

# Personalizing Syllabus DEI Statements

Just because we include people who have been historically excluded from higher education (or specific disciplines and professions) does not mean that the environment automatically becomes equitable. Structures and norms that supported exclusion (through sexism, ageism, racism, ableism, etc.) must be named and opened to change. DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) statements can play a role in this naming and openness to change. But how do you do that naming?

This resource includes a description of DEI statements, strategies for composing your own, and explanations of why this work is both challenging and important. Make notes about your ideas and questions as you interact with this resource and remember to seek support and feedback from trusted colleagues, campus experts and leaders.

## **Syllabus DEI Statement: What Is It?**

Writing DEI statements and sharing them with students is a thoughtful and intentional practice that fosters change rather than a static contractual document. A DEI statement also affirms your commitment to these values in your teaching. A recent publication by three psychologists researching inclusive teaching shows that putting a DEI statement on your syllabus can support a sense of belonging for your students by signaling care for the diversity of backgrounds and perspectives in class. The research also demonstrates how DEI statements help acknowledge multiple and intersecting identities and set expectations for civil discourse and classroom interaction (Fuentes et al., 2021).

Studies show that placing the DEI statement earlier in the syllabus is essential to ensuring students see it and foster more positive perceptions of the instructor and class climate (Branch

et al., 2018). Instructors also can display their DEI statement on the course ICON page in a written form or as a video.

Instead of borrowing an existing statement from other instructors or organizations, craft your own, specific for your course (Richmond et al., 2016). If your department or college already has a statement to be included in syllabi, add a personalized Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion statement at the end of it. Check with your unit if they have any additional guidance, including DEI statement samples from other instructors.

### **How to Create a Personalized DEI Statement**

DEI statements usually consist of the following elements:

- proclamation for the respect for diversity
- an explicit valuing of diverse perspectives
- expectations with respect to the classroom climate and behavior

(Fuentes et al., 2021)

In your DEI syllabus statement, you could also share:

- how micro- and macroaggressions will be addressed and used as teaching moments
- acknowledgment of inequities in society, education, or one's field
- relevant student resources
- indication of ways that diversity enhances learning
- acknowledgment of how a diversity statement aligns with your teaching philosophy

(Fuentes et al., 2021)

## Why is Personalizing DEI Statements Challenging?

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- Concepts and language around DEI are complex and changing, and we lack the opportunities to understand and engage with this complexity. This can make it challenging to know what to say and how to say it.
- There is a cultural norm of celebrating diversity. Even for people who consciously grapple with DEI concepts, there is pressure to say something positive and avoid directly naming challenges (Bell & Hartmann, 2007; Bensimon, 2005). But the celebration of difference does little to acknowledge the difficulty of addressing and experiencing systemic oppression.
- Many instructors report their fear of saying something offensive, insensitive, or problematic, and they will be perceived as incompetent and biased by their students. One of the reasons for that is racial anxiety, a term that describes concerns and heightened stress levels that occur before and during interracial interactions. Individuals of any race can experience it. For example, people of color may encounter racial anxiety when they worry that they will face distant and/or discriminatory treatment and stereotype threat, confirming a harmful and negative stereotype about their group. White people may experience it when they are afraid of being perceived as racist and met with distrust or hostility.
  - If you are experiencing racial anxiety when writing a DEI statement, consider your communication goals. What is the objective you would like to achieve with this affirmation? How would you like your students to feel? Research shows that people concerned about being perceived as prejudiced are likely to be more self-focused. Meanwhile, people who are worried about being a target of discrimination are more likely to be partner-focused (Shelton & Richerson, 2006). Thus, an effective strategy for white instructors who experience racial anxiety designing their DEI statements could be shifting from being teacher-centered and

focusing on their students and the learning environment that could help them thrive (Trawater et al., 2009).

Crafting a DEI statement and discussing it with students can be challenging. Please reach out to the Center for Teaching for any support by emailing [teaching@uiowa.edu](mailto:teaching@uiowa.edu).

## **Language and Considerations: How to Create a Personalized DEI Statement**

- Diversity language can feel corporate and performative. We need a shift from performative to performing our DEI statements by putting them into action, making them more **concrete** and **authentic**. To make the tone more personable and warmer, use **I-statements and personal pronouns** (I, you) in your DEI statement and syllabus in general (Palmer et al., 2016, p. 39):

*Example:* “I am committed to presenting materials and activities that are respectful of diversity: gender, sexuality, disability, age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, and culture. I want your feedback or suggestions on how to improve the quality and diversity of the course materials and experiences. That is why I also embedded activities and check-in points in this course so you could provide me with this feedback, and we could acknowledge and discuss voices that have not been represented.”

- Some UI instructors find it helpful to **provide definitions** for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in their DEI statement to frame discussions with students. The UI provides [concrete definitions of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion](#) that you could share in your statement.

*Example:* “Equity refers to fair and just practices and policies that ensure all campus community members can thrive. Equity is different than equality in that equality implies treating everyone as if their experiences are exactly the same. Being equitable means acknowledging and addressing structural inequalities—historic and current—that

advantage some and disadvantage others. Equal treatment results in equity only if everyone starts with equal access to opportunities” (The University of Iowa, 2022).

- It is helpful to make sure your statement is inclusive of various types of diversity and to be **specific in addressing groups** traditionally excluded in higher ed.

*Example:* “It is my intent to present materials and activities that are respectful of diversity: gender, sexual orientation, disability, age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, culture, perspective, and other background characteristics.”

Here is the full version of this DEI statement: <https://education.uiowa.edu/office-dean/policies/syllabus-checklist>

- It is important to push through discomfort and create statements that help students feel agentic and seen. There is a desire of people with privileged identities to be seen in positive ways when they communicate messages about diversity. This includes avoiding conflict and discomfort. Individuals with marginalized identities, however, seek agency and **acknowledgement of challenges** in these interactions. (Dovidio et al., 2017). Being clear and transparent about what we’re up against helps enable psychological safety (Edmondson, 2018). Here is a fragment from a DEI statement that acknowledges the structural challenges within higher education:

*Example:* “My commitment to you as your instructor is to minimize systemic forces of oppression within the classroom such as ableism, classism, racism, sexism, transphobia, and heterosexism in efforts to create a safe learning environment for all of us. I ask that you also join me in this commitment to foster respect for one another, enhance solidarity, and build community” (Fuentes et al., 2021).

- You can also share personal narratives and experiences of learning and teaching related to equity, oppression, diversity, or lack of it. To personalize DEI statements, instructors could share their own “**stories** about how they were or are impacted by their field’s lack of diversity as well as **self-disclose challenges** with course material

when they were students due to issues related to background and/or identity.”  
(Fuentes et al., 2021)

- A DEI statement gives instructors an opportunity to communicate their belief that the environment is safe for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, and even mistakes. Share your **faith that each student's voice matters, is valued, and belongs**. One way to do that is by using a warm tone and welcoming language in your statement:  
*Example:* “It is my intent that students from all diverse backgrounds and perspectives be well-served by this course, that students' learning needs be addressed in and out of class, and that the diversity that students bring to this class be viewed as a resource, strength, and benefit. [...] Your suggestions about how to improve the value of diversity in this course are encouraged and appreciated.”
  
- Effective DEI statements **call for action and invite a dialogue**, they help build connections with your students:  
*Example:* “Please let me know if our class meetings or submission deadlines conflict with your religious events so that I can make arrangements for you.”  
*Example:* “I encourage you to have discussions guided by empathy, mindfulness, and care for your peers. For that, you will need to critically examine your bias and assumptions and be open and present. Please share with me how we can make a classroom a *safe space* where you feel valued and supported and a *brave space* that motivates risk-taking and dialogue. You can share your thoughts and suggestions during drop-in hours (office hours), via email, or via our class surveys.”
  - The classroom hierarchy can make it hard for students to share their concerns around belonging, inclusion, and equity. Building concrete opportunities for students to provide feedback in your course is crucial.

## How Can We Start Drafting Personalized DEI Statements?

### 1. Reflecting on your values as an instructor:

- a. Faculty have the power to enact our stated DEI values in our academic work, promoting equity in learning. How do you want your students to feel in your class? What are your core values related to teaching and communicating with students? It could be academic success, fairness, growth, diversity of voices, intellectual curiosity, or feeling of belonging.

Please describe your core values:

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- b. After thinking of your core values as an instructor, review institutional mission and value statements.
  - i. <https://uiowa.edu/about-iowa> (Please look at mission and values categories)
  - ii. <https://diversity.uiowa.edu/resources/dei-definitions>
- c. How are they connected to your personal core values? What language could you use in communicating your principles to your students in your statement?

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How does your teaching philosophy align with the values you want to express in a DEI statement?

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## 2. Engaging in Personal Inventory

To start drafting your DEI statement, please consider the following writing prompts:

Think of the common biases, assumptions, and conventions in your discipline regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion, How might these practices and beliefs affect learners with varying backgrounds? How might students respond to them?

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Do your course learning objectives lead to dialogue about diversity, equity, and inclusion? How are you planning to integrate it into your teaching?

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How can diversity support student learning in your classroom context? Why is being equitable and inclusive important to you as a teacher?

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How do you specifically acknowledge and respect diversity in your teaching? How does it shape your course design approaches, course content, teaching strategies, or discussion facilitation?



How do you ensure that students in your class feel that they belong here? How might you include them in co-creating an inclusive classroom environment?

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How can your students give you input on classroom climate and diversity of the course materials and perspectives?

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Which campus resources would you like to share with your students to support them?

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Additional reflective questions can be found here: *Diversity & Inclusion statements*, Sheridan Center at [Brown University](#).

- 3. Learning from others and consulting with other examples.** We encourage you to check the examples of DEI statements from your colleagues in your department or other institutions. The Eberly Center at [Carnegie Mellon University](#) offers samples of DEI statements for various disciplines. As you read through sample statements, make note of what you see as effective attributes and what aspects seem less effective. Are there any strategies appropriate for your context?

## Next Steps

A personalized statement should include **your own positionally** and **context-specific components** and show concrete steps that you plan to take to support Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in your course.

When commitment to DEI in the syllabus is not supported by course design (e.g., by teaching strategies or assessment techniques), it might have unintended consequences, send a mixed message to students, and affect the perceptions of the teacher's integrity (Windscheid et al., 2016).

After designing your statement, make sure that your **syllabus**, **ICON site**, and **course design** are aligned with your diversity statement in being welcoming, consistent, and inclusive.

To see various strategies for making your syllabus more inviting, we encourage you to review a resource written by UI undergraduate students *Using an Inclusive Syllabus to Build Connections with Your Students*.

[https://teach.uiowa.edu/sites/teach.uiowa.edu/files/wysiwyg\\_uploads/using\\_an\\_inclusive\\_syllabus\\_to\\_build\\_connections\\_with\\_your\\_students.pdf](https://teach.uiowa.edu/sites/teach.uiowa.edu/files/wysiwyg_uploads/using_an_inclusive_syllabus_to_build_connections_with_your_students.pdf)

During the first week of class discuss your DEI statement with your students and share why it is important to you. After sharing your statement with students, you could ask your students to respond to a **reflective prompt** (e.g., *What specific thing could you, as a member of this learning community (student), do to help ensure that all the members of this classroom feel that they belong?*); to write a minute-paper about their core values and how their learning experiences are connected to them; or to engage in co-developing community agreements for the class. Refer to your DEI statement over the term.

To request a one-on-one consultation on your personalized DEI statement for your course, please email us at [teaching@uiowa.edu](mailto:teaching@uiowa.edu).

## **Additional Resources:**

Libguide on DEI: <https://guides.lib.uiowa.edu/dei>

Shifting language in DEI work: <http://www.theinclusionsolution.me/decolonizing-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-work-corporate-di-speak/>

Shifting language from diversity and inclusion to equity and justice:

<https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2017/03/30/colleges-need-language-shift-not-one-you-think-essay>

UI DEI language guide: <https://diversity.uiowa.edu/resources/dei-style-guide>

## **Citations**

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