

Building Inclusive Classrooms Workshop 8/2021

Creating and maintaining spaces where students can engage, feel a sense of belonging, and learn.

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The following are some ways you can increase the inclusivity of your classroom. Find what works for you and your teaching style. Includes strategies from Mason's [Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning](#).

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GENERAL STRATEGIES

BELONGING

1. Have an anti-racism, equity and inclusion statement in your class syllabus. [Sample statements are provided below.]
2. Carve out time in your class to discuss your anti-racism, equity and inclusion, and/or name and pronouns statement/s. [Sample statements are provided below.]
3. Ensure that your syllabus is written in non-sexist, gender inclusive terms. For example, use the phrase *first year student* versus *freshman*, *humankind* rather than *mankind*, etc.
4. Develop a method for ensuring that
 - 1) everyone can pronounce each other's names—faculty and students—correctly
 - 2) you do not use Eurocentric name norms, such as “Christian name,” “last name,” or “given name.” Instead, use “family name;”
 - 3) students have a safe way of sharing with you their name and pronouns that are consistent with their gender identity and expression. Also let them know that you will honor that information. Some faculty find it useful to use notecards or table tents with phonetic spelling. [See sample name and pronouns statement at the end of this document.]
5. Establish a set of rules and guidelines for an inclusive and respectful classroom and settle on a way to allow students to contribute to those ground rules.

Example: *Compassionate Vegas Rules (Adapted from Ashley Stone, Ph.D.)*

The Vegas part: Engagement with learning requires space for honesty, making mistakes, and deep discussion. To facilitate our learning, we will abide by Vegas Rules: What happens in class, stays in class. Please maintain the confidentiality of our discussion, including our mistakes and any revealed personal or professional information.

The compassionate part: Using Vegas rules does not make this a consequence free zone. Adhering to Compassionate Vegas Rules requires a dedication on all our parts to ensure a safe class environment – to be compassionate to one another as we grow and to challenge each other constructively in that process. Making mistakes is part of life, as is accepting criticism, and growing from those mistakes. If class becomes uncomfortable for you, speak up; you will be supported. If you cannot or do not want to speak up, please see me so we can determine whether and, if so, how we should address the issue.

6. When lecturing, avoid exclusionary phrases such as, “Everyone knows...,” “It is easy to imagine...,” or “Certainly the answer is obvious....” These phrases assume a shared cultural context and can function to silence or discourage students from asking questions.
7. Avoid assuming all students will recognize cultural, literary or historical references familiar to you.
8. Include diverse images in course content – some sources: blackillustrations.com, Pexels.com, Unsplash.com
9. Assume that no student can speak as a representative of their race or culture.
10. Consider exploring course outcomes - data analytics - can you examine students by demographics to identify inequities?

ACCESS

1. Foster equity and accessibility from the first day of class by making sure that all students understand the basic elements of academic literacy (reading the syllabus closely, what office hours are and why they can benefit students, etc.) as well as the particularities of your course (assignment structures, how they should contact you, utilizing Blackboard or other required tech tools, policies concerning attendance, participation, grading).
2. If you have synchronous online classes, clearly articulate how you want students to manage their environment (e.g. video camera on/off, keeping in mind other people who may be in the students’ household, etc.).
3. Provide information/advice on study skills or student success (resources in google sheet)
4. Consider what tools students are using to access content - many are mostly using phones. Check that materials and programs you use can be accessible with whatever tools they are using.

5. Consider access issues beyond technology: quiet workspace, time management, ability to learn independently. Students with less strong educational backgrounds are struggling the most. Check in with your students frequently and remind them that you can't know what is going on with them or support them if they don't tell you. Point them to GMU student services and other resources (see Collegiate Compassion below).
6. Intentionally build community: community is important in learning in general, and many students need 1:1 personal connection. It is lost in many virtual settings. Community-building and connection-building can go hand in hand with academic rigor.

STRATEGIES FOR ADDRESSING PARTICULAR THREATS TO BELONGING/ACCESS

STUDENT STRESS/DISTRESS

Consider how stress might get in the way of being able to access your course.

1. Build in some flexibility in course policies – drop a grade, flexible deadlines, offering one or two “life happens” no-explanation absences.
2. List campus resources such as CAPS, Suicide prevention hotline, etc. in your syllabus. [See: <https://learningservices.gmu.edu/campus-resources/>]
3. Acknowledge the myriad of challenges the Covid-19 pandemic can have in the lives of your students. See the example provided below.

*Below are listed my/Mason's usual course policies. However, this is not a “usual” time. I fully understand that each of us may face new obstacles, or old obstacles in novel ways, during this time. Please communicate with me if such things are getting in your way in this class. **My goal is to facilitate your growth and success in this strange and uncertain time;** I can only do that if you tell me what is happening.*

4. Provide information that supports students' mental health and wellness. See the example provided below.

If you are experiencing feelings of anxiety, panic, depression, sadness during the semester, Student Health Services and Counseling and Psychological Services Offices (703-993-2380) provides a range of resources to assist and support you. Students can call (703-993-2831) or walk-in during open hours to schedule an appointment to talk with a healthcare provider. If you or someone you know experiences a mental health crisis or emergency, seek help immediately. Call 911 for local emergency services, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-8255), or text the Crisis Text Line (741-741) anytime. I am also available to speak with you about stresses related to your work in my course.

5. Consider including a statement of collegiate compassion. See the example provided below.

*I believe we learn best when we can show up as whole and healthy people. To learn effectively we need to have basic security: a roof over our head, a safe place to sleep, a stable place to live, and enough food to eat. If you are struggling to meet any of these basic needs please talk to me, visit our campus food pantry (<https://ssac.gmu.edu/patriot-pantry/>), or reach out to other Mason resources <https://learningservices.gmu.edu/campus-resources/>. Remember, asking for assistance and advocating for yourself is an important part of your collegiate experience. I am here to help, and **YOU** are not alone.*

WHITE MALE CENTRALITY IN ACADEMIA

In many areas of psychology and higher ed in general, white males are central.

Much of the research we cite in our classrooms is still based in majority white populations and ignores heterogeneity within populations.

1. Ensure that your classroom materials explore multiple perspectives and experiences—e.g. diverse gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and/or political viewpoints, etc.
2. Adopt texts and learning materials (whether books, articles, films, multimedia or digital objects) that are written or created in gender-neutral and stereotype-free terms.
3. If you have readings that include discriminatory language, consider how you will frame and discuss that material with your students.
4. When writing test and quiz questions and creating or adopting assignments—case studies, word problems, scenarios, etc.—use examples that showcase inclusivity with respect to gender, race, ethnicity, individuals' names, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, etc. Identify the problem, present research findings by describing the population and discussing how it might look the same or different in other populations.
5. Cite research with diverse populations or with a specific ethnic group
6. Consider whether students “see themselves” in the research you present - show photos of the researchers/authors, for example.
7. Ask students if they think the findings would apply in their culture/ethnicity.

STUDENT RACISM OR INTOLERANCE

Some students may lack understanding that anti-black racism is a problem or may deny that it exists. Students may demonstrate racist or otherwise intolerant attitudes and behaviors, potentially causing harm to other students, and decreasing other students' access or sense of belonging.

1. Include syllabus language that specifies your classroom as a safe space, expect peer respect, etc.
2. Holding discussions about diversity in the classroom can get these students on board - hearing from students who have a different perspective, different background, different experiences can often be the beginning of changing this perspective. Create ground rules before holding such a conversation.
3. Do not shame students for their racism, but **DO** call them out and ask students to call you out, respectfully.
4. If a difficult classroom conversation develops based on challenging, sensitive, or uncomfortable topics, **pause**. Faculty can “hit pause” on the conversation and encourage students to write down their thoughts about the topic. Pausing can allow students and faculty to think, reflect, and consider thoughtful responses.
5. In a difficult conversation, ask students to write down what they think is not being said, or what perspectives are missing. Collect these and present them in the next class, framing carefully and correcting misunderstandings.

DEFICIT PERSPECTIVE

Research and discussion most often take a deficit perspective on race (differences seen as negative) vs strengths/resiliency. For example, describing the adverse effects of racism, the higher rates of illness in people who are black.

1. Include research/information on coping, resilience, protective factors, and ways people have resisted oppression and created change.
2. If students are doing a paper, etc. describing a particular social problem, have them propose solutions or cite people who have proposed solutions. The library has created a guide for [finding diverse voices in academic research](#).

IMPLICIT BIAS, THINGS THAT ARE NOT SAID

Applicable in person AND online

1. Consider how **your own** identities, experiences, beliefs, and stereotypes are likely to show up in your classes.
2. Assess your conscious and unconscious biases about students based on dress, surname, gender, or race.
3. Since faculty set the tone in the classroom, be aware that students may assume you agree with, or do not care about the impact of, problematic/offensive comments made in class. Instead of dismissing or ignoring those comments, have strategies to respond to racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, or insensitive comments in class.

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

The information below is from [Vanderbilt University's Guide for Teaching Students with Disabilities](#)

“Students of all abilities and backgrounds want classrooms that are inclusive and convey respect. For students with disabilities, the classroom setting may present certain challenges that need accommodation and consideration.” (Vanderbilt University, 2021)

1. Include a statement in your syllabus inviting students with disabilities to meet with you privately to discuss the accommodations they may need.
2. Keep in mind that diversity **should** include disabilities and that you have the power to make students with disabilities feel included in your class. [Here are some examples of statements you can include in your syllabus.](#)
3. Encourage students to visit the [Disability Services website](#) and seek support from the Disability Services Office if they have questions, need support or want to determine if they have a disability.
4. Provide an easily understood and detailed course syllabus.
5. Make the syllabus, texts, and other materials available before registration for students to review.
6. For materials that are online, consider colors, fonts, and formats that can be more easily viewed by students with low vision or a form of color blindness.
7. Clearly spell out expectations before the course begins (e.g., grading, material to be covered, due dates).
8. Make sure that all students can access your office or arrange to meet in a location that is accessible.
9. Think of multiple ways students may be able to participate without feeling excluded.

SAMPLES OF INCLUSIVE SAMPLE STATEMENTS FOR CLASS SYLLABI

ANTI-RACISM STATEMENT

These three sample statements were written and edited by colleagues at Mason, with special thanks to [Dr. Charles Chavis](#), Assistant Professor in the Jimmy and Rosalyn Carter School of Peace and Conflict Resolution, the staff of the [John Mitchell Junior Program](#), and [Dr. Shelley Reid](#), Director of the [Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning](#). Schools, colleges and departments may eventually draft their own anti-racism statements, but for now you may use or adapt any of them for your syllabus.

As a member of the George Mason University community, I <or "Department/School"> will work to create an educational environment that is committed to anti-racism and inclusive excellence. An

anti-racist approach to higher education acknowledges the ways that individual, interpersonal, institutional, and structural manifestations of racism against Black individuals, indigenous people, and other people of color contribute to inequality and injustice in our classrooms, on our campuses, and in our communities. Anti-racist work strives to provide our community members with resources to interrupt cycles of racism so as to cultivate a more equitable, inclusive, and just environment for all of our students, staff, faculty, alumni, and friends, regardless of racial background. I <We> believe that the work of anti-racism starts with each individual; together, students and faculty in this course will build knowledge and take actions rooted in principles of equity, inclusion, and justice that we will carry with us throughout our lives.

As a member of the George Mason University community, I <or "Department/School"> will work to create an educational environment that is committed to anti-racism and inclusive excellence. I <We> affirm that in this class, faculty and students will work together to interrupt cycles of racism against Black individuals, indigenous people, and other people of color so as to cultivate a more equitable, inclusive, and just learning environment for all participants, regardless of racial background.

I affirm <or "Department/School affirms"> that in this class, faculty and students will work together to cultivate a more equitable, inclusive, and just learning environment for all participants, regardless of racial background. We will actively seek ways to

- Make constant, conscious decisions to interrupt racism and cultivate equity, inclusion, and justice for people of all racial backgrounds, and in particular those from Black communities, indigenous communities, and other communities of color, who are most likely to bear the direct and indirect costs of systems of white supremacy;*
- Interrogate histories of white supremacy and white-dominant culture, and to examine the ways in which these histories have impacted our individual beliefs, our interpersonal relationships, our institutional and structural policies and processes, and our entire society;*
- Make a commitment to being responsible for our own relationships to, and actions within, systems of white supremacy; and*
- Cultivate a practice of self-awareness and self-reflection that allows us to critically evaluate our own role in upholding white supremacy and identify the ways we can interrupt cycles of racism at the individual, interpersonal, institutional, and structural levels.*

Faculty who are looking for more information on how to continuously cultivate the practice of anti-racism can refer to this guide from the National Museum of African American History and Culture on how to be anti-racist: <https://nmaahc.si.edu/learn/talking-about-race/topics/being-antiracist>

DIVERSITY/INCLUSION STATEMENT

The <enter here the name of your school/college, department>, an intentionally inclusive community, promotes and maintains an equitable and just work and learning environment. We welcome and value individuals and their differences including race, economic status, gender expression and identity, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, national origin, first language, religion, age, and ability status.

- We value our diverse student body and desire to increase the diversity of our faculty and staff.*
- We commit to supporting students, faculty and staff who have been the victims of bias and discrimination.*
- We promote continuous learning and improvement to create an environment that values diverse points of view and life experiences.*
- We believe that faculty, staff and students play a role in creating an environment that engages diverse points of view.*
- We believe that by fostering their willingness to hear and learn from a variety of sources and viewpoints, our students will gain competence in communication, critical thinking and global understanding, and become aware of their biases and how they affect their interactions with others and the world. [This statement was created by the School of Integrative Studies faculty.]*

NAME AND PRONOUNS USE STATEMENT

"Gender identity and pronoun use: If you wish, please share your name and gender pronouns with me and how best to address you in class and via email. I use <insert your specific pronouns here> for myself and you may address me as "<YOUR NAME>", "Dr./Prof. <NAME>" or "Mr./Ms./Mx. <NAME>" in email and verbally."

Context

This name and pronouns statement was co-authored in 2014 by students in TQ Mason (Mason's trans inclusive student support / action group) and Film and Video Studies faculty. Film faculty have edited this statement for their own names and pronouns and include it on all program syllabi since 2015. Transgender, gender non-binary, and gender non-conforming students and faculty in Film have reported that this lived name and pronoun statement makes a positive difference in their lives and work at Mason.

The name and pronouns statement helps foster a community of learners of all genders and gender expressions. It promotes gender inclusivity and understanding of a student's pronouns and name that originates with the learner. This discourages incorrect assumptions and harmful misgendering, and encourages dialogue as befits the learner's comfort.

Additionally, you might add to the statement that you invite students to approach you before or after class and during office hours, but that email is preferred for large classes for your record keeping purposes. Recognize that a student's name and pronoun(s) can change during a semester if they are in transition. Encourage students to use the tools Mason provides to change their name and pronouns on Mason records. [See: <https://registrar.gmu.edu/updating-chosen-name-pronouns/>]

Further, to support all members of our community, faculty and staff are encouraged to include their pronouns in their email signatures and on name tags. Documents and language on websites should avoid "he/she" or "male/female" sentence construction. When working with students, alumni, staff and faculty, it is important to recognize name and pronouns as they have been expressed by that member of our community. This demonstrates respect and fosters an LGBTQIA+ inclusive environment at Mason.

This document adapted some material from Thurber, A., & Bandy, J. (2018). Creating Accessible Learning Environments. Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching. Retrieved (8/3/2021) from <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/creating-accessible-learning-environments/>.