Awareness Points for First-Generation/Low-Income Students
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UW-Eau Claire Statistics

41% of students are first-generation (defined as neither parent having completed a 4-year degree)

11% of students are low-income (according to levels set by U.S. Department of Education)

Characteristics of First-Generation/Low Income Students

Research has shown that being a first-generation student has a negative effect on persistence and attainment, even when other factors such as socioeconomic status are taken into account. Low-income students are often first generation as well, but even those who are not face numerous pressures that can result in their attrition. UW-Eau Claire students who are both first-generation and low-income have a six-year graduation rate that is approximately 8% lower than the overall rate at the university.

In comparison with other students, those who are first generation or low income are

- More likely to delay enrollment in postsecondary education, which means they are more likely to be married or have dependents. Those of traditional age are more likely to live at home and to enroll part-time than their peers.
- More likely to have non-academic obligations, such as work and family responsibilities, that influence study habits. Overall, they tend to study fewer hours than their peers.
- More likely to report that an important goal for them is to be well-off financially so that they can provide their children with better opportunities than they had.
- More likely to major in traditional degree programs, where the majors have direct correlation to occupations.
- More likely to be “certain” about their academic major. However, they often base the decision on inaccurate or incomplete information. Their career goals may be “reel-istic,” reflecting what they’ve seen in the media, rather than realistic.
- Less informed about the full costs of college attendance and more reluctant to take out loans. As a result, they tend to work an inordinate number of hours.
- More likely to be under-prepared for college. They not only may be less skilled than peers in reading, math, and critical thinking on entering college, but they also may show less improvement during the first year.
- More likely to report feeling they do not belong or do not feel welcome on campus. Social and cultural factors may lead to attrition.
- Less likely to be informed about learning disabilities and accommodations available.
- Less likely to make appointments (and more likely to break them). They are often hesitant to approach faculty members, advisers, or student service providers for assistance. They tend to place a high value on being independent and self-reliant.
- Less likely to be informed about graduate and professional school options.
- More likely to have an anti-intellectual perspective, valuing knowledge that is practical rather than academic. Male students may be afraid of being labeled as a “nerd.”
- Less likely to be involved in student organizations or other co-curricular activities.
Assisting First-Generation/Low Income Students

Lacking a basic knowledge of how to navigate postsecondary education, these students tend to have a greater need than their peers for academic, social, and personal support. The following strategies can promote their academic success.

- Enroll the students in a learning community or other type of structured first-year experience. This involvement has been shown to significantly improve retention rates. Orientation courses can help students gain essential background knowledge about higher education and their own institution.

- Involve the students with faculty, staff, and other students, particularly in activities that are directed toward student learning. Since the students often lack faculty mentors or peer role models, formal mentoring programs can be helpful. Try to foster their involvement with university faculty by encouraging faculty-student research and other types of collaboration.

- Recommend courses that engage students in learning. These students tend to prefer classes that involve interactive, hands-on teaching methods. They will benefit from the use of learning strategies that call for students to work together inside or outside of the classroom. How well these students perform in a class is often strongly influenced by the instructional methods and personal relationship established with the professor.

- Try to de-stigmatize support services. One method is to link academic support to the students’ everyday learning needs, such as with supplemental study groups or the use of paired classes where one is developmental in character. Time management and study skills instruction may also be provided in relation to specific courses or assignments.

- Make intentional efforts to get the students integrated into campus life. It will enhance their probability of success if they increase the amount of time they spend on campus, deepening their involvement in its academic and social culture. Encourage them to participate in student organizations and activities that will allow them to gain career information, develop leadership skills, and form positive social networks with peers.

- Provide the students with clear guidance of what they have to do to be successful. The advising approach used for these students may need to be more intrusive and proactive than for other students. Rather than waiting for them to seek help, it is desirable to reach out to the students as much as possible. They may also need a more directive approach than other students, especially during their first year. At that stage, they want advisers to “tell me what I need to do” in clear and simple terms.

- Encourage the students to engage in experiences that will broaden their awareness of academic programs and career options. They will probably need more assistance than other students to secure internships, perform informational interviews, arrange career shadowing experiences, etc.

- Always maintain high expectations and set high standards for the students.