilities that may need to adjust their schedules accordingly.
* **Use welcoming, clear, and inclusive language.** Communicate empathy and warmth while also reminding students you maintain high standards, as described in the [Warm Demander quadrant of this chart](https://resources.corwin.com/sites/default/files/13._figure_6.2_warm_demander_chart.pdf).  Avoid disciplinary jargon – students should be able to understand their course syllabus before they take the class!
* **Connect to the real world.** Students of historically underserved backgrounds are often more engaged and perform better if they understand how course work clearly connects to their future career plans. In your syllabus, explain how different assignments and course activities support skills they’ll use after they graduate.
* **Be clear about your office hours.** Explain what they are, when and where they will be held, and why they exist. Tell your student what topics they might talk about during office hours. Consider calling them something friendly like “Student Hours.” If you have a TA, explain their role in the course and what help students can get when meeting with them.
* **Refer to the** [**UNL Syllabus Policy**](https://www.unl.edu/facultysenate/unl-syllabus-policy) **for required information that must be on all course syllabi.** This site also provides a fillable syllabus template that faculty may choose to use.
* **Include a link to** [**university-wide course policies and resources**](https://executivevc.unl.edu/academic-excellence/teaching-resources/course-policies)**.** Ensure that students know how to find campus resources they need. If you include this as a link rather than text, you can reduce the length of the syllabus while ensuring students have access to the most up-to-date information on university-wide course policies.

# Materials & Activities

* **Addressing Prerequisite Knowledge.** Use a pre-course survey to understand the level of student knowledge & interest. Provide supplemental materials for students that may not have as strong of a background on the subject. Teach students how to read & understand materials in your discipline. Don't assume that students already know discipline-specific skills like writing/formatting styles, formal presentation skills, problem-solving, etc. If performance of those skills will be graded, explicitly teach them and give students the opportunity to practice. Define or describe vocabulary, acronyms, and symbols before students use them.
* **Teach students how to learn.** Share study strategies with your students, particularly first-gen students who may not have experienced the same mentoring or advising on study habits as other students. Introducing an array of strategies might give students an opportunity to pick something that will work better in the long term. Use points to incentivize good study techniques (e.g.: small amount of extra credit for taking a practice test).  Give explicit instructions on how to get the most out of the study techniques (e.g.: take the practice test in a test-like environment without notes, review what questions you got wrong, get help solving them, use those questions to identify where to target your studying).
* **Provide a Variety of Examples.** Use different types of examples and metaphors and minimize use of ones that rely on knowledge of American culture. In lectures, explain content in different ways using new examples not given in the readings or other course materials. Show students multiple methods for solving the same problem or alternative ways to see issues or topics.
* **Incorporate Diversity into Examples.** Ensure that examples used are diverse in terms of race/ethnic background, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, ability status, etc. Find course materials created by people from diverse backgrounds. Explicitly talk about diversity in your field. Ensure materials avoid outdated gender and cultural stereotypes. Add multiple cultural or historical perspectives on ideas or topics. When creating homework problems, case studies, exam questions, etc. try to use names and scenarios that reflect a variety of different experiences. Think about aspects like race / ethnic background, country of origin, gender, age, and ability status.
* **Accessibility of Materials.** Use a variety of formats for course materials (video, audio, writing, etc.). Use programs that allow students to manipulate the font, background contrast, text size, etc. of written materials. Caption Videos and provide transcripts for podcasts. Use videos that allow adjustments to volume and speed. Avoid PDFs as most are not easily accessible. These are all concepts of [Universal Design for Learning](https://canvas.unl.edu/courses/120076/pages/advancing-your-teaching-with-universal-design-for-learning).
* **Vary the level of interaction.** Some activities will be individual, while others involve small groups or the whole class. Vary the pace of work in the classroom and incorporate methods to involve all students in class activities. Consider participation rules that honor a broader range of participation to avoid disproportionately rewarding only certain types of students.

Assignments & Assessment

* **Increase submission options.**  Give students options for assignment completion since there are myriad ways to demonstrate mastery. For example, provide an option for completing an assignment as a written paper, presentation, podcast, graphic, or other artistic format, which keeps the focus on demonstration of content mastery rather than familiarity with a specific format.  Provide students with choices on topics or other aspects of assignments/projects. Acknowledge and incorporate student interests into class topics/activities when/where appropriate. Generate relevant [authentic assessments](https://ctl.wiley.com/authentic-assessment-in-the-online-classroom/) related to students’ careers or “real-life” situations.
* **Provide opportunities for** [**low-stakes, formative assessments**](https://teaching.unl.edu/resources/grading-feedback/assessment-matcher/)**.** Create assessments that give students an opportunity to demonstrate knowledge of the material. This can take the form of regular assignments like exit tickets, learning quizzes, or muddiest point to identify where students need more clarity and support with the content. Include self-assessment and self-reflection in assignments.
* **Provide detailed written expectations.** Create a rubric or grading sheet that details specific grading criteria. Provide instructions that include sequential steps, organizational methods, or scaffolding. Provide students with annotated examples of past students’ work to help illustrate your expectations and help them understand your criteria for strong academic performance.
* **Avoid using high-stakes assessments.** Try not to let any individual assignment or exam be worth too much of the final grade. Learning requires the ability to learn from your mistakes, which are often not available with high stakes exams. Also, students excel at different types of things, so if specific exams or assignments are worth a large percentage of the grade, it may put students that don’t have a strong background with that particular assessment type at a disadvantage.
* **Ensure grades reflect mastery of course objectives.** Avoid grading on a curve (i.e., adjusting grades to ensure that a certain percentage of students get A’s, B’s, C’s, D’s, and F’s). This creates a competitive environment where students are discouraged from helping one another. It also grades students based on how they do relative to one another instead of how well they have done at meeting the learning goals for the course. If attendance makes up part of your grade, consider having alternative assignments so that students who miss class can complete them to make up the points.
* **Provide feedback within a reasonable timeframe.** Try to ensure students have feedback from previous assignments before starting the next one.  Provide feedback that is specific and substantive/informative. Try to use [Wise Feedback](https://blog.innerdrive.co.uk/how-to-give-wise-feedback)-- be supportive while maintaining high standards. Telling individual students something like “I have very high standards, but I know you can reach them” tells your students that your feedback is meant to help them rather than being a judgment of their ability.  Consider turning on [anonymous grading in Canvas](https://community.canvaslms.com/t5/Instructor-Guide/How-do-I-hide-student-names-in-SpeedGrader/ta-p/768) to remain objective.
* **Listen to students.** A simple mid-semester survey asking ‘1) What should I keep doing, 2) What should I stop doing, 3) What should I start doing’ shortly after the first assessment can help you notice and correct problems before the end of the semester. Talking with students about the results and why you will or won’t make the suggested changes helps build trust.

# Interactions / communication

* **Provide accommodations.** Tell students how to [contact the SSD office](https://www.unl.edu/ssd/) and provide all necessary accommodations for physical and mental health needs. Never ask if students ‘really’ need accommodations.  When making accommodations, consider altering your future course design to incorporate the change for all students.
* **Articulate a communication plan.** Tell students how to contact you, what you would like to be called (professor, Dr., first name, etc.), and when they can expect a response. Let them know how you will communicate important course information (email, announcements, etc.) Use regular [Canvas announcements](https://community.canvaslms.com/t5/Instructor-Guide/How-do-I-add-an-announcement-in-a-course/ta-p/1194) to remind students about key deadlines and to recap key points from class.
* **Intervene early**. Use the [Message Students Who feature in Canvas](https://community.canvaslms.com/t5/Instructor-Guide/How-do-I-send-a-message-to-students-from-the-Gradebook/ta-p/741) to contact students as soon as they start missing assignments or missing class. Use MyPlan to flag students as soon as they start struggling – this will notify both the student and their advisor, which can be very helpful in getting the student back on track early!
* **Support wellbeing.** Provide [links to campus resources](https://canvas.unl.edu/courses/51131/pages/resource-slides-to-embed-in-presentations?module_item_id=1527921) and refer students to the ‘Wellbeing’ button in Canvas. Consider sharing your personal stories of overcoming challenges and frame getting help as a sign of motivation rather than weakness. Consider regularly including slides with resources during class so students can see the range of support available.
* **Create a supportive environment.** Stress and anxiety impair learning, so students need to feel they belong in the class. Communicate your commitment to respectful class discourse with policies specifically for online and face-to-face discussions. Explicitly tell your students you care about their success. Use student names and correct pronouns. [Respond to microaggressions](https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-classroom-management/responding-to-microaggressions-in-the-classroom/) (for example, racially insensitive language or using incorrect names/pronouns) quickly. Do not expect individuals to speak on behalf of an entire group.
* **Use self-reflection.** Instructor biases and attitudes can manifest as stereotyping or microaggressions. Try to avoid deficit thinking and instead, use asset framing to focus on student potential. When you feel tension in an interaction, consider using this [mindfulness reflection protocol](https://crtandthebrain.com/wp-content/uploads/Protocol-for-Checking-Unconscious-Bias.pdf) to evaluate the situation.
* **Share student experiences**. [Create](https://brocansky.com/humanizing/wisdomwall) a wisdom wall where students give advice to the students who will take the class next.  Share this advice at the start of the next semester.

# Canvas

Talking about Canvas may seem strange in a checklist about equity, but an intentionally designed and easy to navigate Canvas course is essential for supporting students with disabilities, particularly those that struggle with executive function and task management. It also helps students such as first generation or those from smaller school districts that may not have used an LMS during high school. Good Canvas design helps reduce the cognitive load for all students, enabling them to better organize their time.

* **Create an easy layout.** Use a consistent, easy to navigate Canvas layout to reduce cognitive load. Try using the [Modules](https://www.instructure.com/canvas/resources/all/how-to-use-modules-to-build-courses-in-canvas) page to organize content by unit so students can find what they need.
* **Set due dates.** Ensure all assignments have a due date listed in Canvas so the items show up on the course calendar and student to do list.
* [**Remove any unnecessary items from the left side navigation menu**](https://community.canvaslms.com/t5/Instructor-Guide/How-do-I-manage-Course-Navigation-links/ta-p/1020)
* **Set tone and communicate course basics with a welcome video**. Record your screen and navigate Canvas in [Student View](https://community.canvaslms.com/t5/Instructor-Guide/How-do-I-view-a-course-as-a-test-student-using-Student-View/ta-p/1122) to show students where to find the syllabus, course materials, and assignments. Give an overview of the course rhythms and major assignments.  Put the welcome video on the [course home page](https://community.canvaslms.com/t5/Instructor-Guide/How-do-I-change-the-Course-Home-Page/ta-p/1035) – consider calling it something like ‘Start here’ or ‘Welcome.’  Use the [screen recording feature that allows your face to be seen in the corner of the screen](https://app.vidgrid.com/view/q0ESpGV4P63n/?sr=FyM7VemEioOU&autoplay=1) and communicate your enthusiasm for the course.
* **Keep Canvas grades up to date** and as accurate as possible so students know how they’re doing at all times. If you use [weighted grades](https://community.canvaslms.com/t5/Instructor-Guide/How-do-I-weight-the-final-course-grade-based-on-assignment/ta-p/746), make sure they are set up before the semester starts so that the course grade displays accurately. Even if you tell students ‘the grade showing in Canvas is wrong’, they are still likely to rely on that as their grade estimate.

# Taking it further

* Work with your instructional designer – they're happy to help you think about different ways to increase equity in your course as well as troubleshoot any challenges you’ve been experiencing. You can find contact information for your instructional designer on the [CTT website](https://teaching.unl.edu/contact-us/)!
* Consider implementing elements of Ungrading or mastery grading where students refine their submission based on your feedback until they reach the learning target, moving the focus of assignments from ranking students to student growth and mastery.
* Read more about different approaches to inclusivity like [culturally responsive teaching](https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/culturally-responsive-teaching-culturally-responsive-pedagogy/2022/04), [anti-racist teaching](https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/equality-inclusion-and-diversity/strategies-for-antiracist-and-decolonized-teaching/), [universal design for learning](https://udlguidelines.cast.org/), or [trauma-informed pedagogy](https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2020/06/03/seven-recommendations-helping-students-thrive-times-trauma).