# Equitizing Syllabi Case Study:

*How Lehman College and Every Learner Everywhere Collaborated to Transform Gateway Courses*

LEHMAN COLLEGE | CUNY

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Achieving the Dream

# Acknowledgements

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## About Lehman College

**Lehman College** is the City University of New York's only four-year college in the Bronx, serving the borough and surrounding region as an intellectual, economic, and cultural center. Lehman provides undergraduate and graduate studies in the liberal arts and sciences and professional education within a dynamic research environment. With a diverse student body of more than 14,000 students and over 81,000 alumni, Lehman offers 90+ undergraduate and graduate programs.

## About Every Learner Everywhere

**Every Learner Everywhere** is a network of 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, Latino, and Indigenous students, poverty-affected students, and first-generation students. Our collaborative work aims to advance equity in higher education centered 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 Everywhere and its collaborative approach to equitizing higher education through digital learning, visit **everylearnereverywhere.org**.

## About Achieving the Dream

**Achieving the Dream** is a partner and champion of more than 300 community colleges across the country. Drawing on our expert coaches, groundbreaking programs, and national peer network, we provide institutions with integrated, tailored support for every aspect of their work — from foundational capacities such as leadership, data, and equity to intentional strategies for supporting students holistically, building K–12 partnerships, and more. We call this Whole College Transformation. Our vision is for every college to be a catalyst for equitable, antiracist, and economically vibrant communities. We know that with the right partner and the right approach, colleges can drive access, completion rates, and employment outcomes — so that all students can access life-changing learning that propels them into community-changing careers. Visit us at **achievingthedream.org**.

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Achieving the Dream

*Starting in 2021*, a group of faculty at New York City's Lehman College participating in an intensive professional development project radically rewrote their syllabi and, indirectly, transformed their course design and teaching practices to put students at the center of learning. These newly equitized syllabi and the faculty who developed them are now influencing courses beyond those originally at the center of this effort. This case study details how the Lehman College Office of Online Education collaborated with Every Learner Everywhere and its service partners to develop and deliver the support necessary for this transition.

# An Opportunity Emerges: Planning for Professional Development That Centers Students

In 2021, as a member of the Postsecondary Success Strategy cohort managed by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, Lehman College, CUNY, was invited to participate in a series of professional development activities from Every Learner Everywhere and its technical assistance partners. The goal of the grant was to engage faculty as innovators in evidence-based teaching practices, data, and technology to improve learning outcomes and better serve students.

The Lehman College Provost at that time, Peter Nwosu, identified the professional development offerings as a chance to further the institution's transformation to equity-centered teaching. Under the purview of Victor M. Brown as the Associate Provost for Academic Programs and Educational Effectiveness at the time, the initiative was to be operationalized by the Office of Online Education with Olena Zhadko as the director. She and her colleagues, Associate Director Dermot Foley and Learning Experience Design Specialist Anthony Wheeler, began to identify priorities and partners for the project, eventually referred to internally as the Educational Transformation Through Digital Learning Initiative.

The Office of Online Education team was guided by the same priorities that always influence their new academic programs: putting students at the center of learning and integrating equity and inclusion into teaching practices. This is particularly important for Lehman, a four-year institution in the Bronx where the student body is "majority minority" and a quarter of students were born outside the U.S.

### LEHMAN COLLEGE STUDENT BODY

Lehman College undergraduate and graduate programs enroll more than 14,000 students. The undergraduate student body is:

- over 12,000 students
- 48 percent Hispanic
- 33 percent Black
- 9 percent white
- 8 percent Asian/Pacific Islander
- .2 percent American Indian or Native Alaskan
- 52 percent first generation
- 51 percent from the Bronx
- 24 percent born outside the U.S.

Sources: About Lehman College: Facts and Data; Lehman College Institutional Research: Interactive Fact Book

The Office of Online Education began by conducting an analysis with their institutional research colleagues to identify high-enrollment general education courses with high DFWI rates (i.e., courses with a high percentage of students who earned a D or F grade, withdrew, or recorded an incomplete.) With that analysis in hand, they recruited faculty to participate in what they anticipated to be a program of intensive educational development assistance and support that would be tailored to the institution's priorities. Their goal for the initiative was to build authentic, accessible, inclusive course design that engages students, with particular attention to courses that demonstrate respect and care for first-generation and Hispanic students.

As Zhadko put it, the Office of Online Education wanted to "facilitate a learning path for faculty to engage in self-reflective practices." She and her colleagues envisioned specialized and robust training to enhance student experiences with digital technologies, redesign bottleneck courses, and further institutional digital transformation efforts.

This vision was a good fit with Every Learner and its technical assistance partners, according to Norma Hollebeke, Senior Manager, Network Programs and Services at Every Learner, because "our whole purpose with our services is to catalyze transformation in higher ed — to go from traditional models designed to serve a handful of privileged people to models that engage every learner. Lehman was a wonderful college to work with. You don't always see this willingness to look at themselves in the mirror and see what they can do for students."

Hollebeke was particularly optimistic about the engagement because Lehman included adjunct instructors who teach gateway courses — the first credit-bearing courses in a program of study — for first- and second-year students. “It helped to bring their insight to it, and that’s a collaboration you don't normally see on most campuses,” she says.

Every Learner and four of its partners — Achieving the Dream, The Association of Public & Land-grant Universities’ Personalized Learning Consortium, Digital Promise, and Tyton Partners — tailored a program to Lehman’s needs, drawing from the training and technical assistance already developed as part of established service offerings. Achieving the Dream took the lead in providing expertise in equity and evidence-based teaching practices, and organizing subject-matter experts who coached Lehman through planning and implementing the project.

The Lehman College Office of Online Education provided administrative support such as facilitating meetings, moderating webinars, managing communications, developing presentations and reports, and coordinating with colleagues in the Office of Institutional Research and Division of Information Technology.

“Our work through this initiative focused on making the learning environment within online courses more inclusive and student centered,” says Foley. “We wanted to place students, with their unique backgrounds and experiences, in the center of the course experience and ensure the course design reflected those factors.”

The Educational Transformation Through Digital Learning Initiative would eventually have three broad phases over an 18-month period: catalyzing professional development, supporting pilot projects, and planning to sustain and scale them. The pilot projects would eventually result in radically rewritten syllabi in those courses and, indirectly, transform course design and teaching practices. Those “equitized syllabi” and the faculty who developed them are now influencing courses beyond those at the center of this professional development project.

## Every Learner Everywhere’s services

Every Learner Everywhere offers a range of consulting, training, and technical assistance on equitable digital learning. The services are delivered in partnership with educators, coaches, facilitators, and researchers at partner organizations like Achieving the Dream, the Association of Public & Land-grant Institutions, and Online Learning Consortium.

The services include workshops and coaching for cross-functional collaborative internal teams or for multi-institution cohorts, and they are offered in a range of synchronous, asynchronous, in-person, and remote formats. The services can also be tailored for the unique needs of an individual institution.

The services cover topics in equitable course design and delivery, institutional culture and capacity, evaluation and analytics, and student success. Visit the Every Learner website to explore the full range of services.

## Phase 1: Case making and foundational learning

The first phase of the initiative consisted of intensive training on why and how to implement evidence-based practices that help students succeed in gateway courses. The faculty involved learned how pairing those practices with high-quality digital tools can make a more personalized and adaptive environment for minoritized and poverty-affected students. The goal at this phase was to establish a strong foundation before launching pilot projects.

The 12 faculty participating discussed topics such as formative practice and assessment, data-informed decision making, metacognition, student agency, and shifting from deficits-based to assets-based thinking. Some outcomes of this phase included building institutional capacity for:

- student-centered instruction and equitable, inclusive teaching practices using digital learning;
- evidence-based instructional strategies and assessment tools to support student mastery;
- leveraging digital tools and student information systems to support data-informed decisions and student-centered learning for minoritized students; and
- integrating educational equity and inclusion strategies into the institution's digital coursework and structure.

Zhadko says a common theme at this stage was "recognizing areas and opportunities within the syllabus and course design that would engage all learners consistently and regularly with the course, instructor, and their peers."

> **"Even if faculty have been teaching for a long time, there are almost never enough opportunities to think deeply about the way we design learning experiences, especially with fast-paced innovation in technology and continuously evolving learners' needs."**
>
> **—Olena Zhadko**

For example, one session examined what a given teaching strategy or course design communicates about the institution's and instructor's concern for student success. Another on student learning contexts explored the influence of prior learning experiences, identities, perspectives, and cultural contexts that students bring with them. Zhadko says faculty valued the opportunity to think about the needs of specific student populations, how language and curriculum choices might land differently, and the assumptions that underlay the choices they might have previously been making for their courses.

One benefit of this phase was allowing busy faculty to critically examine teaching practices. "Even if faculty have been teaching for a long time, there are almost never enough opportunities to think deeply about the way we design learning experiences, especially with fast-paced innovation in technology and continuously evolving learners' needs," Zhadko says. "This initiative provided ample time for faculty to critically examine their courses, syllabi, and learning environments."

## Phase 2: Equitizing the syllabus

When the time came to develop pilot projects Lehman College, faculty decided that revising syllabi to be more equitable and student centered would be the most effective way to work toward their goals.

> **One first fix in most cases was a shift in tone. Anything that sounded like a warning against underperforming was weeded out and replaced with more inspirational and goal-oriented language.**

For many, the syllabus is a short document developed in a few hours, so extensive consultation and support may seem like a lot of attention, but equitizing the syllabus requires reconsidering the relationship to students. “Making a syllabus equity based takes a lot more effort than it does to paste in a lot of legal terminology about what happens if you cheat,” Hollebeke says.

“Making students feel like they belong in that course and understand the goals and the teaching methods takes time to figure out,” she explains. “Several faculty felt like when students were coming into class, they were getting lost early in the process. They took on the challenge of putting students at the center of that learning.”

Working with coaches from Achieving the Dream, the faculty involved with this phase relied heavily on an equity-minded syllabus review guide and rubric from the Center for Urban Education at the University of Southern California Rossier School of Education. The rubric includes indicators such as:

- welcoming language that conveys a willingness to work individually with students;
- representing diversity by communicating that students' racial and ethnic backgrounds are assets;
- mapping connections between the objectives and major assessments;
- creating opportunities for students to choose how they demonstrate their understanding of the course content; and
- validating students by telling them they are capable of attaining their educational goals.

“The rubric was there to guide faculty in terms of what a student might experience as a challenge,” Hollebeke says. “Just like we assess students, the coaches went through syllabi with instructors with the rubric to design something that gives students a sense of belonging.”

One first fix in most cases was a shift in tone. Anything that sounded like a warning against underperforming was weeded out and replaced with more inspirational and goal-oriented language. Another was to make the syllabus more reflective of the students in the course. A common tactic toward that end was to include images, links to videos, and quotes from inspiring and representative figures.

“To the coaches’ credit, they didn't just say something,” Foley says. “It was always backed by research. They would refer back to materials that were rigorous and then have discussions about the value in it.”

At a practical level, shifts in tone happened in introductory messages that clarified how the goals, learning objectives, teaching practices, and assignments all aligned. Later, detailed assignment instructions emphasized that alignment by referring back to the course goals. The intention was to repeatedly clarify why a particular activity, reading, or assessment was part of the course and to communicate a belief that every student was capable of success.

Another major change in the equitized syllabi was to destigmatize student support services by including useful details about those services, such as names of offices and how to make appointments. These were accompanied by a message that using these services is a normal part of successful academic progress.

The resulting syllabi may seem surprisingly long — over 18 pages in some cases — but in this format a syllabus might better be understood as a comprehensive course handbook that is referenced regularly. “The idea nowadays is to introduce the course as a whole as well as teaching methodologies and learning philosophies,” Hollebeke explains. “It's more of a living document that you use as you go through the term, not necessarily something you read front to back the first day.”

Nevertheless, the first day does matter a lot, Hollebeke emphasizes, which is why the syllabus is such an important leverage point for creating a student-centered culture. “When you have that positive first impression in the first hours of a course,” she says, “that is the difference between students feeling they don’t belong and maybe withdrawing versus having confidence and being engaged throughout the term.”

Technically, the equitized syllabus that Brian Wynne, Assistant Professor of Mathematics at Lehman College, created for Calculus I hasn't been used yet, because that course hasn't been on his teaching schedule since this professional development initiative.

But the work Wynne did equitizing that syllabus has impacted Calculus II and other advanced math courses he has been teaching because, "I basically did the syllabus revision for all my courses," he says.

Wynne describes the essence of the revision as concentrating on making clear how everything during the semester connects and how students can achieve their goals. "The onus is on the instructor to make a living document that is referred to in class," he explains. "It's there for full disclosure so students understand what they're getting involved in and how they can be successful. And it's a chance for the instructor to show they want students to succeed."

## Less terse

Like others who participated in the professional development, Wynne was surprised that he was being encouraged to develop a more comprehensive syllabus. "My experience has been that math courses have very terse syllabi," he says.

"When I was a student — and as a teacher for 15 years — all my syllabi were one page. Math instructors don't use their syllabi for much. This showed me some of the possibilities in how syllabi can be used to establish communication with the students."

Working on that has prompted Wynne to rethink communication with students. "Trying to make my syllabus achieve the standards they showed us informed a lot of my thinking," he says.

"I found it helpful as a reminder about how I interact with students might be perceived and how that could lead to negative outcomes if I'm not cautious or if I'm not being welcoming. They made me aware of some of the data around how student performance is connected with how students perceive traditional ways of interacting."

One example of the ripple effect of equitizing the syllabus is that it raises Wynne's own awareness of campus support services and of students who may need them. "Now when I'm meeting with a student, if I hear something that indicates they might benefit from one of those services, I can point them in that direction," he says.

## Sustaining impact

The syllabus Wynne revised is actually the addendum for his section to the department's "uniform syllabus" for Calculus I. Currently he is participating in the department's work to revise the uniform syllabus, and he anticipates that will influence other courses.

"We had a few core faculty involved and hopefully what they learned will be disseminated to more instructors, so that over time we'll start to see some differences," he says.

"I certainly felt like the process helped me improve my teaching if for no other reason than it helps to remind me about the student perspective," says Wynne. "Any time spent reflecting on how students engage with your materials is worthwhile."

## Phase 3: Iterating and scaling

In the semesters following their development of the equitized syllabi, four faculty began to participate in efforts to present their work to the broader Lehman College community. So far, that has been done primarily in the form of webinars. The archive of those presentations, as well as "before and after" syllabi, are available to the Lehman community on a site devoted to the Educational Transformation Through Digital Learning project.

In addition, this work was presented during the annual pre-term faculty development activities in summer 2023, and Zhadko and Foley expect it will be featured in upcoming high-visibility events sponsored by the Provost. Less formally, Foley says one participant has an influential programmatic leadership role in their department and anticipates sharing their learning there with the goal of equitizing the syllabi for other courses.

"Our typical role in the Office of Online Learning is to create opportunities for faculty to partner," Zhadko says. "Faculty love speaking with other faculty, so we will be organizing more college-wide events where we will ask them to share their story and where they see the impact."

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>
> **—Dermot Foley**

She adds it has been interesting to hear how the project assisted each of the participating faculty in unique ways. "The changes they made were not identical," she says. "They have a mix of modalities, but it's not about the modality. It's really about how you help students connect with learning to make it relevant. How do you get students to be curious and feel they can be heard? It was fascinating to see that the changes each instructor made were very different."

Hollebeke says the iterating and scaling stages are part of services from Every Learner because there needs to be a plan to get past initiative fatigue. "Our approach is you've got to carry it through," she explains.

"Institutions suffer from initiative fatigue because there's no sustainability. Once grant money runs out, projects stop. There's no help with stumbling blocks and to reflect on and celebrate success. Our approach takes that into consideration."

Foley sees the follow-through activities taking hold at Lehman. "These faculty finished the grant, and they could have just walked away," he says. "But they all universally said, 'I want to talk to more faculty. Let's do more.' They want to inspire other faculty to undertake their own transformation."

## FROM NEW SYLLABUS TO NEW WAYS OF TEACHING

Prior to this initiative, Sheila Gersh's motto when writing a syllabus had been "less is more." Her three-page syllabus for Using Multimedia to Visualize American Culture, an online course in the Lehman College Department of Journalism, featured an outline of the course with brief sections on policies, expectations, and learning objectives.

Based on what she learned through this project, however, Gersh, an adjunct associate professor, reframed her thinking about how the syllabus could enhance equity. She came to see the syllabus as an engaging opportunity for first-generation students to learn more about the college and understand in detail how the course would unfold.

Her newly equitized syllabus starts with a letter of welcome about herself and the course content, which is complemented by a video introduction. She explains the resources available at Lehman College and gives clear guidelines on expectations for completing assignments. She also incorporates inspiring quotes and images about the course content.

Another major change is that her new syllabus previews all the semester's assignments as opposed to releasing the assignments on a week-to-week basis. Knowing the assignments in advance helps students anticipate their workload and schedules.

"The students were pleased to have all these specific details of the course right in front of them at any given time," Gersh says. "They truly appreciated always knowing what was expected of them and what was coming next."

### New ways of communicating with students

But the changes to Using Multimedia to Visualize American Culture go beyond the syllabus. "What I valued most about the program was the opportunity to think about equitable, innovative ways of teaching in my class," Gersh says.

For example, she added opportunities for online class discussion with the goal of creating a greater sense of community among students. "More discussion board assignments means more grading for me, but I don't mind," Gersh says. "Most students participated, and academic dialogue and conversation — even friendship — improved."

A sense of belonging can be particularly important at a college like Lehman where most students are first generation and many are immigrants. "They often come from cultures where education may be structured differently, and many are second-language learners," says Gersh. "Several of my students are also parents. I also wanted to find ways to get better insight into them."

To improve communication, Gersh incorporated more opportunities for one-on-one Zoom meetings. She believes this helps in online courses so she can learn why students are in the class, what their goals are, and how they perceive their weaknesses.

Overall, Gersh says the professional development with Every Learner helped her reflect on what she can do to ensure students actively learn and eventually graduate.

"I plan to use my updated syllabus next semester," she says, "and I hope students will continue to respond positively to the way I am teaching this course since the initiative."

## Steps toward cultural transformation

The biggest takeaway from the work of equitizing a syllabus is that the changes aren't limited to a handout. It organically prompts faculty to reconsider other elements of course design, says Zhadko.

"Once a change was made in a syllabus, we continuously asked how that is represented in their course," she explains. "How do you align the syllabus, what's in the course, and how do you teach it? It changes the way they teach."

For example, if a syllabus indicates that inclusion for every learner is a priority, it naturally raises the question of how culturally relevant the course content is. Foley says a philosophy faculty member who participated in the project thought revising the syllabus allowed him to transform his assignments to make them more relevant and engaging. Another faculty member found specific ways to support learning by making direct connections to the backgrounds of the students.

"It wasn't like they hadn't thought of that as important to begin with," he says. "But the training from the coaches showed great examples."

### OTHER TAKEAWAYS

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| **Impact not limited to one course** | **"Faculty said to us that they are implementing these changes across all of their courses."**<br>—Olena Zhadko |
| **Include adjuncts** | **"You're not going to see transformational change otherwise. They're the ones in the trenches impacting more students."**<br>—Norma Hollebeke |
| **Set up good infrastructure and look at outside support** | **"For peer institutions, the advice I would give is to look for vendors who bring in a different approach to faculty development. There's a benefit to bringing in expertise to help us scale up. When you work with a vendor who thinks outside the box, it helps you reset with a lot more energy."**<br>—Olena Zhadko |

> **"They're already terrific educators who have fantastic end-of-the-course evaluations, but they're taking an extra few steps to help students be successful. It was surprising to hear faculty talk about how much more intentional they were in acknowledging students, validating their efforts to pursue a degree."**
>
> **—Olena Zhadko**

Zhadko says all the faculty involved in careful work to equitize their syllabi brought up the issue of the tone of their daily interactions with students. They found themselves more conscious of being focused on students' goals and communicating a belief that students can achieve them.

"They're already terrific educators who have fantastic end-of-the-course evaluations," she says, "but they're taking an extra few steps to help students be successful. It was surprising to hear faculty talk about how much more intentional they were in acknowledging students, validating their efforts to pursue a degree. It was amazing to see faculty start to think deeply about that."

Ultimately, the syllabus turned out to be a safe entry point for faculty to talk and think critically about their teaching. "This was such a lengthy initiative and required a lot of commitment from faculty," Foley says. "Working on syllabi allowed them to get to a deep level of self-reflection."

Zhadko and her team embarked on this project hoping that it supported the ongoing cultural transformation at Lehman College to put students at the center of learning and integrate equity and inclusion into teaching practices. She has always known that Lehman faculty care about students, but one outcome of this project is that "once they start talking about the students, their faces light up," she says.

"They tell us stories of assignments, how the students reacted. An initiative like this isn't just a transformation. It's a refreshing, renewing, and rejuvenation of teaching to focus on the learner."