

A Student Bill of Rights

Students from Immigration, Migration, and Belonging at Portland State University, 2021-2022, Balkhiis Noor, Olivia Monestime, Julia Hines, and David Peterson del Mar

Abstract

This Student Bill of Rights was created by two sections of Immigration, Migration, and Belonging, a year-long Freshman Inquiry class largely composed of students from under-represented backgrounds.

Keywords

Student rights, teaching, student-focused teaching, imposter syndrome

The students in the two 2021-2022 Immigration, Migration, and Belonging classes that collaborated in creating this document came from families with roots in Latin America, Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Western Europe, and Eastern Europe. Few of their parents had attended college, and most of the students had shouldered heavy responsibilities at home before arriving at PSU. Most felt at once terrified and exhilarated about being in college. Together they created a warm and caring place, a sort of home or family away from home and family.

Balkhiis Noor is a 2022 graduate of Portland State University, graduating with her Bachelor of Arts degree in psychology. She plans on furthering her education in psychology to become a clinical psychologist. During her leisure time she enjoys spending time with her family and volunteering in her community. She enjoys obtaining new experiences and learning new things.

Olivia Monestime is a recent graduate of Portland State University who obtained a Bachelor of Science degree in biology, with minors in psychology and interdisciplinary neuroscience. As an undergraduate, she explored a multitude of interests, ranging from student advocacy to neurobiological research. She continues to pursue her interest as a researcher with a focus on the treatment of Alzheimer's disease. Apart from her research, Olivia is deeply interested in climate advocacy and human and animal welfare.

Julia Hines is a current undergraduate student at Portland State pursuing bachelor's degrees in Russian and German language and literature and minoring in general History and Medieval Studies with the hopes of obtaining a master's degree in both translation and education after graduation. Julia stays involved both inside and outside of the classroom. On campus, she is part of many campus organizations and societies while working as a tutor for the World Languages & Literatures department. Outside of the classroom she is devoted to human rights and the environment, volunteering her time to organizations and political campaigns that reflect those values.

David Peterson del Mar is a professor at Portland State University in the department of History and University Studies. He is the author of seven books, ranging from histories of interpersonal violence to how people in the U.S. have understood Africa. His current research focuses on how colleges might become more student-focused. Therefore, he now spends much more time working with students than writing books.

Introduction

In the winter and spring of 2022, roughly seventy students in two sections of Immigration, Migration, and Belonging, a year-long Freshman Inquiry course at Portland State University (PSU), collaborated in creating “A Student Bill of Rights,” shared below. Freshman Inquiry, or FRINQ, is part of our public urban university’s University Studies (UNST) program and is required of most students attending PSU right out of high school. Unlike many general-education courses, UNST is designed thematically to cultivate four particular learning goals: communication; inquiry and critical thinking; diversity, equity, and social justice; and ethics, agency, and community (Carpenter & Hamington, 5). FRINQ courses last the entire year and feature “a pedagogical philosophy of student empowerment and the development of agency” (Carpenter & Hamington, 6).

The course instructor, David Peterson del Mar, noticed during the year that many students in the course, past as well as present, expressed frustration with the quality of teaching at PSU and felt like they had no way of registering their concern or experiences. The great majority of these students were from immigrant families and were first-generation college students. The great majority took their studies very seriously and felt a great deal of pressure from family members and themselves to succeed at school and eventually find a lucrative career—but they also had strong doubts about whether or not they belonged at university and were therefore often intimidated and discouraged by faculty who seemed indifferent to teaching and to students. Conversations with student advocates, whose job it was to meet with students struggling with their courses, confirmed that there was often a wide gulf between our students and faculty. What if, David wondered, the students who so often felt invisible and ill at ease at PSU had the opportunity to express what sort of classrooms and instructors they would like to have?

We took a collaborative, student-focused approach in creating the document. A senior undergraduate who had visited each class, Balkhiis Noor, and one of the courses’ peer mentors, Olivia Monestime, invited small groups of students in the two sections of the class to meet and share ideas about what might be included in the document, in terms of the sort of practices and policies that they wished faculty would employ and abide by. Balkhiis, Olivia, and David synthesized these ideas into a draft that groups of students then commented on and refined.

We shared the document through email with several administrators and faculty concerned with teaching practices at PSU, and some of the students presented the document to senior administrators and faculty particularly concerned with improving the quality of teaching and teaching evaluation at PSU. We hope that including this document in *Amplify* will, indeed, amplify its impact, and that PSU and other public colleges will take pains to listen to student voices as we seek to create colleges that are more focused on student success, student experiences, and student feedback, particularly those of students from under-represented backgrounds that few faculty share or understand.

A Student Bill of Rights

The success of students begins with the relationship between student and professor. FRINQ is designed to provide students with the fundamentals of social and academic skills to integrate with their university studies. It is supposed to be a transformative, shared experience that will equip students to thrive at PSU. We have gathered the voices of FRINQ students to improve the quality of their learning at PSU. The following provides the rights that FRINQ students have identified as critical for improving their academic engagement and success in all of their courses.

Creating and Maintaining a Welcoming Environment

- Many students are first generation, so it is difficult to navigate this unfamiliar environment. Feeling welcomed contributes to wanting to come to class.
- Instructors should be passionate about their teaching. The energy of an educator rubs off on students.
- Build community by giving students the opportunity to learn about and connect with each other.
- Instructors should work hard to distinguish students from each other, especially when it comes to mistaking people from the same ethnic group. Professors should know the name of each of their students in classes of under forty people.
- Instructors should avoid trying to intimidate students in certain majors and learning pathways—e.g., the first years of computer science or pre-med curriculums.
- Instructors should be comfortable and open about discussing the importance of student mental health and students' mental health options, while also being mindful of students' privacy.
- Instructors should facilitate conversations at the beginning of the term to
 - identify and discuss microaggressions and how to disrupt them, as well as have
 - conversations on “isms” and imposter syndrome.
- Instructors should strive to both learn to be comfortable in uncomfortable spaces themselves and to read student levels of discomfort (such as being mindful of student body language and gestures).
- Instructors need to make themselves available to meet with students so that students feel seen and can thrive throughout the term, unless extenuating circumstances prevent them from doing so.

Be Mindful of Student Backgrounds and the Biases They Face

- Instructors should be sensitive to students' diverse backgrounds by not presenting their own culture or experiences as “normal.”
- Instructors should incorporate breaks in longer classes to relax and stretch the mind and body.
- Instructors need to be willing to be open-minded and flexible about their teaching styles to accommodate a variety of students, whether or not students have exemptions or accommodations. Accommodations should be respected.
- Instructors need to allow their students to record their lectures, because some of them are difficult for some students to understand.

Practice Mutual Respect and Understanding

- Students should not be required to provide highly personal details of traumatic events when requesting extensions or excused absences.
- Instructors should not be afraid to admit mistakes in lecturing, grading, or other aspects of their work. The common notion that *the student is wrong and the instructor is right* creates a power dynamic and a barrier to an engaged learning experience.
- If an instructor is concerned about a student's behavior, they should bring the subject up tactfully. This can be accomplished either by discreet emails or by talking to the student privately. If instructors do not prefer email communications, they should provide clear, constructive instructions on how to be contacted.

Respond Promptly to Student Work and Questions

- Instructors should strive to grade student work and respond to student queries about assignments promptly. Students struggle to receive responses (via email) to questions, especially regarding assignments or grades, and sometimes responses are never received.
- Assignments need to be graded early rather than at or near the end of the term, when it is too late for students to do something about poor grades.
- Instructors should provide ample and diverse types of office hours (in person and virtual) and respond promptly to emails, or whatever communication method they prefer. Many students have become very successful in learning to utilize office hours.

Be Flexible with Assignments

- Life is not linear, and there will be times when a student may need flexibility with an assignment. It is important to trust and value the request of students.
- Acquiring the required texts and books for a class can often be a heavy financial burden on a student. Instructors should therefore strive to assign free course materials whenever possible.

Reflections from Some of the Participants

Balkhiis Noor

Like many other crucial life skills, persistence and dedication have the power to bring about remarkable transformations. I am delighted to witness the ongoing efforts to establish the Student Bill of Rights. Initially, I joined the project as a work-study student, offering my support to David and his students. However, as I delved deeper into the project, I began to realize how burdensome being a student can be. I questioned why we, as students, haven't engaged in open conversations about the significant issues that shape our lives or pushed for change. Students are rarely given the opportunity to slow down and process the fast-paced world around them.

As a first-generation college student, like many others, my primary focus was simply reaching the finish line of graduation, and making my parents proud. However, this journey often feels

like scaling Mount Everest with a heavy backpack filled with responsibilities, hindering us from reaching our full potential. Some of the instances may be because of experiencing imposter syndrome, not feeling welcomed to reach out to professors, too many assignments needing completion, etc.

One valuable lesson I learned from interacting with students and documenting their voices was the profound impact that unity can have. Today's students are tomorrow's future, and it is crucial that we comprehend and accommodate their needs in order to create a better world for generations to come. And that is exactly what the Student Bill of Rights is intended to establish: rights for students to be heard and be at their best.

Olivia Monestime

One of the most pivotal works I was exposed to in my first term of FRINQ was Adrienne Rich's speech to an assembly of women students at Douglas College entitled "Claiming an Education" (Rich, 1977). She calls on all students to be accountable for their education; to break barriers of thinking, fueled by genuine curiosity; and to create learning environments rich with opportunities for flourishing through intellectual challenges. Rich encourages the idea that students must claim their education, in contrast to receiving it, as this inherently allows them the opportunity to be accountable for themselves.

Above all, a foundational relationship between student and teacher, as well as students and university, must allow for students to claim their education in any system of higher learning. A "contract" must exist between student and professors, Rich asserts. What the Student Bill of Rights aims to do is to no longer assume this contract to be intuitive and implicitly accessible but, instead, to serve as an explicit contract that asserts our rights as students claiming their education. The Student Bill of Rights will stand not only for students graduating this year or the following, but, hopefully, for all students to come at Portland State University.

When I was introduced to the project with David and Balkhiis, I had not initially intended to take on a co-author role. At the time of the project's inception, I was the class mentor for David and mainly urged and orchestrated student involvement in the project throughout the year. David was the first professor I had been exposed to that emphasized building relationships with students as a foundation to a thriving classroom. The idea itself seems so obvious to me now, as the more the project progressed, the easier it was to see how overlooked this concept is by most professors in a student's academic career.

When I became a mentor for an online asynchronous FRINQ class, I really started to understand how important it was for me to play a part in the Student Bill of Rights more directly. Through this experience, I discovered how new learning formats created during the pandemic made the transition to college that much more difficult for the students I worked with. Throwing yourself into a new environment is daunting already, but not having access to the support you need makes it that much more difficult in a post-pandemic U.S. learning institution. To feel helpless regarding your education is the opposite of intellectual freedom. To have ease of access to knowledge in a safe, supportive, diverse, structured environment should not be a privilege, but a right.

Julia Hines

I was one of the students who got the privilege of working on the Student Bill of Rights. It was empowering to sit down as a class and have the chance for our voices to be heard, since so often they are not. We realized that what we were asking for, which was primarily communication, understanding, and flexibility from instructors and the creation of a space that welcomes all (especially first-generation and BIPOC students) and accommodates student needs, is not too much to ask for at all. I am a first-generation student and need accommodations, so these additions to the Bill of Rights are important to me to feel that I belong at the university.

I know that, for many of the BIPOC students in my class, the addition of rights related to instructors' remembering students' names, pronouncing names correctly, and not reducing students to being representatives of ethnic groups was meaningful. PSU has been more welcoming and accommodating than many universities, in my opinion, but, at the same time, there is always room for improvement, especially when so many students have had awful, invalidating experiences with some instructors and staff. I believe the Student Bill of Rights will be the first step to protecting students from being subjected to that type of treatment in the future. I was also one of the students who presented the Bill of Rights to the vice provost for academic personnel and dean of interdisciplinary general education over Zoom last year. It was intimidating to meet with a high-level administrator, but, again, very empowering to have our voices heard, directly from us, the students. I am excited to see where this project goes in the future, and I am proud to have been a part of it.

David Peterson del Mar

The process of creating and advocating for the Student Bill of Rights confirmed my belief that professors should do a lot less professing. I am an older, white, straight man who has written several books, so I have become accustomed to taking up a lot of space in "my" classrooms. Teaching FRINQ has taught me that listening is a teacher's most powerful tool, particularly if you come from a different background from most of your students. Listening is a way for powerful people to make themselves, in a sense, smaller and more accessible and, in college classrooms, especially, for students to feel respected and to know that their experiences, beliefs, and opinions are worthy of being listened to. It also opens up space for students to know and care for each other and to find solace in sharing similar challenges they have faced, creating that sense of belonging and community that, according to them, is so often missing at PSU. And these open spaces are soon filled by a rich range of experiences and perspectives. So my role in the creation of and advocacy for the Student Bill of Rights mirrored the role that I have learned to take in the class more generally. I conceived of the project by listening to student voices and concerns, consulted with student advocates, and then collaborated with Olivia and Balkhiis, two trusted student mentors, to create an open space to invite the students to fill, which the students did eloquently and effectively.

Instructors' most important task, at least at the outset of a course, is to persuade students that we are interested in them and what they have to say. Once that level of trust is reached, they will, indeed, have a lot to say, especially on the subject of how their educational experiences might be improved upon. Academics have been trained and rewarded for developing and articulating our

own ideas, for taking up as much space as we can. Our impact will be much greater if we instead focus on how we might create classrooms in which our students' ideas are given the space to gather themselves and take flight.

References

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