

Syllabus Content: How to Support Students with a Syllabus for the ‘Whole’ Student

Katrina A. Swinehart Held
Central State University
1400 Brush Row Rd.
c/o College of Education
Wilberforce, OH 45384
(937) 376-6036
kswinehart@centralstate.edu

Introduction & Need for Strategy

University students face many challenges today: from finding ways to afford tuition and textbooks to attempting to locate all the student discounts to get the best deal on groceries and rent. Homelessness, hunger, poverty, and mental illness are all issues that university students face every day. Another significant challenge at my university, Central State University, are students who have exited the foster care system without any systems for support. University staff and faculty face the challenge of providing the tools to students to assist them in their adventure toward their undergraduate degree. However, how do we provide those tools to students who are apprehensive about sharing their struggles? Perhaps your course syllabus could be a way to share resources with students anonymously.

Last semester, according to informal conversations, more than half of my students faced hunger and food insecurity. One-third of my students faced the challenge of having acceptable, affordable living conditions. More than three-quarters of my students brought concerns about their mental illness to my attention as an area they needed support. Additionally, students would go to great lengths to keep their needs from being known widely by their peers, and even some faculty or staff. This makes communication on these topics difficult. Research has shown that students who have concerns in these areas can struggle to focus on their academic work.

Connection to Literature

Students facing food insecurity have been referred to as an invisible problem “because of [food insecurity’s] cross-cutting nature, and the fact that most people who are experiencing poverty want to keep it hidden due to stigma and shame” (Cady, p. 265, 2004). According to Allen & Alleman (2019), research conducted recently shows that 36% of students at four-year institutions and 42% of students at two-year institutions are food insecure; this is compared to 12.7% of the general population. USA Today (2019) highlights the major issue of homelessness for university students by sharing 14% of four-year institution students, and 18% of two-year institution students report homelessness. However, USA Today (2019) also found that the number of students who reported housing insecurity (i.e., paying rent) was much higher at 60% of students at a two-year institution and 48% for those at a four-year institution. Additionally, USA Today (2019) explains that “a combination of factors, including rising tuition, financial aid packages that fail to keep up with the cost of living, and an overall lack of affordable housing have fueled the homelessness crisis among college students” (p. 1). Furthermore, Allen & Alleman (2019) state that students are more likely to report themselves as food insecure or facing homelessness if they qualify as “low income” or are a student of color. Allen & Alleman (2019) share that they are more likely to report this to a trusted mentor or advisor than anyone else.

The other challenge, mental illness, manifests differently. Whereas students might seek support from trusted mentors, they are far less likely to share their struggle with mental illness in this same manner (Ghodasara, Davidson, Reich, Savoie, Rodgers, 2011). Peltzer, Yi, Pengpid (2017) shared that U.S. college students from ages 18 to 30 have a suicidal ideation rate of 8.8%. Upfront, a publication of the American Psychological Association (APA), shared in 2013 that 95% of counseling centers at college and universities saw a substantial increase of students seeking services for ‘significant’ mental illness. APA (2013) went on to explain that the most common disorders include anxiety, which impacts 41.6% of students and depression, which affects 36.4% of college students. Furthermore, APA (2013) found that 24.5% of students are taking psychotropic medications. This growing demand for mental health care must be met for our students to continue their academic pursuits successfully.

How It Work & Implementation of LCT Strategy

So how can something as innocuous and straightforward, as a course syllabus, address these glaring, urgent societal problems? It's all about the content and anonymity. After my first year as a faculty member ended in the 2018-2019 academic year, these were the issues I grappled with most. I wasn't sure how to connect students with the appropriate resources, especially given the limited communication they were willing to have with me. I had lived in the campus community for five years but wasn't sure what local resources addressed these issues. So last summer, I sought out to connect my students with the resources available to them. Then I put them in my syllabus, on my office door, and made pamphlets about the resources available in common student areas. One of the sample statements from my syllabi include:

- Wellness - Being a university student can be stressful. Good news! CSU has services to support you should find yourself feeling overwhelmed, anxious, depressed, or having a hard time during the academic year. The services are provided to you here on campus and are anonymous. Here are more details on the services offered and how to get assistance: <https://studentlife.centralstate.edu/index2.php?num=24>. If you need 24/7 care, reach out to TCN at 937-376-8700 or visit Greene Memorial Hospital. Be kind to yourself, be well, and make sure you are taking care of your whole self.

Results to Date & Implications / Impact

My syllabi contain different statements that address the highlighted issues from this abstract: homelessness, food insecurity, and mental illness. This summer, I am researching resources for domestic violence, as that is another issue on my campus that I hope to help students address. These syllabi statements have been given to 92 students in the 2019-2020 academic year. Within that academic year, six students (7%) have used these resources to gain access to mental health care, two students (2%) have found affordable, safe housing, and twenty-two students (24%) have gained access to assistance from local food pantries. This profound impact on the students I served last academic year has been significant to my students. All of these students were able to stay in school because of the resources they found in my syllabus or a conversation with me. These are the students that made me aware of their connection to support, so more students may have used these resources without letting me know. The implications of this technique show that students need to be connected with resources near, and on, our university campuses that can serve them as a whole human; simple statements in syllabi about student care outside the classroom can make all the difference.

Future Plans / Advice to Others

I plan to keep utilizing statements in my course syllabi that address the 'whole' student. Adding these portions to my course syllabi allows me to provide students with knowledge and resources to address their concerns around homelessness, food insecurity, and mental illness. Students may not feel comfortable asking me about these resources directly, and research has shown this to be true. By providing the information in a required document for university operation, students can learn more about ways for them to take care of their concerns outside the classroom. My advice for others considering this same action would be to make sure that you are connecting students with quality resources that can efficiently address their problems. An example would be to make sure that the counseling center you list doesn't have a long waiting period. Additionally, making sure that the food pantry has the availability to serve new clients and how close the resource is to public transportation are all things to keep in mind.

References

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