

# Equity Principles for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

*Every Learner Everywhere  
Teaching Strategy Guide Series*

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Thank you to Laura Davinci, Associate Director of Every Learner Everywhere, for reviewing the document drafts and to Robert McGuire of McGuire Editorial and Emilie Cook, Communications Manager at Every Learner Everywhere, for their excellent suggestions for improving the guides.

## Recommended Citation

Rodgers, A. J. and O'Sullivan, P. (2022) An Equity-First Approach to Evidence-Based Teaching Practices. Every Learner Everywhere. <https://www.everylearnereverywhere.org/resources/equity-principles-for-teaching-and-learning-in-higher-education/>

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**Every Learner Everywhere** is a network of twelve partner organizations with expertise in evaluating, implementing, scaling, and measuring the efficacy of education technologies, curriculum and course design strategies, teaching practices, and support services that personalize instruction for students in blended and online learning environments. Our mission is to help institutions use new technology to innovate teaching and learning, with the ultimate goal of improving learning outcomes for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, poverty-affected, and first-generation students. Our collaborative work aims to advance equity in higher education and centers on the transformation of postsecondary teaching and learning. We build capacity in colleges and universities to improve student outcomes with digital learning through direct technical assistance, timely resources and toolkits, and ongoing analysis of institutional practices and market trends. For more information about Every Learner and its collaborative approach to making higher education more equitable through digital learning, visit [everylearnereverywhere.org](https://www.everylearnereverywhere.org).



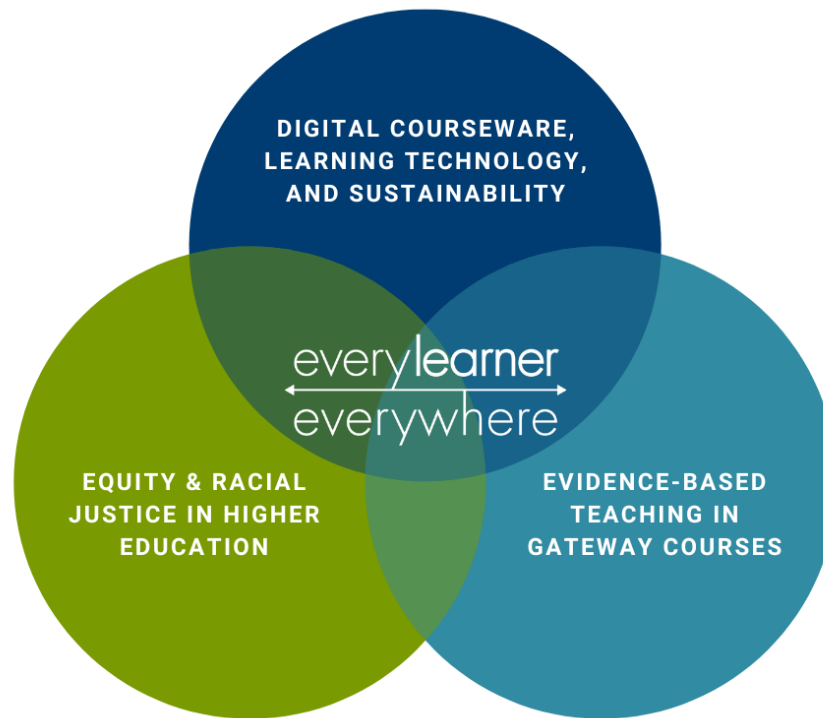


## *Introduction to the Teaching Strategy Guide Series*

Equity Principles for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education is one of a series of teaching strategy guides published by Every Learner Everywhere for the purpose of highlighting how the three facets of our mission, equity in higher education, digital learning, and evidence-based teaching practices, can be applied in higher educational courses. Our target audience is faculty, course directors, course administrators, and faculty support staff. [An Equity-First Approach to Evidence-Based Teaching Practices](#) reviews six teaching practices proven to benefit Black, Latinx, Indigenous, poverty-affected, and first-generation students in [gateway courses](#). [An Equity-First Approach to Postsecondary Digital Learning](#) outlines seven necessary components to adopting and utilizing digital learning tools equitably. This strategy guide also includes a framework for centering equity in the course design, underlying principles, and pedagogical practice of digital courseware. [Equity Principles for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education](#) details our network's eight equity principles and their application to equitable teaching with the goal of redesigning postsecondary digital learning opportunities to more intentionally center the needs, outcomes, and experiences of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students, as well as students experiencing poverty.

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# *Every Learner Everywhere Mission*



We support institutions in the adoption, implementation, and scale of high-quality digital learning tools. Grounded in principles of effective teaching and a commitment to equity and racial justice, our approach to digital learning enables institutions to increase [gateway course](#)<sup>1</sup> and degree completion, lower the cost of instruction, and facilitate more equitable learning outcomes for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, poverty-affected, and first-generation students. Digital learning can engage faculty as innovators and educators focused on using evidence-based teaching practices, data, courseware, and technology tools to improve learning outcomes and better serve students.

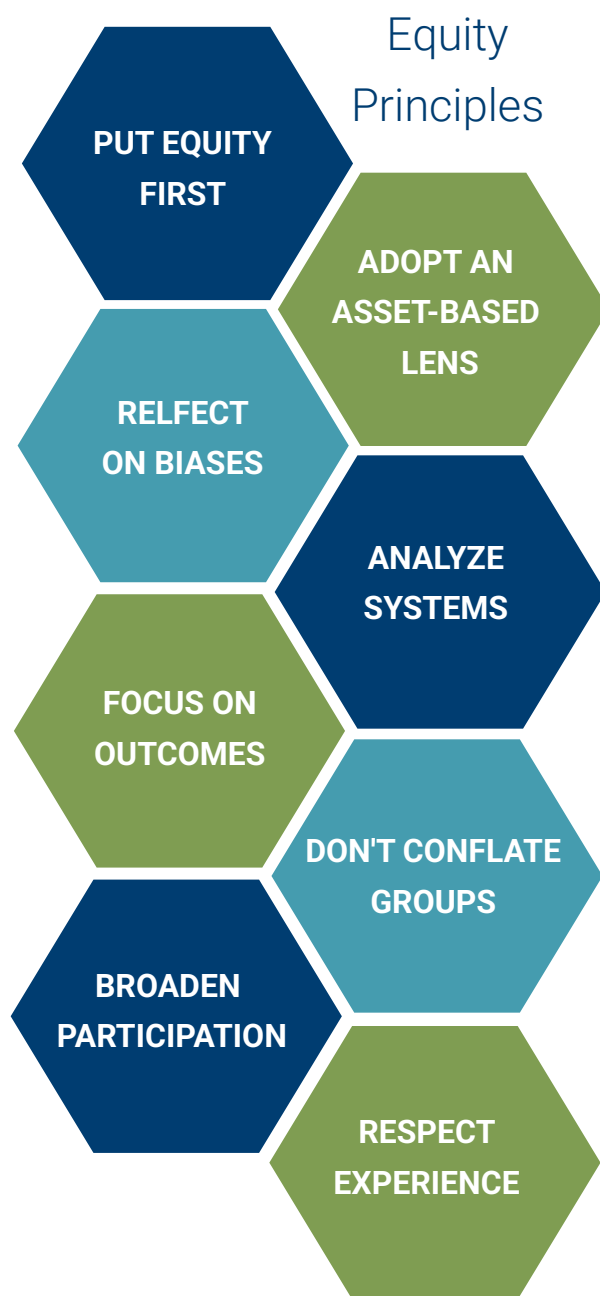
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<sup>1</sup> Kwak, J. (2020). What are Gateway Courses and Why Do They Matter to Equity in Higher Ed? Every Learner Everywhere. [www.everylearnereverywhere.org/blog/what-are-gateway-courses-and-why-do-they-matter-to-equity-in-higher-ed/](http://www.everylearnereverywhere.org/blog/what-are-gateway-courses-and-why-do-they-matter-to-equity-in-higher-ed/)

# Operationalizing Our Approach to Equity

At Every Learner Everywhere, equity is not just one thing we do – it is at the heart of **everything** we do. While there are many definitions of equity, we offer Liliana Garces’<sup>2</sup> frame of equity, which asserts equity is “based on a notion of fairness—that is, that an individual’s life chances, educational opportunities, and ability for self-determination should not depend on factors outside [their] control, such as race or ethnicity. Thus, educational outcomes should not be constrained by structural inequities.” **Eight equity principles** reflect our collective understanding of systemic racism in education and guide decisions about our work.

The quote on the following page, written by Dr. Jeremiah Sims,<sup>3</sup> Co-Founder & Principal Consultant of [Rooted in Love, LLC](#), details the root causes that require us to vigilantly center equity in our daily work:



<sup>2</sup> Garces, L. M. (2014). Aligning diversity, quality, and equity: The implications of legal and public policy developments for promoting racial diversity in graduate studies. *American Journal of Education*, 120(4), 457-480.

<sup>3</sup> Gable, T., Holiday, T., O’Sullivan, P., & Sims, J.J. (2021 June 1). Getting Started With Equity: A Guide for Academic Department Leaders. Every Learner Everywhere. <https://www.everylearnereverywhere.org/resources/>

"This country and its systems are inherently anti-Black and anti-BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, and people of color], because they were founded and predicated upon a racialized, capitalistic value system that assigns more value to white lives than nonwhite lives.<sup>4</sup> This includes our educational system, which is designed to work in the interest of affirming, standardizing, and promulgating whiteness and, by default, white supremacy.<sup>5</sup>

Deficit thinking yields the conclusion that the academic struggles of racially minoritized and poverty affected students are attributable to innate scholastic deficiencies. But a systems view makes it clear that these struggles are because brilliant, talented students are forced to navigate educational terrains laden with seemingly insurmountable obstacles. These “equity gaps” are antithetical to the scholastic success of racially minoritized and poverty-affected students. The system of higher education is inequitable by design, and therefore, must be redesigned for equity.”

*-- Dr. Jeremiah Sims*

Indeed, our digital learning strategy hinges on redesigning postsecondary digital learning opportunities to more intentionally center the needs, outcomes, and experiences of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students, as well as students experiencing poverty. Rather than blaming students, we take a systems approach that places the responsibility for student success and wellbeing where it belongs – within institutions (e.g., colleges, universities, courseware design companies) and their actors (e.g., faculty, administrators, tech designers). Vossoughi, Escudé, Kong, and Hooper<sup>2</sup> wrote that “equity lies in the **how** of teaching and learning.”

Next, we detail our eight equity principles and their application to equitable teaching.

<sup>4</sup> Sims, J.J. (2018). *Revolutionary STEM Education: Critical-reality pedagogy and social justice in STEM for Black males*. New York, New York: Peter Lang.

<sup>5</sup> Vossoughi, S., Escudé, M., Kong, F., & Hooper, P. (2013, October). *Tinkering, learning & equity in the after-school setting*. In Annual FabLearn Conference. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University.

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## 1. PUT EQUITY FIRST

Articulate a specific and explicit focus on racial and economic equity in your teaching and curricula.

### Examples of putting equity first in your teaching:

- Include an equity statement in your syllabus or somewhere prominent in your course LMS that explains how you define equity. Here is a statement that Dr. Rodgers has used in her syllabus: “In this course, equity and justice are not only theorized, but intentionally enacted in the ways we commit to learning and engaging with each other throughout the semester. The teaching team commits to cultivating a learning environment that centers the inherent dignity and value of all students. We acknowledge the vulnerability and internal work required to deeply engage with topics in this course, and we commit to providing a caring and safe environment to process, make mistakes, and grow stronger in our conviction for educational equity. Yet, with high support comes high expectations- any instances of discrimination, harassment, and/or micro/macro-aggression will be addressed immediately and will not be tolerated.”
- Nurture a sense of belonging and inclusive learning environment that enables all students to feel that they belong and can succeed in your class and in the discipline.
- Curate course materials that highlight issues of (in)equity in your discipline.
- Curate course materials that represent your students and their cultural communities as knowers and practitioners of the discipline.
- Develop a system for soliciting student feedback on course policies, course content, course assessments, course activities, and teaching strategies for the purpose of continuous improvement for equity.
  - Conduct these short assessments throughout the course – waiting until mid or the end of the semester can sometimes be too late to make the adequate adjustments needed to your pedagogy to be truly responsive to your students’ feedback.
  - Students should have the option to provide feedback anonymously and without repercussions.
  - If you’re asking for feedback, be transparent with your students about how you are going to integrate their feedback into your pedagogy moving forward. Honor their commitment to your pedagogical development.
- Ensure your course materials and assessments are accessible (per ADA requirements, and also easy to obtain and use for all students), affordable (OER or low-cost), reusable (available to students even after the term ends), and inclusive (utilize inclusive language and represent diverse populations and cultural perspectives).

***If you're asking for feedback, be transparent with your students about how you are going to integrate their feedback into your pedagogy moving forward. Honor their commitment to your pedagogical development.***



## 2. ADOPT AN ASSET-BASED LENS

Pursue equity in optimistic, anti-deficit, and sustainable ways so that a student's background, life circumstances, and/or first-gen status in higher education are not barriers to overcome, but instead, resources that enrich their learning.

### Examples of anti-deficit teaching:

- Don't place the burden for accommodation on students. Instead, create equitable learning environments by using the principles of universal design for learning (UDL), advertising and promoting campus services or departmental resources (e.g., Accessibility Services Office, Office of Diversity and Inclusion, First-Gen Resource Centers, Cultural Centers), and providing students a variety of ways to participate through differentiated instruction, synchronous and asynchronous course activities, and flexible course policies, such as optional camera use in virtual settings.
- Invite students to share how their home communities and social identities are impacted by central issues in the discipline.
- Allow students to write and speak in ways that are familiar to them while also helping them acclimate to academic and formal ways of writing and speaking in the discipline. The classroom should be a space where students can leverage the full repertoire of their linguistic resources to support their learning.
- Share testimonials from former students with varying social identities to show current students that success in this course/ field is possible. Providing possibility models to historically underrepresented students is key to battling imposterism.
- Build in class time for tutoring, extra help, and group work rather than asking students to attend these events on their own and in their own time.
- Set up peer mentoring opportunities for students so they can help each other outside of class and during non-business hours.





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### 3. REFLECT ON BIASES

Consistently reflect on how your biases and positional power show up in your course content and in your teaching. Then seek input on your actions and unintended contradictions, hold yourself accountable for improvement, and strengthen your skills.

#### Examples of reflecting on biases and positional power:

- Pursue professional learning centered on equity and racial justice in your discipline and your pedagogy. Additionally, find personal opportunities for critical reflection around power and privilege.
- Run your course materials through an equity review tool, readability analysis, and diversity evaluation to discover opportunities for making course materials more equitable. Additionally, create an optical character recognition (OCR) version of PDFs of lecture presentations, [alt text](#) for images that are used, and unique titles for each slide, and [set the reading order](#) for your presentation.
- Record your lectures or live teaching sessions and review them with peers or an institutional learning specialist trained in inclusive and equitable teaching. If you teach an online class, ask for a review of your course design, course materials, and assessments.
- Develop relationships with other faculty, a discipline-based community (such as a professional society), and student groups who can hold you accountable to your own equity goals and course improvement.

### 4. ANALYZE SYSTEMS

Critically analyze and aim to continuously improve the systems, structures, cultures, policies, and processes affecting education.

#### Examples of continuous improvement of educational systems:

- Set equity goals for your course and develop steps to ensure you achieve them.
- Suggest that your department conducts a departmental or programmatic equity audit that can uncover policies, processes, and pedagogies that create barriers to student progression or completion of a degree program.
  - We want to note that Faculty of Color, especially those who identify as women, are often disproportionately burdened with equity-work. As you imagine how you or your department might engage in these activities, we urge you to consider who often takes on the labor of equity-oriented transformation? How, if at all, is their labor compensated and recognized? What is being changed in their workload to honor their engagement with this new task?

- Collect/disseminate course-level and department-level data or knowledge that can be used to analyze current systems, structures, cultures, policies and processes affecting student progression and/or degree attainment. Where do the equity gaps exist? What hypotheses or conclusions can you make about why these gaps persist in your department or course?
- Utilize the institutional equity dashboard or gather course-level and departmental-level data to learn whether there are patterns in which students enroll in courses in your department, major or minor in the discipline, and attain degrees in the discipline. Use this data to assess with departmental faculty and student advisors the policies, course offerings, and support structures that attract or discourage students from the department/discipline.
- Revise courses with high DFW rates for racially minoritized students so they align with equity principles and incorporate [evidence-based teaching practices](#).

## 5. FOCUS ON OUTCOMES

Focus on quantitative outcomes and qualitative understandings of students' experiences in order to redesign departmental courses and programs.

### Examples of insights to understanding the student experience:

- People say that numbers don't lie, but how people make sense of quantitative data can vary significantly. Data does not always tell an accurate story if it is interpreted with bias, if data outliers are ignored, and if some data are not included because the sample is too small. Quantitative data can be enriched by qualitative explanations that can be found through student focus groups, student interviews, and a student advisory board.
- Contextualize your data. Data may need to be understood against historical/sociopolitical backdrops, institutional data, or national data trends. For example, if currently most of the students enrolled in, and earning degrees from, the philosophy department are white males, is this trend historical at the institution or an anomaly? Is the trend replicated nationally or in the institution's comparison group? How do research studies or a lit review inform the perceived issue?
- On an individual level, student data needs to be understood in terms of that student's experience and circumstances. Understanding student data requires that we remember that these are not data points – they are people. For example, the data may indicate that a student is not taking advantage of study groups, extra help sessions, or office hours. It could be that the student is first generation and thus less likely to feel comfortable in those spaces and may need some encouragement or someone from those spaces to reach out to the student. It could also be that the student has children and cannot take part in in-person campus activities once the children are home from daycare or school. Rather than making assumptions, you can always ask your students, "How can I help get you the resources you need to be successful in this course?"

***On an individual level, student data needs to be understood in terms of that student's experience and circumstances.***

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## 6. DISAGGREGATE DATA TO THE FINEST POINT POSSIBLE <sup>6</sup>

Too often, small populations of racially minoritized students are grouped together as underrepresented and minoritized students, thus erasing their unique identities and the unique barriers to their academic progression and completion of a degree.

### Examples of data disaggregation:

- Offer the *option* for students to provide demographic information about the various social identities that they hold – especially if the institution doesn't make this data readily accessible. Try your best not to make assumptions about your students' social identities and instead give them the space to be self-determined in how they understand themselves in the social world.
- Avoid conflating data on student populations under the broad umbrella of 'underrepresented minority.' Racially minoritized people have related, but very distinct, experiences of being racialized in the United States. These distinct histories trickle into students' experiences of higher education. For instance, aggregating all racially minoritized students into one big bucket can obscure the particularities of how antiblackness contributes to students' experiences in your course.
- Don't disregard data because the sample size was too small. Indigenous students, for instance, are routinely erased from quantitative studies because they are underrepresented in higher education. In an effort to gain statistical significance, Indigenous students and their insights are rendered insignificant and excluded from the data. This is unjust. Supplement non-statistically significant data on student demographics with student interviews, focus groups, and other opportunities for these students to tell their stories and have their voices heard at the institution.

## 7. BROADEN PARTICIPATION

Broaden the participation of people, partners, and perspectives to reflect the equity that students and their institutions deserve.

### Examples of broadening participation:

- Share the decision-making power by developing a departmental or degree-specific student advisory board who can assist with equity audits, course revision, and policy review. Compensate students for this labor.
- Teach students that the discipline exists beyond the confines of the academy. Engaging in place-based and community-led learning emphasizes that academics are not the only knowers or doers of the discipline and offers a new way into authentic disciplinary practice.

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<sup>6</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of disaggregating student data, please see McGuire, R. (2022, September, 1) Toward Ending the Monolithic View of "Underrepresented Students": Why Higher Education Must Account for Racial, Ethnic, and Economic Variations in Barriers to Equity. Every Learner Everywhere. <https://www.everylearnereverywhere.org/resources/toward-ending-the-monolithic-view-of-underrepresented-students>



- Allocate and redistribute funds to support our target population's recruitment, enrollment, persistence, and completion of gateway courses
- Ensure that all departmental spaces are ADA compliant and accessible to students regardless of dis/ability.

## 8. RESPECT STUDENT EXPERIENCES

Honor the lived experiences and expertise in equity of poverty-affected and Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students as intellectual resources.

### Examples of honoring students' lived experiences with equity:

- Develop a departmental or degree-specific student advisory board which can assist with equity audits, course revision, and policy review. This labor should be compensated appropriately.
- Supplement non-statistically significant data on student demographics with student interviews, focus groups, and other opportunities for these students to tell their stories and have their voices heard at the institution.
- Positioning students as equity experts can sometimes have the inadvertent consequence of making students feel singled out. Higher education research has long demonstrated that many people of color, particularly Black women, do an inequitable share of emotional and intellectual labor around issues of DEI and institutional transformation. This work is deeply important, but it is also hard, often undervalued, and almost always uncompensated. As we consider ways to honor students as valued partners in this work, we must also ensure that students have the space to contribute to equity initiatives in safe spaces, with appropriate compensation and/or recognition, and in ways that tangibly move the needle on policy and practice.



# Additional Resources from the Every Learner Everywhere Resource Library

Below is a selection of resources on equity-centered digital learning produced by Every Learner Everywhere in collaboration with its network partners.

- [\*What Our Best College Instructors Do: Reflections by students about meaningful learning experiences\*](#) outlines best practices for inclusive and effective teaching from the students' perspective.
- [\*Adaptive Courseware Implementation Guide\*](#) shares lessons from course instructors with experience centering around racial and socioeconomic equity and student voice in the adoption and implementation of adaptive courseware.
- [\*Caring for Students Playbook: Six Recommendations\*](#) suggests equity-focused strategies that put student care into practice by acknowledging student challenges while identifying student assets.
- [\*Equity Review Tool: A Process Guide for Equity-centered Educational Materials\*](#) poses critical questions that illuminate privilege, bias, exclusion, and misrepresentation and that promote equity-minded language.
- [\*Getting Started with Equity: A Guide for Academic Department Leaders\*](#) is a resource for deans and other institutional leaders to start conversations in academic departments about advancing equity and justice in curricula and teaching.
- [\*Improving Departmental Equity Using the IMPACT Framework\*](#) includes worksheets for anticipating, acknowledging, and redressing racism perpetuated by academic departmental policies and practices.
- [\*Learning Analytics Strategy Toolkit\*](#) helps the reader assess campus readiness to use learning analytics and provides the tools to start.
- [\*Strategies for Implementing Digital Learning Infrastructure to Support Equitable Outcomes: A Case-based Guidebook for Instructional Leaders\*](#) focuses on building infrastructure for high-quality digital learning and outlines specific recommendations and examples.
- The [\*Every Learner Everywhere YouTube channel\*](#) includes a growing archive of conference and webinar presentations featuring experts in equity-centered, evidence-based digital learning.