

Designing a Syllabus for Hope, not Despair

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Students' first encounter with their classes is often through syllabi for them. Syllabi also help set the tone for students' expectations of learning in their classes. If this tone is too negative or punitive, students can feel discouraged out of the gate in their classes. How can instructors check and revise their syllabi for tones and policies that support student success through hope-filled language that's clear and aligned with their learning goals?

Here I explain three reasons to create hope-filled syllabi, provide practical strategies for revising this core document to emphasize that hope, and offer examples of what that language might look like in any discipline.

Three reasons to create a hope-filled syllabus:

1. Our existential context demands it.

As [anxiety and depression are higher than ever](#) for college students, faculty and students try to connect with each other in the wake of several challenging contexts by discerning how to reach students a few years post-COVID, a perceived overreliance by students on phones and social media, and general challenges facing all of us today.

Being explicit about countering existential dread and anxiety could help positively increase students' attitudes toward their university experiences, which [is correlated with improved mental health for students](#). It might also be helpful for faculty coming out of their "[worst semester ever](#)" in Spring 2024 in which headlines noted widespread despair among faculty in their teaching.

2. Marquette's mission is grounded in it.

Marquette exists in the context of larger Catholic social movements like the [Four Universal Apostolic Preferences](#), one of which is [Journeying with the youth toward a hope-filled future](#). I often include those links and language from my university's guiding mission and values to provide broad strokes of working toward hope. (Jesuit pedagogy, often expressed through the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm, can help realize Marquette's mission in teaching as well.)

3. It supports success for all students.

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As student success initiatives gain traction in higher education to serve all students but especially those who are first generation and those who have been traditionally excluded from higher education for a variety of reasons, faculty should think about the ways they might reinforce damaging conceptions of higher education as being primarily punitive or obscure relative to students’ own experiences.

Providing concrete, transparent ways for students to succeed in their classes is a way of being hope-filled to give all students a chance to flourish. Moreover, as [The Equity-Excellence Imperative](#) created by the Boyer 2030 commission reinforces throughout the report, universities would fare well to prioritize student-centered conceptions of education that surpass transactional ideas about higher education in order to deliver and realize lasting value for all.

What a syllabus does:

- Introduce a course in terms of content and curriculum,
- Secure a blueprint for course policies, and
- Provide a tone and introduction to you as an educator.

What a syllabus does NOT do:

- Summarize everything perfectly for an entire class or semester,
- Become a document that’s totally unassailable in every way,
- Substitute for real, human-to-human contact and conversation about the class.

Designing a syllabus for hope: Guiding principles and examples

1. Be clear about expectations for attendance and participation.

This is a big deal on campuses across the country right now. Consider communicating why students should come to class, what they are expected to do in class, and providing ways for them to engage with course material, their peers, and you—or whatever suitable combination—for this critical part of many classes.

Example: I want you to come to class each day, and I want you to want to come to class each day. It’s important for you to have a full range of educational experiences at Marquette. Regular participation and engagement can be key to having a rich education.

Plus, it makes for a lively environment and encourages connections between you and your peers. And, it keeps me from talking just to empty chairs, or machines, so trust me when I say that I want you here, too.

Since I value participation and engagement in this way, and since I think you should, too, I count it as part of your grade. For high-level participation and engagement, you should focus on coming to class having prepared course materials and activities for the day. I can tell this preparation if you have notes, annotations, worksheets completed, etc. High-level engagement also means paying close attention in class to what we are doing, contributing in meaningful and thoughtful ways to our classroom community. This means remaining on task as much as possible. You can show this participation and engagement outside of class, too (etc.)

2. Detail accountability principles for your students and yourself.

Use affirmative rather than punitive language when possible, and help students see how they can succeed in your class, not just how they might fail. Include both kinds of accountability on your syllabus.

Example accountability language for students

- Please submit work by the deadlines and let me know in advance if you run into troubles.
- Reach out to a peer, check the university's learning management system (LMS) for updates, refer to the syllabus, or take some other action to help you get what you need in class.
- Honor your peers by staying on task in class. That means, among other things, using technology when appropriate, and not using it when it's not.

Example accountability statements for faculty

- I will grade your work within one week of the deadline, barring exceptional circumstances.
- If and when I need to arrange adjustments to class or assignments, I will communicate with you as soon as I can. Honor your peers by staying on task in class. That means, among other things, using technology when appropriate, and not using it when it's not.
- I will honor your efforts in class and that of your peers by helping maintain the focus of the class and keeping it a class worth coming back to.

3. Double-check your policy for accessibility to all learners.

[Transparent](#) and [universal](#) design—providing students with WHY they are asked to do X and connecting class activities to desired learning outcomes while being as aware as possible of equitable access to success in your class—is key to giving students hope and direction in your class and in their educations.

Making sure that students have access to what they need to succeed in your class from the start)—an important point as accommodations increase and student needs expand. Plus, it's the right thing to do.

4. If possible, identify explicitly hope-filled activities and content in your class at least once. Augment their sense of personal agency as students and people in the world.

5. Address your stance toward technology head on in the syllabus.

Whatever your stance toward emerging technologies is for your class in light of policies and procedures at your university, ground it in sound pedagogical and disciplinary thinking. Aim to say what you hope students will do and will learn, not what you hope they won't do (e.g., use it for cheating). [This language](#) regarding the cognitive and ethical dimensions of using emerging technologies to support student learning is helpful. Connect this policy to supporting academic integrity if possible.

Use symbols if/when necessary or desired. Some people like a red, yellow, green light symbol regarding the use of emerging technologies in their class. Consider flipping it around, though, if you don't want to allow machine learning in your class. The green light can be to indicate full speed ahead on students' original ideas, etc. Your approach on this issue can also be a matter of hope for students.

6. Consider additional humane policies, like those regarding late work.

Over the last twenty years, I have used a late work policy that virtually eliminates late work from students in my classes. I think this is because it's grounded in a bit of hopefulness that appreciates their humanity and that sometimes even the best laid plans go awry. I've noticed that extending a bit of grace as I would want offered to me helps students be even more accountable for their work in class.

Example: This course also has a GRACE PASS policy, which is designed to allow students ONE "pass" to submit written work (not tests, quizzes, etc.) 48 hours after the deadline without penalty. This Grace Pass exists because life is messy and stuff happens, so students should email their instructor before the initial deadline to say that they would like to use the Grace Pass for a given assignment. Poof! It will be granted. Students need not give an explanation, reason, or excuse, though they can if they'd like.

Hope-filled syllabus design: A checklist

Where does your syllabus contain examples of:

- Hope-filled course policies?
- Hope-filled expectations for students and educators?
- Hope-filled attitudes toward whatever your technology policy might be?
- Hope-filled ways to succeed in your class?
- Ways to connect with hope either by way of content or by activities?

Additional hope-filled considerations for your syllabi and in your classes

- Consider connecting course content with any of the three contextualizing themes from the beginning of this article: Where might students be asked to think through hopefulness as a global and spiritual need, pressing reality in their college experience, and regarding justice and equity per our mission?
- Consider connecting course activities with hopefulness: Where might students be asked to contribute in positive, life-affirming ways in your discipline, in their learning, or in class activities?
- Rightfully so, much of academic learning is challenging, and frankly, often is depressing. (Ex: Business Ethics.) What opportunities exist to support students' own formation in your class?
- Consider your own attitude and energy demonstrated not only in the syllabus but as you go throughout the semester: Where might it be appropriate to be explicitly hope-filled?