

College guide raises questions on BGCT-related colleges

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Texas Monthly recently released its annual college guide, including profiles on BGCT-related colleges, which at first glance seems to paint a troubling picture in a few of the highlighted categories.

College guides such as *Texas Monthly's* are intended to help parents assess which college best suits their soon-to-graduate child. How does their information support an informed decision?

Specifically, how can Texas Baptist parents and students interpret data on Baptist General Convention of Texas-related colleges included in some of these guides to make informed decisions about the undergraduate education offered at BGCT-related universities?

Context is key

Context is key in interpreting such statistics and is necessary for college guides to provide the value to which they aim, according to several BGCT-related colleges profiled in *Texas Monthly's* report.

For instance, *Texas Monthly's* guide reported Wayland Baptist University has a four-year graduation rate of 9 percent.

Wayland President Donna Hedgepath said in an email: "The data referenced comes from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), which only accounts for first-time, full-time students with no prior college experience."

While she said the university could not dispute the graduation rate

reported by *Texas Monthly*, Hedgepath pointed out Wayland “serves a diverse range of students, including graduate students, those at external campuses, military personnel, and online learners. When considering all students, Wayland’s graduation rate is significantly higher.”

Cindy Marlow McClenagan, Wayland’s vice president of academic affairs, noted the undergraduate enrollment numbers cited in the report also bear scrutiny. She said for fall 2024, Wayland-Plainview’s full-time enrollment was 707 undergraduate students—including both first-time, full-time students and transfer students.

Additionally, 204 graduate students were associated with Wayland-Plainview in fall 2024, McClenagan noted.

In addition to Plainview, Wayland has campuses in Lubbock, San Antonio and Hawaii. To arrive near the 2,090 enrollment the college report cited for Wayland, all of the university’s combined campus enrollments for undergraduate and graduate students would have to be tallied. That still only brings enrollment up to within about 400 of the number provided by *Texas Monthly*, she explained.

Improving student success

While Wayland representatives indicated understanding the numbers requires better context, they also were clear on Wayland’s commitment to improve student success.

McClenagan said Wayland is focused on meeting student need through several key programs, including its [Summer Bridge program](#) and [Title V grant](#), and by moving to a new form of faculty collaboration, Pioneer Pulse. The platform allows faculty to communicate student needs quickly, as soon as they learn of them, to other faculty who need the information. Better communication among faculty leads to more efficient, effective and holistic

interventions, she explained.

Wendy McNeeley, assistant vice president for student success at Howard Payne University—whose four-year graduation rate was reported to be 25 percent—explained some of the ways the university is working to meet student needs and improve outcomes.

The Center for Student Success at HPU “was started as a part of our strategic plan to impact the student experience,” McNeeley said.

“As we work to impact the academic needs of students as they begin their studies at HPU, one of our goals is to positively impact retention,” which she anticipates will lead to the university seeing a direct impact on graduation rates.

“We have been tracking the use by students of the center’s tutoring and coaching resources. Prior to pulling these resources together and emphasizing them and making them more visible, we recorded 89 total tutoring sessions for the 2022-2023 academic year,” she explained.

“In 2023-2024, the year we opened the center, we increased these contacts to 191 for the academic year, and this past fall semester, that number increased again to 251 contacts, with three months in the academic year remaining.”

McNeely noted: “We are pleased to see our students are using the resources more consistently. Our coaching program began in fall 2024 and is beginning to gain steam as students recognize that there are dedicated staff who want to assist them in being successful students.”

Understanding student populations

Understanding the students served by the universities profiled by *Texas Monthly* also gives context to the statistics, the universities who spoke with

Baptist Standard agreed.

Gabriel Cortés, [Hispanic education director](#) for Texas Baptists, notes Texas' Hispanic population reached 12 million in 2022, becoming the state's largest demographic group (40.2 percent).

He said recent census estimates showed “49.3 percent of Texans under 18 are Hispanic, [yet] only 26 percent of Hispanics over 25 have an associate's degree or higher.”

In creating Cortés' position, Texas Baptists demonstrated increasing Hispanic education is a priority. Several BGCT-related universities—including Howard Payne, Houston Christian and Wayland—already meet the threshold of a 25 percent Hispanic student population to qualify as Hispanic-serving institutions, and the other schools are not far off.

Cortés educates Texas Baptists about the anticipated enrollment cliff, when the “U.S. will hit a peak of around 3.5 million high school graduates sometime near 2025.

“After that, the (traditional) college-age population is expected to shrink across the next 5 to 10 years by as much as 15 percent.”

He said *Forbes* reported in December 2024, Hispanic students and multiracial students are the only two demographic categories projected to increase.

And in January, NPR reported “in places where the number of high school graduates remains stable or increases, it will be largely because of one group: Hispanic students,” Cortés explained.

[iExcelencia in Education!](#), a Washington D.C.-based network dedicated to “accelerat(ing) Latino student success in higher education,” reports four-

year graduation rates for Hispanic students in Texas across all four-year institutions is 48 percent, while white students' four-year graduation rate in Texas is 58 percent.

"Our student retention and graduation rates compare favorably with other minority-serving institutions nationwide, especially given the unique challenges that students often face who struggle to continue due to financial difficulties," noted Samantha Bottoms, dean of student success at Houston Christian University. HCU's four-year graduation rates were reported as 38 percent.

Changes that lead to improvements

Among BGCT-related schools in the report, Baylor University's four-year graduation rates were notably high among BGCT-related colleges at 70 percent.

J. Wesley Null, vice provost for undergraduate education and academic affairs at Baylor University, explained in his 14 years at Baylor, the university has made improving graduation rates a priority.

As a result, Baylor has seen rates for first-year, no-prior-college students' four-year graduation improve from 54 percent to about 74 percent for the 2021 incoming class who will be graduating this May.

During Null's tenure, Baylor also has seen a 10 percent jump in fall-to-fall retention for first-time freshman, from 81 percent to 91 percent with 2024 incoming freshmen.

Perhaps the most consequential change Baylor made in the last decade to see improvements in these numbers, Null said, was revising the core curriculum. The core was reduced in 2019 from between 75 and 80 hours to 50 hours now, cutting out about two semesters' worth of coursework.

He said there were a lot of reasons to reduce the core, but prior to 2019, the last time Baylor had reduced its core was during World War II.

Additionally, Baylor has created supports for special student populations—such as first-generation college students, veterans, or high-financial-need Pell-Grant-eligible students—to better support their needs and increase retention.

The Baylor Benefits Scholarship—instituted by the board of regents—for example, covers 100 percent of tuition and fees for students whose families make \$50,000 or less, Null said. Of these scholarship recipients, 99.4 percent were retained from fall 2024 to spring 2025.

The programs Baylor has implemented to meet the needs of students who aren't doing as well are making a significant difference, Null explained.

“Scholarship based on need is a powerful tool, at these private institutions, in particular,” Null noted, when considering which among the changes Baylor has made might be strategies transferable to other BGCT-related universities.

Other BGCT-related universities with whom *Baptist Standard* spoke already have identified these areas as strategic and are making strides toward them.

Editor's note: Corrections were made after publication in paragraphs eight and twelve to correct a first name and the name of the communication platform to Pioneer Pulse.