

Inclusion: Awareness of **Socioeconomic Diversity**

••••• **Socioeconomic Status (SES)**

The American Psychological Association describes **socioeconomic status (SES)** as a construct derived from a “combination of education, income and occupation” (APA, n.d.). SES clearly intersects with other demographic categorizations such as race and ethnicity (Lareau 2011, Orr 2003). Socioeconomic situation is one of the many dimensions of student diversity, mirroring the diversity in society overall.

••••• **Lower SES Students in the Higher Education Context**

As with other diversity continua and categorizations, socioeconomic status in higher education is an imperfect reflection of the larger society, with students from the lower end of the socioeconomic range typically underrepresented. As colleges and universities work to increase access and opportunity for those students, what has long been evident in K-12 education is receiving scrutiny in higher education: Students from lower socioeconomic situations face challenges to success not faced by many of their more advantaged peers. Researchers are beginning to unravel the complex cloud of cultural, psychological, and emotional aspects that hinder the wellbeing and higher education success of socioeconomically disadvantaged students, and are suggesting educational and student support actions to assist students with those challenges.

Because of the intersections as well as interactions with dimensions of gender and gender identity, religion, and others, generalizations about the characteristics of a “typical” lower SES student must always be approached with caution. Caution is warranted even more so by the difficulty of obtaining reliable data. Unlike other dimensions of student diversity, lower SES situation may be more difficult for faculty to recognize in their students than those of ethnicity, race, and gender. However, some general patterns and characteristics are evident.

Below are some of the general characteristics of lower SES students in higher education:

First-Generation College Students

Lower socioeconomic students tend to be first-generation college students (for many the two are synonymous), and some are from families where one or both parents may not have completed high school (Stephens et al. 2014). Parental expectations and aspirations for their children's education may be high, but familiarity with the culture of higher education and with ways of navigating college application, registration, and pre-matriculation preparation are typically low (Brown et al. 2016, Lareau 2011). As a result, students from these backgrounds often arrive on campus with reduced conceptions or misconceptions about the university, feel out of place, and are at risk of leaving (Ostrove and Long 2007, Reay et al. 2009). Lower SES students typically have had a narrower range of cultural experiences such as travel (even vacations) and more limited exposure to the range of academic and career possibilities (Brown et al. 2016, Lareau 2011). Most lower SES students are themselves dependent on needs-based financial aid, with little or no family financial support possible. Many of these students need to take on part-time (or full-time) jobs, cutting in to their time available for academic work, and often limiting their ability to participate in extra- and co-curricular activities in the university community (Doerschuk et al. 2016).

Academic Preparedness

Many lower SES students are less academically prepared than their more advantaged peers. Often, they attended schools with larger class sizes, fewer advanced college-prep course offerings, and more disciplinary distractions. These students may be familiar with a more limited range of learning strategies and approaches, and may approach studying and interacting with peers, faculty, and student support staff differently. Lower SES students may be less inclined to seek assistance from faculty or interact with peers in study groups out of a feeling that they alone are responsible for their learning (Yee 2016). They are likely less equipped – due to a lack of prior modeling and examples - to enter into the “life of the mind” that is the essence of the academic community, tending more to view themselves as recipients of education rather than as active participants in the exchange of ideas and perspectives. This can lead to under-performance on written assignments and exams where students are tasked with synthesizing, integrating, and evaluating concepts and information (Wright et al. 2016). Lower SES students sometimes also under-perform on standardized multiple-choice exams because of under-preparation due to inadequate learning strategies, or because of stereotype threat (Spencer and Castano, 2007).

Tips for working with Socioeconomically Diverse Students

These and other generalizations are certainly not characteristic of all lower SES students, nor are they unique to those currently situated with that portion of the SES spectrum. However, there are strategies that can be explicitly employed to help all students confront the challenges of university success. The experiences of University of Tennessee faculty and the strategies they have developed to meet the needs of this population of students are the topic of the April 2018 Diversi-Tea discussion. Examples of such strategies and considerations can be found in works by Doerschuk et al. 2016, Ostrove and Long 2007, Oyserman and Destin 2010, Stephens et al. 2014, and Yale Center for Teaching and Learning n.d. The following is a list of some of these strategies:

- **Actively** encourage students to seek support and assistance. Peer and faculty mentors and role models can be helpful for this.
- **Include learning** and study strategies in your disciplinary pedagogy.
- **Deploy strategies** for student collaboration, peer tutoring and support.
- **Promote** a sense of belonging in the institution and the department.
- **Provide** and clarify clear classroom and performance expectations.
- **Consider ways** to bring student experiences into classroom discussion.
- **Reflect** on your use of language, cultural references, and images in your teaching; seek cultural and linguistic references that are inclusive of a range of experiences and backgrounds; variegate cultural references and language use.
- **Consider financial outlays** that students may incur in your course; seek to minimize costs and look for alternative means of funding.

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