

Helping Lower-Income Students Succeed

Baylor University has a significant number of lower-income students. In 2017-2018, for example, **19%** of Baylor undergraduates were Pell recipients (meaning that they come from families earning \$50,000 or less annually). We celebrate the opportunity for socio-economic mobility this figure represents. But we must also recognize that lower-income students often struggle to succeed at Baylor. The six-year graduation rate for low-income freshmen at Baylor is **11 percentage points lower** than non-low-income freshmen. Rates of drop/fail/withdrawal in entry science courses are **8 percentage points higher** for low-income students than their non-low-income peers.

The reasons for these struggles are varied, but any set of solutions must include instructor behavior and course design. Here are five things instructors can do to increase the likelihood of success for lower-income students:

- **Lower the costs of course materials.** Students on limited budgets may be forced to choose between course materials and groceries or other necessities. Skimping on either can negatively affect student performance. Instructors often have great power to lower the costs of course materials so students don't face this problem. This certainly includes textbooks, but also learning tools (clickers, online course packs, etc.) and learning experiences (are there costs or travel associated with off-campus learning events you require?). Consider what is necessary. For instance, can you use a learning response system that is free to students, like Socrative? Or, does an older (cheaper) edition of the text or a free open-access version (like [Openstax](#) or [MERLOT](#) or [Open Textbook Library](#)) work? Some courses can operate without a textbook at all, pointing students instead to online resources.
- **Provide open access to the first week's reading.** Some students don't have the course books in time for the first day of class, either because they don't have the money at the time, or because they bought a cheaper version online and are waiting on shipment. Students without the text start off behind. Place the text on reserve in the library or departmental office or scan the first few readings and post them to Canvas.
- **Use interactive learning methods and focus on higher-level thinking.** Students are more likely to be engaged and persist in college when learning is personal, relevant, and intellectually stimulating, rather than abstracted and focused on memorizing information. Interactive teaching methods, like discussion, can also help students develop a sense of community with faculty and fellow classmates.
- **Make your course friendly for working students.** Students with jobs (especially off-campus) may have limited availability and flexibility in their schedules. This can make group assignments requiring out-of-class collaboration a challenge. If such group work is important to the class, encourage students to find ways to collaborate virtually (e.g., Zoom) or provide class time for collaboration. Also, students with job commitments may have more difficulty devoting time to assignments and projects that are not indicated clearly at the beginning of the semester. Try not to "spring" work on students, expecting them to have free evenings or weekends for an unannounced task.

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- **Integrate socio-economic diversity in your teaching.** Students who don't feel welcomed (i.e., represented) often lack motivation, which can affect their performance and their persistence. Everything from casual conversations with students, to the anecdotes and illustrations explaining material, to pictures on PowerPoint slides can reinforce notions of what is "normal." Rather than assuming, for instance, that all students went home for Thanksgiving, ask students open-ended questions about how they spent their break. Create (or adjust) illustrations and case studies to reflect and validate a wider range of income and backgrounds. With each teaching decision, consider whether it might make a lower-income student feel "other."

If you have questions or would like assistance in developing any of these suggestions in your classroom, contact Christopher Richmann, ATL Assistant Director, christopher_richmann@baylor.edu.

Source

Muskin, L., and Lee, J. (2004). Raising the graduation rates of low-income students. Washington, D.C.: Pell Institute Study of Opportunity in Higher Education. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED490856.pdf>.