# Berkeley Center for Studies in Higher Education

**SERU Consortium Brief**[*]

**RAISING GRADUATION RATES WHILE MAINTAINING RACIAL-ETHNIC EQUITY IN GRADUATION:**
**The UC Riverside Recipe**

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**ABSTRACT**
The University of California, Riverside has raised its four- and six-year graduation rates significantly over the last decade while maintaining near-equity in graduation rates among the four major racial-ethnic groups and across socio-economic strata. The paper discusses campus policies and practices that have helped to produce these results. The campus has contributed to nearly equal graduation outcomes by maintaining strong network ties with parents in minority communities, by offering high levels of academic support and research opportunities to students from under-represented groups, by recruiting faculty and staff who are dedicated to the social mobility mission of the campus, by simplifying bureaucratic procedures, and by a consistent message emphasizing the values of diversity and inclusion. The campus has been able to raise graduation rates among all groups by guaranteeing 15 units of credit each quarter, by leveraging summer to provide courses students need, by improving pre-calculus math instruction, by hiring transition advisors to help students who were struggling in the science colleges, and by aggressively promoting a "finish-in-four" campaign. A coordinated and committed campus effort is necessary to achieve these results.

**Keywords:** Graduation Rates, Reducing Group Differences, Institutional Mechanisms

The University of California, Riverside is well known as a campus that values diversity and has succeeded more than virtually any U.S. university in aiding the upward social mobility of its students (USNWR 2020). University of California survey data confirms that Riverside is a standout on campus climate measures. Students at Riverside, regardless of racial-ethnic group, tend to feel that they belong on the campus and that the campus is a welcoming place for them (UCOP 2021).

Riverside's success in raising its graduation rates while maintaining near-equity in graduation rates among the four major racial-ethnic groups on campus is less well known, but it is an equally notable accomplishment. Research universities tend either to have high graduation rates with large gaps by race and ethnicity or low graduation rates with less notable gaps by race and ethnicity. In this research brief, I will discuss the institutional designs and practices that are behind Riverside's unusual combination of high graduation rates and near-equity between groups.

**UC RIVERSIDE'S CONTEXT**
First, a bit of context. Riverside began as a University of California citrus experiment station in the early 20th century when citrus was king in inland Southern California. Buoyed by the support of the local community, it became a full-service campus of the

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University of California in 1954, with an initial emphasis on the liberal arts college experience. By the early 1960s the idea of the campus as "the Swarthmore of the West" was dead and UC Riverside was approved to develop into a fully-realized research campus with graduate programs. The diversification of the campus undergraduate student body followed over the next two decades and was greatly accelerated by Chancellor Raymond Orbach who made diversification a centerpiece of his administration in the 1990s.

Today Riverside's undergraduate student body is predominantly minority (more than 85%) and first-generation (57%). Nearly half of UCR undergraduates are Pell Grant recipients (UCR 2021). Like the other UC campuses, Riverside draws from the top 12.5 percent of California high school graduates, though mainly from the bottom third of the UC eligibility pool.

Near-equity in racial-ethnic graduation rates preceded the rise in graduation rates. By the mid-2000s, African-American, Asian American, Hispanic, and white students were all graduating at rates within three to five percent of one another. Rates across socio-economic strata were also similar, with gaps of no more than five percent between Pell Grant students and those without Pell Grants (UCR 2014).

Undoubtedly the campus benefited from UC selectivity as well as the upwardly mobile orientations of an ambitious student body. But the campus contribution should not be underemphasized. The campus effort spans a range of administrative offices and faculty research projects. The admissions office maintains regular engagement with parents' groups, especially in the Los Angeles area black community, outreach efforts that help parents to bond with the campus. These efforts create a steady flow of motivated students to the campus from these communities.

## SUPPORT PROGRAMS

Costo Hall on the Riverside campus is the home to a vibrant set of cultural affinity groups, such as African Students Programs and La Raza, and many of the pre-professional student organizations are also organized along racial-ethnic lines. Student services administrators have simplified what could be an overwhelming bureaucratic maze through the organization of services in a "one-stop shop," where students can register for classes, pay bills, discuss financial aid, and get advice on the wide variety of campus health and wellness services.

STEM fields are the most challenging for UC Riverside undergraduate students, as they are on virtually every campus. The STEM colleges have made it a priority to foster the success of under-represented students by sponsoring early research experiences for first and second-year students and a wide range of summer research opportunities. The learning communities in the College of Natural and Agricultural Sciences are nationally known because they have proven to aid the retention and science grades of under-represented students, in part because Supplemental Instruction is required for members of learning communities.

The senior administration is committed to maintaining the campus's reputation as a welcoming place for students from all backgrounds. This commitment is evident in campus communications, which invariably feature students from a variety of racial-ethnic groups, and in the Chancellor's frequent messages about the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion and the pride the campus shows in its US News rank as the campus that is "number 1 for social mobility." The largest banner on the campus, three stories tall, features this ranking.

The bus rides the campus organizes for new staff to the hardscrabble neighborhoods from which many Riverside students originate is one of the indicators that the administration wants new staff to understand "where students are coming from" and how much drive and determination it has taken them to be accepted at UC. The campus's reputation builds on itself. One cohort of students tells their brothers and sisters and parents about how comfortable they feel on campus and about the supportive staff and faculty. Their brothers, sisters, and parents tell others. Word gets around.

## HOW TO IMPROVE GRADUATION RATES?

It is one thing, of course, to obtain near-equity in graduation rates and quite another to obtain high graduation rates while maintaining near equity. In 2013, then-governor Jerry Brown called out the campus for its low graduation rates. He was right to do so; four-year graduation rates for full-time freshman admits stood at an abysmal 41 percent and six-year rates were hovering below two-thirds (see Table 1).

Responding to Governor Brown's criticism, Executive Vice Chancellor and Provost Dallas L. Rabenstein appointed a Graduation Rate Task Force in June 2013. I chaired the Task Force, which included a mix of outstanding faculty members and campus administrators. In the course of studying the problem we discovered a number of surprising facts. The campus had never implemented a course planning system so that students could be guaranteed 15 units per term and access to the most popular

courses on campus. It had never attempted to use summer session to provide in-demand courses. Instead summer courses depended solely on instructors' teaching interests.

In addition, many students thought a full load was 12 units, the number of units required for financial aid eligibility. Others were reluctant to take the 15 units required for four-year graduation because they wanted to protect their grade point averages. (In response, we publicized the link between higher unit counts and higher GPAs.)

Table 1: SIX-YEAR GRADUATION RATES ENTERING FRESHMEN SELECTED ETHNICITIES: 2007-2014

|        | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 |
|--------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Asian  | 68.8 | 72.2 | 77.4 | 76.5 | 79.2 | 78.5 | 80.0 | 81.8 |
| Black  | 66.8 | 73.3 | 73.4 | 66.5 | 74.5 | 67.9 | 74.5 | 78.1 |
| Latino | 62.1 | 66.1 | 69.4 | 70.1 | 72.7 | 74.8 | 74.5 | 73.7 |
| White  | 67.4 | 68.5 | 71.2 | 73.3 | 72.1 | 69.3 | 74.1 | 78.4 |
| Total  | 66.2 | 69.3 | 73.0 | 72.9 | 75.0 | 74.5 | 76.0 | 77.3 |

Table 2: FOUR-YEAR GRADUATION RATES ENTERING FRESHMEN SELECTED ETHNICITIES: 2007-2016

|        | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 |
|--------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Asian  | 42.9 | 47.4 | 52.8 | 52.3 | 60.4 | 59.3 | 62.0 | 67.9 | 67.5 | 71.2 |
| Black  | 40.3 | 43.1 | 47.0 | 41.6 | 48.4 | 47.3 | 44.3 | 56.3 | 44.6 | 56.4 |
| Latino | 37.0 | 40.6 | 41.5 | 41.2 | 49.2 | 53.0 | 52.3 | 57.5 | 57.5 | 59.4 |
| White  | 44.0 | 45.23| 47.9 | 48.6 | 50.8 | 53.3 | 56.8 | 67.1 | 55.9 | 58.8 |
| Total  | 41.0 | 44.3 | 47.5 | 46.7 | 53.4 | 54.8 | 56.0 | 62.4 | 61.3 | 62.4 |

Source: https://ir.ucr.edu/stats/outcomes/grad

Our research included focus groups with advisors and students, statistical analyses to identify at-risk students, and review of the literature on what campuses around the country were doing to improve their graduation rates. We studied the issues for six months before issuing a report in January 2014. The Task Force set an ambitious goal to improve four- and six-year graduation rates by 15 percent for the class of 2021 and outlined 41 recommendations to achieve that goal. The recommendations included institutionalizing enrollment modeling, providing increased access to high-demand courses in the summer, and revamping of the introductory mathematics curriculum and instruction. We hired transition advisors to intervene at the beginning of second year with science and engineering students who were struggling in their first-year classes.

The campus also developed new tools for advisors to address the needs of students at risk for non-completion and implemented a campus-wide finish-in-four campaign to raise awareness about the importance of finishing a degree in a timely manner. Following the formal adoption of the task force's recommendations, the Student Services Building and many office walls on campus were festooned with colorful banners and flyers describing the most important benefits of finishing in four years.

### AN IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

Critically, we did not end our work with the submission of the report. I developed an implementation plan to make sure that the campus followed through on the task force recommendations. This plan included the administrative units and people responsible for the change, the date by which we expected the change to occur, the accountability mechanisms in place to ensure that the change was implemented, and the dates of follow ups and completion of achieving the recommendations.

The campus administration did not implement every recommendation. The Provost decided that the campus had better ways to use scarce funds than to hire more advisors. And even small recommendations sometimes ran into unexpected roadblocks. We were never able to convince the college deans to require that students on the dean's honor roll complete 15 or more units of credit during the term. But we were able to implement most of the recommendations and nearly all of those we deemed most important.

Today, four-year graduation rates are 62.4% and six-year graduation rates are 77.3% and the campus graduation rates now more closely resemble the profile of the majority of UC campuses (Warren 2021). The preparation and qualifications of the student body has not magically improved, but the campus commitment to timely graduation has. For these efforts, the campus won the Association of Public and Land Grant Universities (APLU) Project Completion Award in 2016.

No campus can achieve these outcomes without determined and coordinated effort and a single individual or small group of individuals who are ultimately responsible and accountable for the work. Like so many recipes, the ingredients are not hard to identify (though the resources to purchase them may be hard to find). The care in preparation and execution is the secret ingredient.

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