

U. of California-Riverside Devises a Successful Latino Graduation Strategy

by Gary M. Stern

The University of California (UC)-Riverside, a large institution with 20,746 undergraduates that is 35 percent Latino, takes graduating Hispanics very seriously. It relies on several success strategies, including first-year learning communities, creating Hispanic academic programs, developing an early-warning academic alert, and using data to retain and graduate larger number of Latino students than the norm. Results have been impressive – 62 percent of its Latino students graduate within six years, compared to a national Hispanic graduation rate of 51 percent.

What can other colleges learn from its strategies?

A 2010 Education Trust report, *Big Gaps, Small Gaps, Hispanic Students*, written by Mamie Lynch and Jennifer Engle, noted that encouraging Latinos to earn a bachelor's degree is critical to the country's future. By 2050, Latinos will number about one-third of the work force, and yet, as of 2010, only 13 percent of Hispanics had bachelor's degrees compared to 21 percent of African-Americans and 39 percent of Whites. Private colleges do a more effective job, graduating 66 percent of Latino students compared to 48 percent of public colleges. The researchers concluded that colleges must create innovative ways to recruit and graduate more Latinos.

UC-Riverside is a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) and a research university, which helps attract talented students in the sciences. Its research facilities provide access to doctoral programs that many HSIs can't furnish.

The college is strategically located, about 60 miles from Los Angeles and 90 miles from San Diego, and its three most popular majors are psychology, business administration and biology.

Here are the factors that have enabled UC-Riverside to graduate a large number of Hispanic students:

1. Commitment starts at the top and filters through campus.

The Education Trust report praised UC-Riverside for making graduating Latino students a "core value" that has become part of the campus culture. The provost's office oversees the monitoring of Hispanic graduation rates and reviews statistics from each of its nine colleges, including Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, Engineering or Natural Sciences. William Kidder, assistant executive vice chancellor at UC-Riverside, attributes its success in reaching Latino students to the commitment the college makes to diversity from "admissions to all facets of the university's outreach efforts up to chancellors." Chancellor Timothy White, in several speeches, has positioned diversity as critical to the college's success. Having a diversity commitment from the chancellor sends a message throughout the college about the importance of graduating minority (and all) students.



James Sandoval, Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs

2. Develop learning communities.

Because the state university is large and many first-generation college students could easily get lost in the hubbub of a complex campus, UC-Riverside introduced freshman learning communities to break down the anonymity of the university. These learning communities are self-selected by students, and about 40 percent of all freshmen opt for them. At orientation, admissions staff extol the academic and social benefits of joining learning communities. In the learning communities, smaller groups of students take the same classes, operate as a cohort and bond in classes in their respective colleges. "It's important that students have a sense of connection rooted in the university community," Kidder said. One reason why learning communities have proved effective at retaining and engaging students is that they generate more interactions with faculty and graduate teaching assistants, he said. Hence, students

in learning communities receive more personalized advising and more peer assistance. In the sciences, learning community students have greater opportunities for paid summer research. Since many Latino students are first-generation college students and can have a hard time adjusting to college, these learning communities play an important role in retention. Indeed, UC-Riverside's data reveal that Latino students return as sophomores at an 8 percent higher rate than the norm. "For students who are academically talented but haven't had exposure to college, it's more important that students have a sense of belonging and engagement," Kidder noted.

3. Recruit targeted students.

Before a college can retain and graduate students, it must attract students who meet its standards. Gaining acceptance to UC-Riverside is demanding. Students must have a 3.5 GPA and average SAT scores of 1470, explained James Sandoval, vice chancellor of student affairs. Its admissions department works with local high schools and community colleges and has developed strong relationships with community-based organizations in Hispanic neighborhoods to identify students that meet its requirements. "It's through these relationships we've built a strong base of highly qualified students," Sandoval said.

4. Build word of mouth in the community.

Snappy brochures and online marketing can play a role in recruiting students, but building word-of-mouth in local communities can have a major effect on attracting talented Latinos, Sandoval suggested. UC-Riverside's undergraduates and graduates are encouraged to return to their community to speak to family members, high school counselors and teachers at local high schools to explain how Latinos thrive on campus.

5. Establish a welcoming atmosphere on campus.

"Students need to step on campus and feel welcome," explained Sandoval. At orientation, students are informed of programs such as Chicano studies or living in Mundo Hall, a dormitory for Latino and Chicano students, which can help students make the transition from high school to living independently. Since UC-Riverside changes classes on a quarterly basis, students need to be welcomed immediately to fit into a rapidly changing educational environment. Moreover, students are trained as peer mentors who can then help other students adjust to campus life. For example, when senior Tracy Juárez, a psychology major, was a freshman, she recalls the college holding welcome week and organizing a series of events on campus and in the

dorms. Events were held so that freshmen could socialize, get to know each other and become familiar with campus. That set the tone for helping students feel at ease on campus.

6. Having critical mass matters.

When Latinos are only 3 percent or 4 percent of the student population, it's easy for them to feel marginalized or ostracized. But at UC-Riverside, Latino students, who are mostly Chicanos, constitute one out of every three students, forming a sizable campus minority. When UC-Riverside surveys undergraduates, 90 percent of Latino students say they feel a strong sense of self-respect on campus.

7. Create an early intervention system.

Freshmen can easily get into "academic trouble, which can cause a downward spiral before they recover," noted Kidder. Rather than waiting until the end of the fall quarter to determine grades and which students are facing difficulty, in 2009, UC-Riverside's vice provost for undergraduate education partnered with IT to create an early-warning assessment system that enables faculty to reveal struggling students before the end of a semester. Faculty administer an early assessment exercise within the first three

weeks of the fall quarter; students who fail to meet the cutoff scores are invited to visit the Academic Resource Center for assistance. If the Academic Resource Center doesn't hear from students, it reaches out to them. Students meet with peer counselors who assess the problem and then refer students for appropriate resources such as tutoring.

8. Maintain affordability.

Affordability breeds academic success. Even small changes in financial aid at a federal or state level can disrupt students receiving aid, Kidder suggests, and 54 percent of UC-Riverside students receive Pell Grants. One of the keys to obtaining financial aid, which may sound simple but often isn't, is meeting deadlines, Sandoval said. Beginning at recruitment, students are made aware of deadlines to obtain Pell Grants and other financial aid to ensure compliance.

9. Devise programs that target Hispanics.

UC-Riverside offers a Hispanic studies program that appeals to students who want to pursue Latino culture and history. Moreover, it offers a Chicano Student Program that provides support services and assistance for students in need or tutoring or counseling. Juárez notes that Latino students can feel welcome within the Chicano Student Program. Most staff is



William Kidder, Assistant Executive Vice Chancellor

bilingual. Students can use the Chicano Student Program center as an office, use computers, find tutoring and ask questions of the coordinator. "It provides a very welcoming atmosphere," Juárez said. In addition, UC-Riverside focuses on building communities. Organizations such as Latinos in Science bring together students with common majors and interests and serve as support systems to help them do well academically and socially, said Sandoval.

10. Hold cultural events.

Encouraging Latino students to feel accepted on campus also entails respecting their culture. Juárez and many other students participated in a Day of the Dead cultural event on campus. The festival included foods, enabled students to create altars as part of the ceremony, and took place in the campus center. "It was a way to allow Hispanics to feel a part of their culture and share it with other students on campus," said Juárez.

11. Develop diversity programs.

Latino students are also encouraged to join campuswide organizations. Sandoval noted that the campus has a wide range of activities such as a marketing club and multicultural organizations that attract a wide range of students. Its Common Ground program organizes leadership retreats that welcome students of all races, religions and ethnic backgrounds. "We're focused on bridge building between communities," he said.

12. Encourage volunteering.

Juárez is president of the Latino Union, an organization of about 50 students that is dedicated to community service. The Latino Union participates in a Diabetes walk and raises funds for an autism organization whose funding had been cut. "Getting students involved in a community service organization expands their horizons. It helps students understand other people's needs and gets them involved in the community," said Juárez, who plans to go to graduate school in clinical psychology and earn a doctorate.

13. Why students fail to graduate.

Despite its track record of success, with 62 percent of Latino students getting a degree within six years, about one of every three Latino students fails to graduate from UC-Riverside. But that 62 percent number can be misleading, says Kidder, because many students transfer and graduate from other institutions – and others "fall in love, their circumstances change, or they move away."

14. Create strategic plans for the future to increase success.

UC-Riverside has a 2020 strategic plan to increase its graduation rate to 75 percent. Kidder said that goal can be reached by attracting more students into its learning communities, improving academic advisory services and expanding opportunities for undergraduates to participate in research in the arts and humanities and other areas.

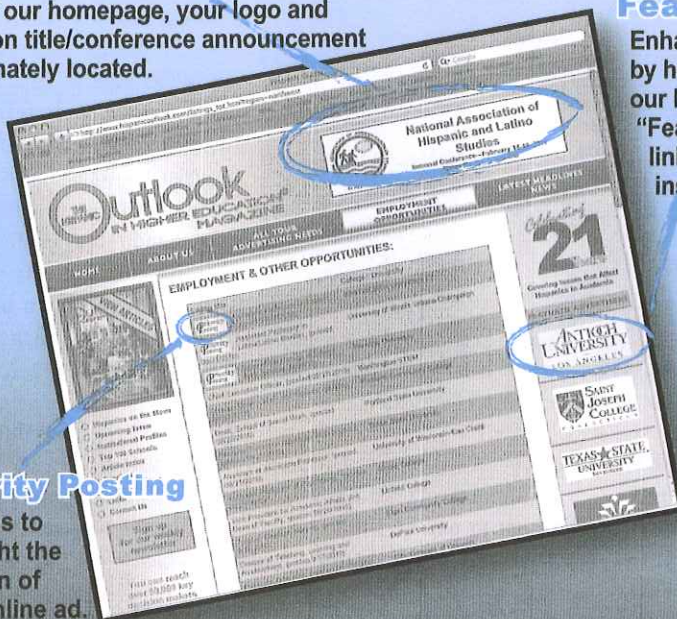


Advertising Enhancements Available

Reach an even wider audience with these add-on enhancements to boost the exposure of your ads.

Banner Advertising

Top of our homepage, your logo and position title/conference announcement prominently located.



Priority Posting

Add this to highlight the position of your online ad.

Featured Advertiser

Enhance your recruitment by having your logo on our homepage under "Featured Advertisers" linking to your ad or institution's website.

Call our Sales Office

**800-549-8280
ext 102-106**

E-Blast Advertising

Promote your Institutional Profile and recruiting by adding your logo to our weekly E-Blast newsletter, this e-mail is sent to 15,000 active contacts.

