

# Fostering Student-Professor Collaboration in Course Design



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## Introduction

College instructors have been reflecting on how to be more inclusive in classrooms. Aronowitz (1994), Rogers and Freiberg (1969), and Shor (1992) argue that students should share responsibility for curriculum planning. As Shor argues,

*...to reverse [the] passive experience of learning, education for empowerment is not something done by teachers to students for their own good but is something students codelvelop for themselves, led by a critical and democratic teacher* (Shor, 1992, p. 20).

In the current study, I implemented an opportunity for students to collaboratively finalize course syllabi (to make changes to course policies, the calendar, language of the syllabus, information about campus resources, and grading policies) in 6 of my psychology courses.

### Predictions

Given undergraduate student's lack of practice with course design, students will be limited in suggestions about course policies and changes in grade weight (i.e., how much one assessment should be weighed in calculation of student course grades).

Given past findings, students will request flexibility of deadlines (or no deadlines) for assignments, requests for more extra credit opportunities, and requests for more information about on-campus resources.

Given instructors' position of authority and for fear of repercussions to academic standing, particularly given inclusivity is a sensitive topic, students likely will hesitate to comment on instructor's efforts of inclusivity in draft of syllabus.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

120 undergraduate students (from 6 undergraduate, psychology courses) anonymously completed a handout.

| Fall 2023                         | Spring 2024                       |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1 freshman                        | 32 freshman                       |
| 20 sophomores                     | 13 sophomores                     |
| 18 juniors                        | 10 juniors                        |
| 29 seniors                        | 4 seniors                         |
| > 21 lower classmen<br>> 37 upper | > 45 lower classmen<br>> 14 upper |

Note: these numbers represent the students enrolled in Dr. Rojo's courses, however, because data were collected anonymously (and no demographic information collected), we do not know which 7 students did not complete survey.

### MSMU Undergraduate Student Population

|                            |                              |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Asian/Pacific Islander 16% | 89% female                   |
| Black 7%                   | 11% male                     |
| Hispanic 54%               |                              |
| White 12%                  | 58% Eligible for Pell Grants |
| Other/Multi-racial 11%     |                              |

### Survey (a handout provided on Canvas)

Participants anonymously completed a handout, with an opportunity to

- Ask questions about
  - Course format, schedule, materials, instructor contact info and office hours
  - Assessments and deadlines
  - Policies and expectations
- Make suggestions about
  - Course calendar/pace of course
  - Assessments (change, remove, and/or add)
  - Inclusivity of the
    - Language of the syllabus
    - Resources listed
- Respond to "Do the following seem reasonable and fair?"
  - Course calendar/pace
  - Grading
  - Number and kind of assessments (i.e., workload)
  - Policies, Expectations

## Results

### Questions

125 No questions  
111 with questions

| If participants had questions, they were categorized into one of the following: | %    |
|---|------|
| Clarify how to complete assignment OR how an assignment is graded               | 35.1 |
| Course Policy   | 18.9 |
| Question about extra credit   | 12.6 |
| Pace of course/Course Calendar  | 9.9  |
| Course content  | 9.9  |
| Textbook  | 9    |
| Communication with instructor   | 4.5  |

13 (about 11%) students felt assignments, course schedule and /or course policies were unfair or unreasonable

### Suggested Changes about Course Calendar, Resources, Policies, and Assessments

155 No suggestions  
41 responses with suggested changes

| If participants made suggested changes, they were categorized into one of the following: | %    |
|--|------|
| Extra Credit Idea  | 58.5 |
| Change the weight of an assignment   | 29.2 |
| Give more time to complete assignments OR Include resources for textbook                 | 10   |

95% inter rater reliability for categorizations

### Feedback about Inclusivity

85 responses stated they no ideas for how to be more inclusive or felt the draft of syllabus was inclusive as is  
55 responses with suggestions about inclusivity

| If participants made suggested changes, categorized into one of the following:  | %   |
|---|---|
| Race/Ethnicity/Diverse Perspectives<br><i>I think that Dr. Rojo could have been even more inclusive by incorporating diverse perspectives and voices in the course [content] ... including readings or examples from different cultures, backgrounds or experiences to provide a more comprehensive learning experience for all of us</i> | 14.5*   |
| <i>Dr. Rojo can shine light more on Asian communities and resources that revolve around AAPI</i>  | *2 of these responses specifically about AAPI           |
| Tutoring/Academic Services<br><i>...could also mention that any student is able to use our academic support center as well as Tutor.com (through canvas)</i>  | 12.7  |
| Say more about Disability Services<br><i>Maybe explain more of what the disability services has to offer on campus</i>  | 9   |
| Counseling Services   | 7.2   |
| Services for Commuters OR Health Services   | 10  |
| Other:  | 1 or 2 students responded in each of these ways         |
| Help with group work  | Library Services  |
| Offer course content in various formats   | LGBTQ+ Resources  |
| Test Anxiety resources  | Single parent Resources                                 |
| English Language Learner Resources  | Resources for new students                              |
| Include more words of encouragement   | Email every, single student and ask them what they need |
| Does not like the term "differently abled"  | Career Services   |

19 students (about 16%) "so long as you give enough advance notice, I should be okay."

10 (8%) students requests about where to find textbook for cheaper.

## Results cont'd and Conclusions

### Statistically significant associations

#### Questions

|        | Y  | N  | Clarify how to complete assignment OR how an assignment is graded | Clarity on how to complete EC | Course Policy | Pace/Course Calendar | Course Content | Textbook |
|--------|----|----|---|-------------------------------|---------------|----------------------|----------------|----------|
| FALL   | 67 | 58 |   |                               |               |                      |                |          |
| SPRING | 56 | 55 |   |                               |               |                      |                |          |
| FALL   |    |    | 23  | 8                             | 5             | 8                    | 7              | 5        |
| SPRING |    |    | 15  | 6                             | 5             | 8                    | 6              | 6        |

Fall students were more likely than Spring students to have questions,  $X^2(4, N = 236) = 88.88, p < 0.001$ . Specifically, Fall students more likely to ask about how to complete an assignment (or how an assignment is graded) than Spring students,  $X^2(18, N = 111) = 44.72, p < 0.001$ .

This might be because (A) students are just starting academic year and thus eager (or "rusty," given summer break) to "get into gear" with academia in Fall vs. Spring term, and/or because (B) more upper classmen in Fall vs. Spring term, and maybe upper classmen more likely to take opportunity to ask questions than lower classmen.

#### Suggestions

|        | Y  | N   | EC Suggestion | Change the weight of an assessment | Pace of Course/Course Calendar | Textbook |
|--------|----|-----|---------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------|
| FALL   | 30 | 109 |               |                                    |                                |          |
| SPRING | 10 | 46  |               |                                    |                                |          |
| FALL   |    |     | 24            | 3                                  | 2                              | 0        |
| SPRING |    |     | 0             | 9                                  | 0                              | 2        |

Fall students were more likely than Spring students to make suggestions  $X^2(2, 195) = 65.83, p < .0001$ . Specifically, Fall students more likely than Spring students to make suggestions about extra credit assignments,  $X^2(4, N = 41) = 29.166, p < 0.001$ .

Perhaps juniors and seniors have more experience with college course assignments (and have now built confidence in making these suggestions). It is also possible that (because the upper division courses (Research Methods) of Fall semester are known in the PSY department to be challenging) these students were eager to suggest extra credit opportunities.

#### Inclusivity Feedback

|        | Academic | Commuters | Counseling | Disability | Financial | Race | Health | None | Other |
|--------|----------|-----------|------------|------------|-----------|------|--------|------|-------|
| FALL   | 3        | 3         | 1          | 3          | 1         | 6    | 2      | 64   | 8     |
| SPRING | 5        | 0         | 3          | 2          | 2         | 1    | 1      | 21   | 14    |

Spring students were more likely than Fall students to make suggestions about inclusivity,  $X^2(18, N = 140) = 74.767, p < 0.001$ .

I implemented a lot of Fall feedback before Spring term began (added more information on syllabus about the following: how I work with Disability Office to accommodate students, more details about counseling and psychological services on campus, added resource links to academic services on campus, information about when reading assignments should be completed, what to do if miss several class meetings, added section about MSMU Center for Equity, Diversity and Justice and the clubs and organizations on Campus as a resource for students who want to feel more included on campus and/or find peer support). This may explain why fewer suggestions in Spring about inclusivity than in Fall.

I also received informal, mid-semester feedback, and found the following:

- 83% Fall students found workload to be "just right", 18% heavy, and 6% too light
  - 33% Fall students not reading most reading assignments, 29% reading at least half, and 38% reading most
- Due to experimental error, these data not collected in Spring term*

### Did results support predictions?

As predicted, very few students made suggestions about weight of grade, changes to course calendar, or suggestions for new/different assessments. We continue to believe this is likely due to lack of training in course design. Indeed, many past researchers (e.g., Bovill et al., 2008) make note of this limitation. Some institutions have funded several-week curriculum design training, to include undergraduate students (and provide them an opportunity to give educated suggestions on curriculum design) and we see some exciting findings here.

I was pleasantly surprised with student's willingness to comment on opportunities for me (the instructor) to be more inclusive (both about resources and with regard language in syllabus) and immediately implemented these changes, which I believe led to fewer of these kinds of suggestions being made in Spring term.

### Final thoughts

I encourage other college instructors to consider providing students with an opportunity to provide feedback on all the current content, but particularly for resources on campus (I learned of some I hadn't known about and now recommend them to students in need).

## References

- Aronowitz, S. (1994) A different perspective on educational equality, *Review of Education / Pedagogy / Cultural studies*, 16(2), 135-151.
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- Rogers, C. & Freiberg, H.J. (1969) *Freedom to learn* (3rd edn.) (New York: Macmillan Publishing).
- Shor, I. (1992) *Empowering education. Critical teaching for social change* (London: University of Chicago Press).

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