

WATCH OUT FOR BLIND SPOTS IN COLLEGE COURSES

Many of us will use at least part of our downtime this summer to design, review, or revise the courses we are teaching next year. This process of revision can be an opportunity to see our work with new eyes and address blind spots in our approach to working with students.

I recently attended a faculty workshop on implicit bias led by a colleague in my university's math department. I was interested because I have been working to put diversity and inclusion front and center in all the courses I teach: literature courses as well as my English methods class for students preparing to work in middle or high schools.

As an English professor, I thought I knew how to correct for biases in past eras of literary scholarship. I have made concerted efforts to diversify the list of authors my students read so that my syllabus showcases writers from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds and from a range of gender identities.

I confess I had thought less about the implicit bias in the rules and

regulations of my syllabus, many of which have been copied and pasted year to year over my two decades of teaching.

My math department colleague opened my eyes to these biases when he pointed to attendance rules in his own syllabus, which, in the past, stated that missing a specified number of classes meant an automatic penalty for a student's grade. He always made exceptions, he said, when students told him of personal hardships. But he was learning that many students, especially first-generation college students and others from marginalized groups, never thought to approach him because the rules stated in the syllabus did not leave room for leniency.

The next step of the workshop was to examine our own course syllabi. Reading my timeworn list of rules, my eyes halted at a line that read, "Late work will be accepted only in documented cases of emergency." I borrowed those words from a senior professor years ago, when I was just starting out and needed to sound more authoritative than I felt. The truth is that I seldom ask students to document their personal emergencies. I believe them when they tell me of deaths in the family, sick children at home, weekend trips to the hospital that leave them unable to finish papers on time. In reality, I accept late work all the time, but my list of rules made it sound like I didn't. And my use of the term "documented" implied a menacing tone in an era when many of my students worry about loved ones who could be detained or deported.

Are there other blind spots in my syllabi? Probably. I'm going to keep rereading sections I used to skim over when I assumed that they didn't need to change. Thanks to my colleague's perceptive guidance, I will no longer turn a blind eye on barriers that are all too visible to students who need my support.

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