First-Day Info Sheets: A Tool to Prompt Semester-Long Inclusive Teaching

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What faculty do and say on the first day of class is crucial to establishing and maintaining an inclusive learning environment for the duration of the semester. First-day information sheets ("info sheets") are commonly used by instructors. By making simple modifications to this tool, we can gather more information about the goals and experiences of our students, the lives of our students outside of our classroom, and how our students' lives may impact their engagement with the course material and course structure. We can also use this information to actively highlight to students that their full selves (names, pronouns, background) belong in our biology classroom. We provide a set of prompts and suggested steps, rooted in the scholarly literature, to encourage and facilitate faculty use of info-sheets as a valuable tool to inform semester-long inclusive teaching efforts.

INTRODUCTION

The first day of class sets the tone for the semester. Research shows that instructor actions and their interactions with students on the first day of class can have a lasting influence on student attitudes about the course and the instructor (1, 2) and about their sense of belonging. First-day information sheets ("info sheets") are commonly used by instructors to take inventory of their students' names, majors, and previous course preparation at the start of the semester. We believe that by modifying the info-sheet prompts (Fig. 1) we can turn this document into a valuable tool for semester-long inclusive teaching by gathering information about the mindsets and emotions that students bring to the course, setting and communicating the climate for the classroom, and stimulating instructors to make equitable course-design decisions and build relationships with students.

The info-sheet prompts and suggested actions are informed by the recently-published cyclical 'Deep Teaching' model for the college STEM classroom (3). Deep Teaching proposes that instructors must first increase their own self-awareness of how their experiences and social positioning influence their teaching and their interactions with

students. This increased self-awareness is the launch point for getting to know our students in a more holistic way and for cultivating greater empathy for students. We instructors subsequently use this increased self-awareness and empathy to implement varied pedagogy, develop a trusting class climate, and effectively leverage and connect students with on-campus networks (3).

The tool described below is not a silver bullet or magical solution to creating an inclusive classroom, nor is any tool for that matter. Simply gathering the student responses is just the start; it's in the next steps that we take with the information—by repeatedly referring back to the sheets throughout the semester and using the information to reflect upon and change our pedagogy, make one-on-one connections with students, and build community—that the inclusive teaching practice occurs. Below, five themed info-sheet section rationales are outlined and some suggestions for action steps to take using the student responses are provided.

Section 1 prompts: Name and identity

Rationale for prompts. Our names are integral and fundamental components for our identities. As instructors, we hold significant power in our classrooms, and the care we take to affirm our students' intersectional and multifaceted identities communicates our respect for the individuals in our community. College classrooms are increasingly diverse and international and it is critical that faculty use students' preferred names and pronounce student names correctly.

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[Course Name and Semester]

I

Full Name: _____

My preferred First Name: _____

   First name pronunciation (if desired): _____

   The pronoun(s) I go by (if any): _____

II

My career goals are: _____

Place(s) I grew up: _____

Something that I am good at or that makes me feel proud of myself:

_____

III

I live (*circle*): **On campus / Off Campus** (*How do you get to campus?*): _____

I work outside of school (*circle*): **No / Yes** (*How many hours per week?*): _____

I have reliable access to the Internet and Canvas (*circle*): **No / Yes**

IV

A word that describes how I feel about this class at the moment:_____

Study strategies that I use to prepare for exams: _____

_____

Number of hours per week I believe I will be spending to study for this course: _____

I appreciate when my instructors _____

_____

I dislike when my instructors _____

_____

One current question I have about this class is: _____

_____

V

Please use this space to privately share anything you would like your professor to know (Perhaps something that could impact or help your learning/experience/effort in class)

FIGURE 1. First-day "Info Sheet."

This effort communicates that everyone belongs in our classrooms, especially students from groups historically minoritized by academia (4).

An additional consideration regarding identity is that gender is a spectrum, rather than simply binary (either male/masculine or female/feminine). The students in our courses may possess a range of gender identities and gender expressions/presentations. Some students may still be considering their gender, just be starting their transition, or feel no strong sense of personal gender at all (5). Referring to a student by the pronouns (e.g., he, she, ze, they) that they want used shows respect and validation for their rightful identities (6, 7). Because mis-gendering can make our students feel disrespected, unwelcome, and unsafe, it is important to provide our students with the opportunity to share their preferred pronouns, if any. However, it is also important that we do not put students on the spot to publicly announce their pronouns, as this may be harmful as well. The prompt included on the info sheet provides students an opportunity to privately write their pronouns. This allows instructors to avoid mis-gendering students based on assumptions from their appearances and avoids putting students on the spot to declare their pronouns in front of the class during icebreakers or oral introductions (8). The prompt uses the term "pronouns," which replaces the previous conventional phrase "Preferred Gender Pronouns (PGP)," to acknowledge that pronouns are not a preference but a personal truth and to acknowledge that some students do not identify with any gender.

Some action suggestions. Using the information from these prompts, you can:

- Have students check names off a roster or say their own names aloud (if timing allows), rather than read roll call aloud on the first day. Then the following class, use the preferred first names and proper pronunciations provided by students when calling roll. (You may need to practice some beforehand!) You may also look to see if your course management system allows students to record themselves saying the proper pronunciation of their names. Similarly, Google Document extensions (like Voice), or the audio notes extension in Microsoft Word, may be shared with students to record their names in a shared document, if no official system exists at your institution. A portable recording device such as a cell phone with the recording application activated during the roster call portion of the first day of class, also serves as a helpful way to save students' correct name pronunciations.
- Use students' names in class. Research shows that when professors directly address students in class (even if they don't know all student names), students reported feeling more valued, more comfortable asking for help, and more cared about by the instructors (9). You can have students make name tents with their preferred first names and display them in every class. To avoid students losing the tents, consider keeping the class set

and having students grab them from the instructor's table as they enter the lecture hall or classroom.

- Ensure that you use the pronouns stated by your students and correct yourself if you make a mistake. For some helpful guiding language about correcting mistakes, see (7). Using gender neutral pronouns like "they/them/their" for everyone on the first day, replacing gendered group identifiers (e.g., guys, ladies) with gender-neutral language (e.g., folks, y'all, everyone), and encouraging students to refer to each other by first names can be helpful all-around strategies.

Section II prompts: Individuation and affirmation

Rationale for prompts. We are all susceptible to unconscious biases, many of which are based on societal stereotypes. Additionally, students are susceptible to stereotype threat, or the fear of confirming negative stereotypes about their own demographic group, when in academic situations (see Killpack and Melón [10] for a literature review of bias and stereotype threat). As instructors, our unconscious biases can lead us to make assumptions about our students' identities, experiences, and abilities, simply upon viewing their faces or reading their names on our rosters (11). Our unconscious biases may lead us to unintentionally use microaggressions in our interactions with students. Microaggressions are brief and often subtle statements, exchanges, or behaviors that communicate insults, prejudice, and/or hostility, and send denigrating messages to individuals, especially those in marginalized groups (for increased description and instructive examples of microaggressions, see [12, 13]). Bringing awareness to unconscious biases and educating ourselves to address and avoid microaggressions can have an important impact on our classroom climate and on students' sense of belonging (13). We can reduce the negative impact of biases and stereotypes by individuating, or gathering specific information *about* our students *directly from* our students (14, 15). This set of prompts allows us to learn about students' regional and local communities, future goals, and points of pride; it also provides an opportunity for student self-affirmation, which is an evidence-based stereotype threat intervention (16–18).

Some action suggestions. Using the information from these prompts, you can:

- Reflect on how the information provided by your students challenges your initial assumptions about who they are as individuals and then use the information provided to reframe false assumptions. Learn more about how to identify and address microaggressions made by you or the students in your class (13, 19).
- Strategically incorporate career connections, diverse scientists, and links to your students' cultural backgrounds and home countries into your course content. For example, you may incorporate a "Scientist Spotlight" assignment (20) or highlight the biographies of diverse scientists (21). You could choose journal club

articles written by diverse and/or international authors or create case studies about the ecology and evolution documented in countries that bear relevance for your students. Additionally, career aspirations shared by students could be incorporated into exam question prompts ("You are a nurse practitioner seeing a patient…" or "You are a first-year graduate student with some confusing data…") to enhance relevance.

- You can revisit the info sheets before a scheduled meeting with an individual student and reference something that they wrote as a starting point to connect and build a relationship with them one-on-one. In large classes, you could choose a couple of students each week, "study" their info sheets, and use some of the information to converse and connect with them before lecture. In particular, if there is a student in the course who seems disengaged, they could be a good candidate for chatting up about their listed career aspirations or points of pride.

- You can send out announcements through your course management system to share campus and external internship, job, professional development, and extra-curricular opportunities that relate to the career goals and interests stated by your students.

Section III prompts: Logistical considerations

Rationale for prompts. Our own privileges and personal academic paths can serve as blinders to the realities and differences of our current students (see Killpack and Melón [10] for a literature review of faculty privilege and belonging in the STEM classroom). The undergraduate degree-seeking population at many universities is diversifying. For instance, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics, students are increasingly older, low-income, enrolled part-time, veterans, work part- or full-time, identify as Black, Hispanic, or Latinx, have first-generation college status, and have dependents (children or aging adult family members) (22, 23). This misnamed population of "non-traditional" students is the new normal at many colleges and universities, and it is our responsibility to ensure that our courses are designed to provide equitable opportunities for all to learn. This set of prompts allows us to collect some baseline data about student situations to inform our decisions surrounding course logistics and to challenge assumptions that most students in our courses live on-campus, have constant access to technology, and have few outside obligations beyond keeping up with schoolwork.

Some action suggestions. Using the information from these prompts, you can:

- Reflect on how the experiences and obligations of your current students are similar or different from your own as an undergraduate.

- Review your course policies related to attendance, due dates, late assignments, and mode of submitting assignments. Consider how to make course design changes to increase flexibility and to better accommodate all of your students, for example, those who have limited Internet access or those who work or have childcare obligations in the evenings.

- Avoid assigning important group projects that require students to meet outside of class. Students with work and family obligations outside of school will not be able to contribute to their full ability. For similar reasons, reconsider holding instructor-led study or review session in the evenings or on the weekends to avoid disadvantaging students with outside obligations.

- Emphasize your willingness to meet outside of regular office hours using meeting tools like Zoom or Google Hangouts. This can highlight to students that you are willing to meet them where they are.

- Use the data provided on the info sheets to request resource materials from campus programs/offices. For example, campus programs could provide a list of resources such as the Veteran's affairs office, transfer student affinity groups, commuter lounges and dining halls, computer labs, affordable childcare offerings, or food pantries that can be shared with all students during the early weeks of the course. Additionally, you can use data from the info sheets to advocate for student needs to key administrators. If most of your students work to pay for school, request that the administration initiate discounted computer rentals, create student grants for expenses such as books, school supplies, or laptops for students, or faculty grants for incorporation of Open Educational Resources (OER) into courses.

Section IV prompts: Taking the pulse

Rationale for prompts. Students' past STEM experiences can influence their confidence in their abilities and their persistence in the major and the field. Students' perceptions of course difficulty and self-reported anxiety related to the course can have negative outcomes for course grades and persistence in the major (24). Research shows that verbal and nonverbal "teacher immediacy" efforts, which serve to break down the perceived interpersonal barriers between students and instructors, can have positive impacts on student attitudes and perceptions of their own learning (25–29). We can use several prompts to "take the pulse" of our students to understand the emotions and experiences that they are bringing to the course on day one. Gathering these responses from students can help us to empathize with our students' experiences, and then use non-content instructor talk (30) to directly address their questions, fears, and discomforts and offer support in areas where they feel they need it.

Some action suggestions. Using the information from these prompts, you can:

- Create a word cloud of the one-word descriptions and display it during the early weeks of class. Because font size increases with repeat responses, you can show

that students are not alone in their first-day feelings. Empathize with students, acknowledge all feelings and provide students with reassurance.

- Compile all first-day questions and post responses in a list for students on the course management system. You can keep a running list over the semesters, as many questions come up repeatedly.
- Be self-reflective and open to changing your pedagogy. If many students report that they are visual learners, add more useful visuals. If many students say they dislike when instructors make them feel stupid for asking questions, address this explicitly and re-affirm that you welcome questions. If students note that they appreciate when instructors are organized, consider reviewing your course management system pages, syllabi, or assignment instructions for areas that could be more clear or orderly for students.
- Incorporate relevant "instructor talk" based on students' responses to build relationships, explain pedagogical choices, and create a supportive classroom culture (30).
- Connect students with campus resources such as peer tutoring, supplemental instruction, and study groups.
- Discuss and model effective study strategies with students throughout the semester. First-year students in particular can be overwhelmed with the college transition and may have little experience with managing time and conducting self-regulated learning (31, 32). You can use data from the info sheets to highlight successful study strategies that they already use and suggest additional strategies that are pertinent to your course and to college-level learning in general, revisiting them (e.g., using exam wrappers [31]) throughout the course.

Section V prompts: Connection points

Rationale for prompts. Each of our students has a unique set of backgrounds, experiences, strengths, and challenges. For example, students may be in the military, have group-work anxiety, medical issues, learning disabilities and accommodations, math phobias, parenting or family obligations, etc. By inviting students to share something privately that they think may impact their learning or experience in the course, we can empathize and quickly connect students with appropriate campus networks and resources, and tailor instruction throughout the semester. This action communicates instructor immediacy and shows support and care for our individual students.

Some action suggestions. Using the information from these prompts, you can:

- Follow-up with each student via email or in-person as soon as possible during the first week to thank them for sharing and to provide ideas for a plan to work with the students and/or address their concerns. This often means linking students to campus resources such as disability services, counseling and health services, or transfer student services, and then following-up with students using the recommendations and accommodations from campus professionals.

LOGISTICAL NOTES

There are various ways to manage the actual info-sheet document to ensure that it is an easily referenced and commonly used tool for inclusive teaching. You could administer the document as a hard copy during class on the first day and then store documents in alphabetical order in binders for each course section. Alternatively, you could administer the document as a Google form for each course section so that responses are easily searchable and can be analyzed by prompt or by individual student.

Responsiveness to prompts is critical to making this a useful document to inform inclusive teaching approaches. However, the first weeks of the semester are busy and we have so many students. Pace yourself! We have suggested some actions that are important to take in the first week of class (See IV and V above). However, actions for many responses can be revisited when the semester settles into a rhythm. Inclusive teaching is an ongoing practice.

CONCLUSIONS

Tools that can be widely distributed and used by faculty can help us implement changes to create an atmosphere that highlights everyone's inclusion in the biology classroom. We have provided a small set of suggested action steps to pursue that use student responses to the prompts. There are many more possibilities for prompts and actions steps, and we encourage you to share them with your colleagues and scholarly communities to collectively hone our inclusive teaching practices in service to our students.

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