



An Investigation Into Student Perceptions of Social Justice Frames in a Course Syllabus

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

This study applied Lambert's 3R framework (redistributive, recognitive, and representational justice) to explore the impact of social justice framing and open educational practices on undergraduate students' perceptions. Using a within-subjects design, 191 participants were exposed to four hypothetical course syllabi, each reflecting different combinations of justice frames and open educational practices. The study examined how these social justice frames influenced students' intentions to register for the course, their sense of belonging, perceptions of faculty and staff relations, and their evaluation of the instructor. Results indicated that increased social justice framing led to greater intent to register, more positive perceptions of school support and acceptance, better relations with faculty and staff, and higher instructor evaluations. Importantly, the effects of social justice framing were consistent across participants with varying numbers of marginalized identities, suggesting that these interventions may benefit diverse student populations. This study contributes to the literature on social justice and open educational practices by demonstrating how social justice-oriented course design can foster a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.

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Belonging is a core human need (Maslow, 1943) reflecting an individual's perceptions of acceptance, inclusion, and connection within the school social environment (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Goodenow & Grady, 1993). For educational institutions, fostering a strong sense of belonging among students is essential, as it is consistently linked to positive academic and psychological outcomes (Ahn & Davis, 2020). Students who feel connected to their school environment tend to perform better academically (Murphy et al., 2020; Slaten et al., 2016) and experience enhanced psychological well-being, such as increased self-esteem, better mood, and reduced stress (Begen & Turner-Cobb, 2015). In a study of 578 students, Pedler et al. (2022) found that those who felt a greater sense of belonging were more likely to remain enrolled, reporting higher levels of motivation and greater enjoyment in their academic activities, while students who frequently considered leaving reported significantly lower levels of belonging. This highlights the essential role of a sense of belonging in reducing student attrition and promoting persistence in higher education. A 2024 systematic review of the literature on belongingness in higher education (Allen et al.) found four main themes that can help educators better understand how to support students: connectedness to peers, staff, and the institution; feeling safe and part of the community; being valued and accepted; and embracing diversity and inclusion.

The current study explores the intersection of student belonging, perceptions of the instructor, and social justice-oriented syllabus design. Specifically, we investigated how incremental inclusion of social justice elements in a hypothetical course syllabus influences students' academic intentions and perceptions. We focused on three key outcomes: (1) intent to register for the course, (2) sense of belonging—measured across two sub-scales: *peer belonging* and *instructor connection*, and (3) evaluations of the instructor across a range of traits, including—but not limited to—warmth, competence, and inclusivity. We hypothesized that each successive version of the syllabus, incorporating additional dimensions of social justice, would lead to increasingly positive outcomes in all three areas.

Our work is grounded in Lambert's (2018) framework for social justice in open education, which outlines three interrelated dimensions of justice: redistributive, recognitive, and representational. These dimensions informed both our syllabus design and our theoretical framing of belonging and inclusivity in higher education. To explore how social justice framing in a course syllabus influences student perceptions, we conducted a within-subjects experiment in which undergraduate students reviewed four versions of a syllabus that progressively incorporated redistributive, recognitive, and representational justice elements. After reviewing each version, students reported their intent to register for the course, their perceived sense of belonging, and their evaluations of the instructor. This repeated-measures design allowed us to assess how student perceptions shifted as justice-oriented content increased.

Notably, Lambert's framework, rooted in the work of Fraser (1995), Young (1997), and Keddle (2012), defines open education as:

the development of free digitally enabled learning materials and experiences primarily by and for the benefit and empowerment of non-privileged learners who may be under-represented in education systems or marginalised in their global context. Success of social justice aligned programs can be measured not by any particular technical feature or format, but instead by the extent to which they enact redistributive justice, recognitive justice and/or representational justice. (Lambert, 2018, p. 239)

In the sections that follow, we define and discuss each dimension of Lambert's framework, review relevant literature, and connect these principles to our study's exploration of how a syllabus can function as a vehicle for advancing social justice and belonging in higher education.

REDISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE

The most longstanding principle of social justice, redistributive justice, evolved from the concept of distributive justice (Rawls, 1971), which focuses on the allocation of resources among a group, with intentional emphasis on directing these resources toward individuals who, due to

their circumstances, have less. While textbook costs continue to be a barrier for many groups of students pursuing higher education, it should be noted that course materials also incur notable costs in different manners particularly with respect to stress and time spent searching for more affordable or free options (Clinton-Lisell & Gwozdz, 2025; Katz, 2019). These barriers increase significantly for student groups that have been historically underserved like Pell-eligible, first-generation, and students of colour (Jenkins et al., 2020). Students who are unable to afford their course materials such as textbooks and online homework systems can feel a heightened sense of alienation from both their classroom peers and faculty (Nguyen & Herron, 2021). These findings mirror those of McClure & Ryder (2017) concerning the extent to which sense of belonging behaviors can be shaped by financial circumstances. However, as students pursuing postsecondary education continue to struggle to afford their learning materials (Appedu et al., 2021; Florida Virtual Campus, 2022), faculty are increasingly making efforts to mitigate these barriers by utilizing open educational resources (OER) (Seaman & Seaman, 2024), free teaching, learning, and research materials that are either in the public domain or licensed to allow anyone to use them in ways that commercial, copyrighted materials do not allow (e.g. redistribution, remixing, revising, etc.). Within Lambert's (2018) framework, OER exemplify redistributive justice by removing access barriers to textbooks and other course materials for learners who, due to their socio-cultural circumstances, may lack access financial resources, potentially limiting their educational opportunities.

Across several studies exploring the relationship between OER adoption and student perceptions, different aspects of instructor-student dynamics have been revealed. Vojtech and Grissett (2017), for example, used mock vignettes—short, hypothetical scenarios presented to participants to gauge their responses—to examine how students perceived instructors who adopted OER instead of traditional textbooks. Their findings suggested that students viewed such instructors as more caring and encouraging, likely because they saw the adoption of OER as a considerate choice that alleviated the financial burden on students. Similarly, Nusbaum and Cuttler (2020) used mock syllabi and hypothetical course descriptions to assess students' perceptions of instructors who assigned OER. In this case, students rated instructors who selected OER as more approachable and kinder, viewing OER adoption as an indication of the instructor's awareness of and concern for students' financial situations. Finally, Clinton-Lisell and Kelly (2024) used experimental vignettes describing mock courses that varied by textbook type, either OER or traditional textbooks. They found that students who read about courses using OER rated those course instructors as warmer and more competent compared to those using traditional textbooks. In addition, students reported higher motivation to take courses with OER, perceived lower emotional costs (such as anxiety or frustration), and were more likely to enroll in a course that used OER over one that relied on a commercial textbook. These studies collectively suggest that faculty who adopt OER are perceived more positively in terms of warmth, care, and competence, which could influence students' likelihood of enrolling in their courses. However, while redistributive justice through assigning OER can help alleviate access barriers and reduce financial strain, it is important to recognize what may still be missing. Redistributive justice, while admirable in achieving cost savings for students and eliminating financial barriers to access, often misses the mark with respect to ensuring that learning resources are culturally affirming and inclusive of diverse student experiences. This gap is better addressed by the principle of recognitive justice (Brandle, 2020; Azadbakht et al., 2021).

RECOGNITIVE JUSTICE

While redistributive justice focuses on removing financial barriers to access, recognitive justice calls for the creation and use of resources that validate and reflect the lived experiences of marginalized groups. This suggests that while OER can help make educational resources more accessible, it is equally important for these resources to reflect the diverse identities, histories, and experiences of all students, particularly those from historically underserved communities. Recognitive justice highlights the significance of acknowledging human dignity and the distinctions between dominant and marginalized groups (Fraser, 1995; Lambert, 2018). With this justice frame, quality and inclusivity embedded within learning resources is equally as important as mitigating cost or other access barriers that disrupt a student's sense of belonging and ability to succeed. For example, one study demonstrated that first-generation students'

sense of belonging in the classroom decreased after reading a chapter from OpenStax's introductory psychology open textbook, which did not include diverse representations and viewpoints, but was later ameliorated after reading an edited, more diversified version of the original (Nusbaum, Cuttler & Swindell, 2020). A similarly positive effect of recognitive justice emerged in a study in which OER for a History of Psychology course was adapted (through the use of the open license) to increase representation of historically marginalized psychologists, including women and pioneers of colour (Kelly, et al., 2022).

REPRESENTATIONAL JUSTICE

Whereas redistributive justice can decrease access barriers to learning materials (Lambert, 2018) and recognitive justice can potentially increase students' sense of belonging (Nusbaum et al., 2020) these justice frames still leave much to be desired with respect to intentionally including and centering the experiences of marginalized voices and groups. Representational justice aims to increase the representation of the experiences of groups that have historically been marginalized by the dominant society (Fraser, 1995; Keddie, 2012; Young 1997). As faculty continue to become more knowledgeable about the pedagogical affordances that OER allow with respect to making course learning materials more culturally affirmative and relevant for students, many are expanding this work to include open educational practices (OEP) across three broad dimensions: from content-centric to process-centric; from teacher-centric to learner-centric; and from primarily pedagogical to primarily social justice focused (Bali et al., 2020; Hodgkinson-Williams & Trotter, 2018). For example, providing students from underserved or marginalized groups opportunities to help shape curricular processes and create course content demonstrates representational justice in practice, such as when learners from specific groups contribute to the development of OER that reflect their own experiences related to race, gender, or sexual identity (Lambert, 2018). There is some evidence to suggest that students who participated in renewable assignments (an OEP that is a student-created, iterative OER that counts as a graded assignment) may experience higher levels of motivation and representational justice than when they complete traditional assignments like a test or research paper (Clinton-Lisell & Gwozdz, 2023; Lazzara et al., 2024). Discussions concerning the relationship between epistemic justice (Medina, 2013) and OEP through learning design are starting to emerge that shed light on how practices of representational justice, even if best-intentioned, can still have potential negative impacts on students (Wallis & Rocha, 2022). Given the potential benefits of incorporating Lambert's (2018) justice frames into course design, it is also important to consider how the syllabus, as a student's first point of contact with a course, can shape their perceptions and experiences.

THE SYLLABUS

The syllabus is an artifact that outlines key structural elements of a course, including general course details, instructor contact information, policies, and a schedule of learning activities and assessments. It serves as a foundational document in post-secondary educational settings, conveying crucial information about a course, such as its learning outcomes, requirements, and expectations (Richmond et al., 2019).

The functions of a syllabus are multidimensional and essential. Traditionally, the syllabus has primarily served three major roles: as a contract, a permanent record, and a communication tool (Parkes and Harris, 2002). Beyond its communicative role, a syllabus can significantly influence student perceptions, behaviors, and overall experience (Richmond et al., 2016; Wheeler et al., 2019). A well-designed syllabus can foster equity, diversity, and inclusion by clearly outlining course policies and cultivating an inclusive classroom environment (Gin et al., 2021). For example, a syllabus can create a powerful first impression of a course and influence student-instructor relationships, with a warm and inviting tone potentially encouraging students to seek assistance and support when needed (Harnish & Bridges, 2011; Gurung & Galardi, 2022). Instructors may also use the syllabus to share details about their personal attitudes, values, and philosophies toward teaching and to communicate their support for equity and inclusion (Habaneck, 2005; Gin et al., 2021). These features can be especially important for students with marginalized identities, as the syllabus can act as a communication tool for fostering inclusive classrooms (Gin et al., 2021).

Given that the syllabus serves as the initial point of contact between students and instructors, the design and content of a syllabus can significantly shape students' initial impressions and impact student attitudes, expectations, and behaviors towards the instructor and the course (Harnish & Bridges, 2011). For example, a learner-centered syllabus can have a positive effect on students' perceptions of the instructor, promoting characteristics such as rapport, caring, helpfulness, and student motivation (Richmond et al., 2016, 2019). Additionally, the tone of a syllabus, including its warmth and inclusivity, can establish a welcoming environment that enhances students' likelihood of considering the instructor as a resource for both academic and personal matters (Gurung & Galardi, 2022). For example, a syllabus that adopts a friendly tone is perceived as more approachable and engaging, fostering a positive impression of the instructor (Harnish & Bridges, 2011). Moreover, the visual design and language used in a syllabus can influence students' perceptions of their instructors and the course content (Nusbaum et al., 2020), while the length and level of detail provided in a syllabus, such as assignment descriptions, study tips, and campus resources, can contribute to increased student motivation and a more positive perception of the instructor (Harrington & Gabert-Quillen, 2015; Heim et al., 2019).

CURRENT STUDY

The purpose of the current study was to understand the influence of an undergraduate course syllabus designed to emphasize principles of social justice on student perceptions of the course and the instructor. Specifically, three versions of an undergraduate introductory psychology course syllabus were systematically and additively altered along the three dimensions of social justice within Lambert's framework (2018): redistributive, recognitive, and representational. The specific aspects of the syllabus manipulated included the course materials, course assignments, and course policies (see Table 2). The dependent variables of interest included students' intent to register for the hypothetical course, sense of belonging, and evaluation of instructor. An additional variable of interest was number of marginalized identities experienced by participants and its potential influence on their perceptions of the course and its instructor.

Our hypotheses were as follows:

- 1. Intent to Register:** Students' likelihood to register for the course will be more positive for each consecutive version of the syllabus that emphasizes an additional dimension of social justice.
- 2. Sense of Belonging:** Students' sense of belonging (along two sub-scales) will increase with each consecutive version of the syllabus that incorporates additional social justice elements.
- 3. Instructor Evaluation:** Students' evaluation of the instructor will become more positive with each consecutive version of the syllabus that includes additional social justice elements.
- 4. Moderation by Marginalized Identities:** The aforementioned relationships will be moderated by the number of marginalized identities experienced by participants. Specifically, those with more marginalized identities will report a stronger sense of belonging and more positive evaluations with increased social justice focus in the syllabus.

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory social science course at a university in southern Ontario, Canada, and recruited via the university's research participation system (SONA). The target sample size was 206 students, determined through a power analysis using G*Power, assuming an effect size of .20. Eligibility criteria included having normal or corrected-to-normal vision, the ability to read and understand English, and access to an internet-connected computer or tablet. Participants received one course credit for their participation. Data were collected from 214 participants, 18 of whom did not finish

the survey and were excluded from analyses. An additional 5 participants chose to withdraw their responses at the end of the study and were also excluded. The final sample consisted of 191 participants, aged 17–46 years ($M_{age} = 20.02$, $SD = 3.72$; 148 female, 42 male, 1 preferred not to answer). Participants were also asked to provide information on sexual orientation (73% heterosexual) and whether they identify as Indigenous (3%), a visible minority (23%), and having a disability (14%, 6% preferred not to answer). Most participants (77%) were born in Canada.

[Table 1](#) provides more detailed information about participant demographics.

Table 1 Demographic information.

	N	%
Gender		
Female	148	77.5
Male	42	22.0
Prefer not to answer	1	0.5
Ethnicity		
White	126	66.0
South Asian	24	12.6
Black	23	12.0
Middle Eastern/West Asian	8	4.2
Southeast Asian	6	3.1
Indigenous	4	2.1
Latino	4	2.1
A racial group not listed	4	2.1
East Asian	2	1.0
Prefer not to answer	1	0.5
Visible Minority		
No	140	73.3
Yes	43	22.5
Prefer not to answer	6	3.1
Disability		
No	154	80.6
Yes	26	13.6
Prefer not to answer	11	5.8
# of Marginalized Identities		
0	80	41.9
1	74	38.7
2	24	12.6
3	6	3.1

PROCEDURE

Participants were informed that they would complete an online survey in which they would view different versions of the same syllabus for a hypothetical Introductory Psychology course. After reading the instructions, participants were asked to respond to questions about their perceptions of the syllabus, including their intent to register in the hypothetical course, sense of belonging in the course, and evaluation of the instructor. Demographic information was also collected.

CONDITION	JUSTICE FRAME ADDED	COURSE MATERIALS	COURSE ASSIGNMENTS	COURSE POLICIES
1	Baseline	Commercial textbook	Traditional project, seminars, exams, and research participation	Zero-tolerance attendance and late assignment submission
2	Redistributive	OER textbook	Wikipedia assignment	Emphasis on accommodation, laptop loaner program, print copies of OER available
3	Recognitive	OER textbook Canadian edition	Wikipedia assignment focused on marginalized group representation	Emphasis on inclusive environment, clear guidelines for participation
4	Representational	OER resource co-created with students	Wikipedia assignment focus on excluded perspectives, with own experience encouraged	Emphasis that course content and material designed to reflect diversity of learners and that feedback is welcome

Table 2 Manipulation of syllabi sections with each additional justice frame.

Participants were then sequentially exposed to four different versions of the syllabus, each featuring a systematic manipulation of three justice frames: redistributive justice, recognitive justice, and representational justice. These justice frames were manipulated to have either high or low levels. Specifically, participants experienced the following versions of the syllabus:

1. Baseline condition: All justice frames were kept low.
2. High redistributive justice condition
3. High redistributive and recognitive justice condition
4. High redistributive, recognitive, and representational justice condition

Across the four conditions, different elements of the syllabus were manipulated to reflect the desired justice frame, including the course materials, assignments, and course policies. This within-subjects approach, wherein each participant experienced all four conditions, allowed the researchers to control for individual differences between participants and increase the statistical power of the study. It also enabled a more direct comparison of participants' perceptions across the different syllabus versions, as each participant served as their own control.

The participation time was approximately 45 minutes. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could choose not to answer a question or withdraw from the study at any time. Upon completion, participants received one course credit for their participation. This study was reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Board.

MATERIALS

MANIPULATION OF COURSE MATERIALS

In the baseline condition, wherein all justice frames were low, the syllabus included a commercial textbook with an access code for a homework system. In the high redistributive justice condition, the required textbook was an OER, and the syllabus included a statement indicating that students could access, download, and retain the digital version for free, with a low-cost print copy available for optional purchase. In the high redistributive and recognitive justice condition, the syllabus featured an OER textbook that was a Canadian edition specific to the local context. The syllabus stated that students could freely access, download, and retain the online version of this textbook. Finally, in the high redistributive, recognitive, and representational justice condition, the course materials included OER that were co-created with students. These materials placed a strong emphasis on diversifying the content and integrating relevant resources. The syllabus noted that the OER was designed to enhance the learning experience and provide comprehensive, accessible content for the introductory psychology course.

In the baseline condition, the assignments included traditional assessments such as a research project, along with exams, seminars, and research participation. In the high redistributive justice condition, the syllabus included an assignment wherein students would work to edit and improve an article on a course-relevant topic on Wikipedia, the openly licensed online encyclopedia. The high redistributive and recognitive justice condition syllabus featured a Wikipedia assignment focused on representing marginalized groups, such as articles about female or BIPOC scientists. For the high redistributive, recognitive, and representational justice condition, the course assignments included a Wikipedia assignment that asked students to focus on perspectives that have traditionally been excluded or white-washed and encouraged the inclusion of their own experiences.

MANIPULATION OF COURSE POLICIES

In the baseline condition, the syllabus included a zero-tolerance attendance and late assignment submission policy, as well as a requirement for students to have a laptop and purchase a print copy of the textbook. In the high redistributive justice condition, the syllabus outlined additional supports and resources for learners who may require extra assistance, such as those with disabilities. It also included information about a laptop loaner program and the availability of print copies of the open textbook available for loan in the library. The high redistributive and recognitive justice condition syllabus reflected an inclusive environment where minority views were given equal consideration in open online discussions. It also outlined clear guidelines for participation and promoting respectful dialogue to ensure a constructive and inclusive learning experience. Finally, in the high redistributive, recognitive, and representational justice condition, the syllabus explicitly stated that the course content and materials were designed to reflect the diversity of learners. It also mentioned that the professor welcomed feedback from students regarding the inclusivity of course materials and activities, and that the course policies were shaped in collaboration with marginalized students to ensure their voices and perspectives were central to the course design.

INTENT TO REGISTER

After reviewing each version of the syllabus, participants rated their likelihood to register for the course. They responded on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all likely) to 5 (very likely).

SENSE OF BELONGING

Participants' sense of belonging in the course was measured using two subscales from the University Belongingness Questionnaire (UBQ) adapted from Slaten et al. (2023): 1) school support and acceptance, and 2) faculty and staff relations. Participants were asked to consider how the course outlined in the syllabus they viewed might affect their sense of belonging within that course. Each item had a Likert response scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The school support and acceptance subscale included eight items, such as "I am satisfied with the academic opportunities in this course", "I believe there are supportive resources available to me through this course", and "This course values individual differences". The faculty and staff relations subscale assessed four items, such as "I feel that the course instructor will appreciate me", "I will feel connected to the course instructor", and "I believe that the course instructor will care about me". Scores from both subscales were combined to calculate an overall belongingness score.

INSTRUCTOR AND COURSE EVALUATION

Instructor evaluation was measured using a scale developed by Nusbaum and Cuttler (2020). Participants rated how well a list of 17 descriptors (e.g., caring, approachable, knowledgeable) applied to the instructor of the course described in the syllabus. Responses were provided on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

MARGINALIZED IDENTITIES

The number of marginalized identities was coded on the basis of participant responses indicating any of the following: gender other than male or female, sexual orientation other

than heterosexual, identifying as Indigenous, visible minority, and/or having a disability. Most participants did not identify as having any marginalized identities ($n = 80$). Seventy-four participants identified as having one marginalized identity, while fewer identified with two ($n = 24$) and three ($n = 6$) marginalized identities.

RESULTS

ANALYTICAL APPROACH

For all analyses we conducted a repeated measures ANOVA, with number of marginalized identities as a between-subjects factor. Mauchley's Test of Sphericity was significant in all cases, so a Greenhouse-Geisser correction was applied. Missing data was dealt with through listwise deletion. See Table 3 for all dependent variable means and sample sizes for each analysis.

CONDITION	INTENT TO REGISTER ($n = 184$)	SENSE OF BELONGING: SCHOOL SUPPORT ($n = 183$)	SENSE OF BELONGING: FACULTY RELATIONS ($n = 182$)	INSTRUCTOR EVALUATION ($n = 150$)
1	$M = 4.68$ $SD = 1.00$	$M = 2.00$ $SD = 0.47$	$M = 2.44$ $SD = 1.35$	$M = 41.42$ $SD = 12.08$
2	$M = 4.92$ $SD = 1.14$	$M = 2.25$ $SD = 0.52$	$M = 2.01$ $SD = 1.08$	$M = 48.71$ $SD = 9.88$
3	$M = 5.20$ $SD = 1.01$	$M = 2.47$ $SD = 0.53$	$M = 1.86$ $SD = 0.89$	$M = 53.73$ $SD = 10.11$
4	$M = 5.22$ $SD = 1.02$	$M = 2.49$ $SD = 0.55$	$M = 1.87$ $SD = 0.87$	$M = 54.79$ $SD = 11.17$

Table 3 Mean scores on each of the dependent variables.

INTENT TO REGISTER

Students were more likely to indicate an intent of registering for the course when there was an increase in social justice framing. There was a main effect of social justice framing: intent to register was significantly different across the different conditions ($F(2.75, 495.73) = 5.00$, $p = .003$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$). Post hoc analysis, with Bonferroni adjustment, shows that intent to register significantly increases between condition one and three (i.e., between the baseline condition and the redistributive and recognitive justice condition; $SE = 0.14$, 95% CI $[-0.81, -0.056]$, $p = .015$). There were no significant increases in intent to register between conditions one and two ($SE = 0.15$, 95% CI $[-0.73, 0.08]$, $p = .187$) or conditions three and four ($SE = 0.11$, 95% CI $[-0.27, 0.33]$, $p = 1.00$). The effect of social justice framing on intent to register was similar for participants with different numbers of marginalized identities. The interaction between condition and number of marginalized identities was not significant ($F(8.26, 495.73) = 1.11$, $p = .356$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$).

STUDENT SENSE OF BELONGING

School Support and Acceptance Subscale

Students indicated a higher sense of school support and acceptance with an increase in social justice framing. There was a main effect of social justice framing, with perceptions of school support and acceptance varying significantly across the different conditions ($F(2.62, 468.26) = 19.10$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .10$). Post hoc analysis, with Bonferroni adjustment, shows that perceptions of school support and acceptance significantly increase between conditions one and two (i.e., between the baseline and the redistributive justice conditions; $SE = 0.07$, 95% CI $[-0.54, -0.13]$, $p < .001$). There was no significant increase in perceptions of school support and acceptance between conditions two and three ($SE = 0.06$, 95% CI $[-0.31, 0.01]$, $p = .072$) or conditions three and four ($SE = 0.06$, 95% CI $[-0.19, 0.14]$, $p = 1.00$). The effect of social justice framework on perceptions of school support and acceptance was similar for participants with different numbers of marginalized identities. The interaction between condition and number of marginalized identities was not significant ($F(7.85, 468.26) = 0.68$, $p = .702$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$).

Students Faculty and Staff Relations Subscale

Students indicated a more positive sense of faculty and staff relations with an increase in social justice framing. There was a main effect of social justice framing: perceptions of faculty and staff relations were significantly different across the different conditions ($F(2.39, 425.38) = 5.04, p = .004, \eta_p^2 = .03$). Post hoc analysis, with Bonferroni adjustment, shows that perceptions of faculty and staff relations significantly increase between conditions one and three (i.e., between the baseline condition and the redistributive and recognitive condition; $SE = 0.19, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.10, 1.10], p = .009$). There were no significant increases in perceptions of faculty and staff relations between conditions one and two ($SE = 0.19, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.03, 1.00], p = .075$) or conditions three and four ($SE = 0.12, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.17, 0.49], p = 1.00$). The effect of social justice framework on perceptions of faculty and staff relations was similar for participants with different numbers of marginalized identities. The interaction between condition and number of marginalized identities was not significant ($F(7.17, 425.38) = 0.79, p = .597, \eta_p^2 = .01$).

INSTRUCTOR EVALUATION

Considering the within-subjects design of the current study, we were unable to treat all adjectives as separate dependent variables and run a multivariate analysis of covariance as in Nusbaum and Cuttler (2020). A principal components analysis revealed one main component (based on a parallel analysis and the scree plot see supplementary material), so aggregated scores on the instructor evaluation scale were treated as the dependent variable. All adjectives were positively worded, so participant scores on the scale could range from 17 to 85, with higher scores indicating more positive instructor evaluation.

Students had more positive instructor evaluation with an increase in social justice framing. There was a main effect of social justice framing: instructor evaluation was significantly different across the different conditions ($F(2.00, 292.51) = 29.04, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .17$). Post hoc analysis, with Bonferroni adjustment, shows that instructor evaluation significantly differs between conditions one and two (i.e., between the baseline and redistributive conditions; $SE = 1.67, 95\% \text{ CI } [-11.75, -2.80], p < .001$), and between conditions two and three (i.e., between the redistributive condition and the redistributive and recognitive condition; $SE = 1.08, 95\% \text{ CI } [-7.63, -1.84], p < .001$). There was no significant difference in instructor evaluation scores between conditions three and four ($SE = 1.05, 95\% \text{ CI } [-2.27, 3.36], p = 1.00$). The effect of social justice framework on instructor evaluation was similar for participants with different numbers of marginalized identities. The interaction between condition and number of marginalized identities was not significant ($F(6.01, 292.51) = 1.13, p = .345, \eta_p^2 = .02$).

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study highlight the significant impact of social justice frames (Lambert, 2018) in a course syllabus on students' intent to register for courses, their sense of belonging, and their evaluation of instructors. Increasing emphasis on social justice across the first three iterations of the syllabus produced notable differences in student perceptions and attitudes.

The analyses demonstrated a clear trend: as social justice framing of the syllabus evolved from baseline to greater justice conditions, students expressed a greater likelihood of registering for the hypothetical course. This suggests that the incorporation of redistributive, recognitive, and representational justice principles resonated positively with students. The significant increase in intent to register between the redistributive and recognitive justice conditions indicates that the explicit representation of marginalized groups and perspectives can enhance students' engagement and interest in the course. Interestingly, the lack of significant difference between recognitive and representational justice conditions suggest that while initial changes have an impact, further enhancements may not yield additional increases in intent to register, indicating a possible ceiling effect in student responsiveness to social justice frames. The results of this study also illustrate how specific changes made across different syllabi versions significantly influenced students' sense of belonging, particularly in the areas of school support, acceptance, faculty interactions, and overall instructor perceptions. In the baseline condition, which relied on a commercial textbook and traditional assessment methods, students' lower sense of belonging may have been influenced by the lack of inclusive course materials and rigid policies. These elements could have limited students' opportunities to engage with the

course content in a way that felt relevant or accessible, potentially hindering their feelings of acceptance and support within the academic environment. The lower scores on the school support and acceptance subscale in this version suggest that students may have felt less connected to both their peers and faculty, possibly due to the relatively impersonal nature of the course structure.

With the transition to an OER in the redistributive justice condition, there was an increase in students' perceptions of school support. By removing financial barriers to course materials through OER, which provided all students with free digital access to the same resources, this may have contributed to a stronger sense of community and belonging. The introduction of the authentic and renewable Wikipedia assignment might have further supported this sense of inclusion, especially at a time when it is increasingly common for a portion of students' final course grades to be derived from automated online quizzing or other assessments associated with required commercial textbooks that require the purchase of access codes. These changes in course design were reflected in higher scores on the faculty subscale, suggesting that students viewed their instructors as more approachable and supportive in this version. The shift to OER and renewable assignments may have promoted a more inclusive and accessible learning environment, potentially fostering stronger relationships between students and faculty.

The redistributive and recognitive justice condition introduced a focus on representing marginalized groups within course materials and assignments. This could have contributed to a greater sense of recognition and validation for students, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds. The inclusion of diverse perspectives may have helped students feel more valued and seen within the course context. This shift was associated with improved scores on the school support and acceptance subscale, suggesting that students felt more connected to the academic environment and their peers when they saw their experiences reflected in the course. Additionally, the emphasis on respectful dialogue in the syllabus likely contributed to a more inclusive atmosphere, which in turn may have influenced students' perceptions of faculty support, further enhancing their feelings of belonging.

While the representational justice condition introduced participatory elements—such as co-creating course materials and encouraging students to share personal narratives—these changes did not lead to significant increases in students' intent to register, sense of belonging, or instructor evaluations compared to the recognitive justice condition. Although this version emphasized student voice and inclusion, the results suggest that the addition of representational justice may not yield further measurable benefits beyond those already achieved through redistributive and recognitive justice. It is possible that earlier changes, such as the adoption of OER materials and the inclusion of marginalized perspectives, had already addressed the most salient barriers to belonging and engagement. As such, student perceptions may have plateaued, indicating a potential ceiling effect. While students may have appreciated the participatory approach in principle, this was not reflected in significantly higher scores on the school support and acceptance subscale or in instructor evaluations.

Overall, the progression from traditional, less inclusive frameworks to more collaborative, student-centered approaches across the syllabi suggests a clear trend toward enhancing students' sense of belonging. Each iteration of the syllabus introduced strategies that may have fostered a greater sense of community, recognition, and support. While the specific effects of each change remain open to further investigation, these findings suggest that integrating OER, designing renewable assignments, fostering inclusive course content, and involving students in the creation of their learning experience could contribute to a more supportive and engaging academic environment. Future research should continue to explore how these practices can be refined to better support diverse student populations and improve educational outcomes.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COURSE DESIGN

These findings have significant implications for course design in higher education. When examining the findings, it is important to hone in on the specific types of social justice framing at work in this study. For instance, the observed effects appear particularly associated with an increase in recognitive justice. This dimension of social justice emphasizes the acknowledgment and representation of marginalized perspectives, which was evident in the syllabus versions that included explicit references to diverse voices and experiences. The significant increase in

students' intent to register and their sense of belonging can be attributed to this recognitive justice framing. By incorporating open resources and pedagogies that highlight historically underrepresented groups, students may feel more validated and connected to the course content. This alignment not only fosters a sense of belonging but also enhances students' perceptions of the course as inclusive and supportive. Institutions should consider the integration of social justice frameworks into their curricula as a means to enhance student engagement and belonging. By prioritizing diverse perspectives and inclusive materials, educators can create learning environments that are not only academically enriching but also socially responsive.

STRENGTHS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study offers important contributions to the understanding of how syllabus design, particularly through the integration of social justice frameworks, can influence students' perceptions and attitudes.

Strengths

One of the key strengths of this study is the within-subjects design, which allowed us to control for individual differences by using the same participants across all syllabus conditions. This design enhances statistical power by reducing variability due to intra-individual differences, enabling a more direct comparison of participants' perceptions across the various syllabus versions. By treating each participant as their own control, we minimized confounding factors, allowing for a more accurate assessment of the effects of different social justice frames on student outcomes.

Additionally, this study benefits from ecological validity through the use of a syllabus based on a real course. The syllabus was drawn from an actual course at the university where the research took place, which ensures that the study's findings are not only academically relevant but also grounded in practical, real-world educational contexts. This connection to authentic course design increases the generalizability of the results, underscoring the importance of syllabus design in shaping student engagement, sense of belonging, and perceptions of faculty.

Limitations

While the study has several strengths, there are limitations that must be acknowledged, beginning with the aggregate nature of the syllabus manipulations. As participants moved from one syllabus version to the next, each version included multiple changes simultaneously (e.g., shifts in redistributive, recognitive, and representational justice). This makes it difficult to pinpoint which specific element or combination of elements was most responsible for the observed effects. Future research should isolate individual components of the syllabus to determine the precise impact of each justice frame on student perceptions and outcomes.

A second limitation concerns the duration of syllabus review. While the survey included attention checks to ensure participant engagement, we did not account for how much time participants spent reviewing each syllabus version. The amount of time spent engaging with the syllabus may have affected the depth of their responses, as some participants may have absorbed more or less of the content, potentially influencing their evaluations and sense of belonging. Future studies could incorporate measures to assess how engagement time correlates with student responses and explore whether longer or more focused engagement with the syllabus influences their perceptions.

Another limitation arises from the awareness of syllabus differences. Although we provided clear instructions and emphasized the changes between syllabus versions, it remains uncertain whether all participants fully noticed or engaged with these variations. Individual differences in attention and perception could have led to varying levels of awareness, potentially affecting the overall findings. Future research should consider measuring participants' awareness of syllabus changes to more accurately assess the influence of specific elements on student attitudes and behaviors.

Additionally, the study's design did not account for potential order effects. Since participants were exposed to all versions of the syllabus in a fixed sequence, the order in which syllabi were presented may have influenced their responses. Future research could randomize the order of

syllabus presentation to mitigate order effects and ensure more reliable conclusions regarding the impact of syllabus design on student outcomes.

Finally, the sample was predominantly composed of psychology undergraduates, many of whom may have already been familiar with the course content due to prior exposure to introductory psychology. This prior knowledge could have influenced participants' evaluations, as they may have implicitly compared the hypothetical syllabus with their own experiences, introducing potential bias. Additionally, the small number of participants with multiple marginalized identities limited our ability to robustly test how these identities might moderate the effects of syllabus design. Expanding the participant pool to include a more diverse range of identities and academic disciplines would help provide a more comprehensive understanding of how syllabus framing affects various student populations.

Future Research Directions

Building on the strengths and limitations of this study, several directions for future research emerge. First, isolating the individual components of social justice framing (e.g., redistributive, cognitive, and representational justice) would allow researchers to identify which specific elements have the most significant impact on students' perceptions and behaviors. This would provide more nuanced insights into how different types of social justice interventions shape student engagement and belonging.

In addition, incorporating qualitative methods such as interviews or open-ended survey responses would provide deeper insights into how students experience and interpret the social justice frames embedded in the syllabus. While quantitative measures captured changes in attitudes and perceptions, qualitative data could offer a richer understanding of the personal and emotional factors that influence students' responses to syllabus design.

Given the relatively small number of students with multiple marginalized identities in this study, future research should aim to recruit more diverse samples to explore how various marginalized identities moderate the effects of syllabus design. This would help identify whether certain social justice frames resonate differently across different student populations and academic contexts.

Furthermore, future studies could investigate the role of engagement by assessing the amount of time participants spend reviewing syllabus materials and whether this engagement influences their sense of belonging and course evaluations. Additionally, by controlling for order effects, researchers can better isolate the specific impact of syllabus changes, ensuring that findings are not influenced by the sequence in which syllabi are presented.

Expanding the scope of research to include students from diverse academic disciplines would help assess whether the effects of syllabus design are generalizable across various fields of study. Understanding whether certain elements of social justice framing are more effective in some disciplines than others would provide valuable guidance for educators looking to implement inclusive practices in different subject areas.

Finally, it is worth noting that the SCOPE (social justice, cost, outcomes, perceptions, engagement) framework (Clinton-Lisell et al., 2023) reflects Lambert's (2018) call to address the growing need to center social justice in open education research. This framework also draws attention to the importance of considering not only the cost savings that accrue to students from the adoption of OER but also the multidimensional cost (including time, cognitive load, and emotional cost) to faculty of embracing open educational practices. This is a challenge that was identified in research by both Ashman (2023) and Lazzara et al. (2024) that explored the experiences of faculty members who adopt renewable assignments and other approaches to open pedagogy. In line with this theme, future research on syllabus design would do well to explore and articulate the trade-offs involved when designing socially just learning environments, including by integrating open educational practices.

By addressing the present study's limitations and exploring these future directions, researchers can continue to refine our understanding of how syllabus design impacts student engagement, belonging, and overall academic success. Such insights will be crucial in guiding the development of more inclusive and equitable educational environments.

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

The research methods and hypotheses for this study were pre-registered on the Open Science Framework prior to data collection (Pakkal et al., 2024). The full versions of the syllabi used in the study are also publicly available on the Open Science Framework (<https://osf.io/exnqh>). Anonymized data will be provided upon reasonable request.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGs)

This study is linked to the following SDG(s): Quality education (SDG 4) and Reduced inequalities (SDG 10).

ADDITIONAL FILE

The additional file for this article can be found as follows:

- **Supplementary Material.** Tables S1–S2. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55982/openpraxis.17.3.831.s1>

ETHICS AND CONSENT

This study received ethics clearance from Brock University's Research Ethics Board.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS (CRediT)

Oya Pakkal: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Data collection, Analysis, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Anita Twele: Conceptualization, Analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Lindsey Gwozdz: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Rajiv Jhangiani: Conceptualization, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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