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Some Strategies to Improve Student Success, and Reduce DFWI rates in large, introductory U.S. History classes.

HIST 200 is a challenge for many students at CSUSB. For many students it is one of the first college level classes they take, and the transition to college can be difficult. In addition, reports indicate that as of 2018 [roughly 40% of entering first year students](#) in the California State University System probably need some remedial classes to get up to speed for CSU studies.

Conventionally, such classes, often with 150 students, take the form of classic large lectures and textbook classes. The trouble is that lecturing has been shown, repeatedly, to be [inferior to more active approaches](#). That is doubly true when students may have little experience with lecture classes, particularly with large ones, and therefore, are ill prepared for that approach to basic, introductory classes.

The principle difficulty in introductory US history classes is, therefore, how can one introduce students, in any fairly comprehensive way, to a great deal of material in a suitable manner.

There is no one answer, and there is no perfect answer. But what one can do, and should do, is to incorporate as much “active learning,” and, in general, what in 2019 we call “high impact practices” as possible into the classroom.

At the most basic level, one can add questions, via campus clicker technology into one’s classes. CSUSB has invested in this technology for a reason. Making clicker questions part of class means that students have to think back over blocks of material every x number of minutes (ten to fifteen is probably a good time, but it would repay further study and experimentation to see what scholars suggest and to see what seems to work with CSUSB students). It also has a side benefit. Students are notorious for skipping large introductory classes. But if an important part of the grade is based upon in class exercises, then students will have to show up, and pay attention, throughout the quarter.

Scholarship also seems to show that students, perhaps particularly those raised in today’s U.S. schools, tend to benefit from a social learning environment. The model of the isolated scholar in a room with a book seems antiquated, particularly to our newest students. Hence, to help students feel comfortable in the classroom, and to help students move from high school, community college, or from several years in the workforce to CSUSB, it is wise to have exercises that foster some communal learning. Perhaps this can be done by having a good class discussion, but, particularly in a large classroom, it is almost certainly wise to break the group down into smaller groups. In classes with 150 students, however, it might not always be feasible to have the kinds of group work and group projects that are often common in upper division classes. (We also need to keep in mind that sometimes the “latest thing” is itself a fad, and the best social science of, say 2010, is revised by 2030).

In light of all that, the prudent course in a large introductory class might be to have students work with the students they happen to be sitting with on assignments in class. In HIST 200, one approach might be to approach the primary document side of the course in this way. Break out small, selected pieces of primary documents (a paragraph account of, for example, Powhattan meeting John Smith, or a short selection of Abigail Adams’ “Remember the Ladies” letter to her husband, for example), and then have students, with their neighbors, discuss the text, in the context of what the class has read in the textbook and has just been discussing in the class meeting.

To cap off the exercise, it would be wise to follow the group discussion up with a larger discussion in the class as a whole, following by a couple of questions for the class via the clickers. Repetition, particularly in slightly modified formats, fosters retention. (One [article puts it this way](#), “Effective student memory involves the creation of multiple meaningful connections between bits of information.”)

Such steps will, one hopes, begin to help students meet the challenges that come with college education by fostering a welcoming, comfortable, but still properly demanding introductory class in U.S. history.