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Feature Stories

PUTTING FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS FIRST

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Faced with a growing population of first-generation students, many colleges are undertaking unique initiatives to recruit and retain these students.



As the demographics of the United States change, it's only natural that enrollment in the nation's colleges and universities mirrors these shifts. One well-reported trend is the growing Hispanic population, which is resulting in a greater number of first-generation college students. Institutions of higher education across the country are creating and revamping programs to serve these students in efforts to increase their chances of obtaining a degree.

Dr. Sylvia Hurtado, director of the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California, Los Angeles, says a current freshmen survey indicates that a larger percentage of Hispanic freshmen are first-generation, compared to freshmen of other backgrounds. In addition, a higher percentage of Hispanic students entering college need tutoring or remedial work in subjects like English, reading and math.

"Over the last two decades we have seen tremendous growth among Latinos in higher education," Hurtado says, noting that her research looked at trends in access for four-year institutions from 1975-2006. "Fifty-eight percent are enrolled in two-year colleges, and there is an increasing number in four-year colleges. Of concern is graduation. Forty-seven percent complete their [baccalaureate] degree in six years, and community college students take even longer to complete."

Majority Minority

California State University, Dominguez Hills, has a majority minority student population. American Indians, Asians, African-Americans and Hispanics now make up approximately 80 percent of its student body. Of these students, many are first generation, meaning that their parents did not attend college.

"We had a real influx of first-generation freshmen in the past four to five years, with greater than 1,000 students in the past five years," says Dr. Margaret Blue, dean of undergraduate studies and chair of the Academic Policy Council at CSUDH, which is designated as a Hispanic-serving institution. Blue says there's a difference in the academic preparedness of today's first-generation students compared to that of students 10 years ago.

"These students don't know what their learning style is, and many don't have study skills. Many are intelligent, yet unprepared for college because of their backgrounds," says Blue, citing overcrowded classrooms at underfunded urban high schools and other challenges. "As a result, we are seeing a difference in our student body."

Six years ago, CSUDH first taught a University 101 course that offered personal, social and intellectual development, to help primarily first-generation students become better students.

The course was expanded to become what is now the Toro Program for first-generation, first-year students, which includes a general education course such as biology, physics, English or Chicana/o studies, taught with students grouped in a cohort. Faculty develop linked assignments between the two courses. Students participate in activities together on campus as part of the program, and for the first time beginning last fall, students who successfully completed the course served in the University 101 class as liaisons between the faculty and students. Many of the studentmentors help organize and lead study groups.

Focusing on first-generation freshmen students seems to have paid off. According to a CSUDH study conducted from 2005- 2007, Toro Program participants had higher retention rates — two more semesters beyond the first year — than those who did not participate.



One of eight siblings, Salvador Medina is the first to attend college in his family and is a recipient of a McLennan Community College 1st Generation College Student Initiative scholarship. He says he chose MCC because it is close to home and has small class sizes.

"The odds [that] a student who took UNV 101 would be a continuing student in fall 2007 are 1.6 times that of a student who did not take UNV 101," the study stated. The study adds that this should be balanced against the fact that 40 percent of the UNV 101 cohort dropped out of the university after two years, concluding that the long-term retention benefit of the course dissipates over time, and that other student experiences influence student retention.

Nevertheless, the academic senate was so convinced of the value of University 101 that it will be required for all freshmen entering in the fall of 2009.

Signing Up and Keeping Up

An executive order from the CSU chancellor's office states that if students cannot get through a year of college, they should be sent to a community college. At CSUDH, students are given a bit more time to prove themselves.

"We have [first-generation] students sign a three-semester contract with us that they will work with us on tutoring, seeing their advisors, and attending classes regularly. And we check up," says Blue of CSUDH. "It's not surprising that the students that are not succeeding are not doing any of the above. What good are we doing if we wash them out? They may not go on to community college, and even if they do, they may never return here again."

Indeed, the community colleges often attract first-generation students. And they, too, face challenges meeting the needs of these students.



Many first-year students at McLennan Community College in Waco, Texas, participate in its First Generation College Student Initiative.

McLennan Community College in Waco, Texas, is recruiting through community outreach programs an increasing number of Hispanic students, many of them first-generation, says Ameenah Shabazz-Snow, the college's outreach specialist and coordinator of McLennan's 1st Generation College Student Initiative.

"We think first-generation students deserve to go to college as well as anyone else," says Shabazz-Snow. "They're just not groomed to go to college because their parents are not aware. We target fourth-, seventh- and 11th-graders. We are starting early to get information out to students about college. We are not just waiting until they have graduated. I tell them to work hard, get the grades and prepare, so when the time comes, they can't say they are not ready."

McLennan offers a summer bridge program composed of two courses to increase retention of first-generation students. Team-building and other activities are part of the program.

The two courses include one in college writing, which is usually given in the first summer session, and in the second summer session, the students take a course called Psychology 1300. "This class explores learning styles, essay writing, classroom presentations, etc," says Shabazz-Snow.

"The students must pass both of these classes, as they are for-credit classes."

In addition to meeting the academic needs of first-generation students through targeted courses, McLennan also attempts to meet their financial needs.

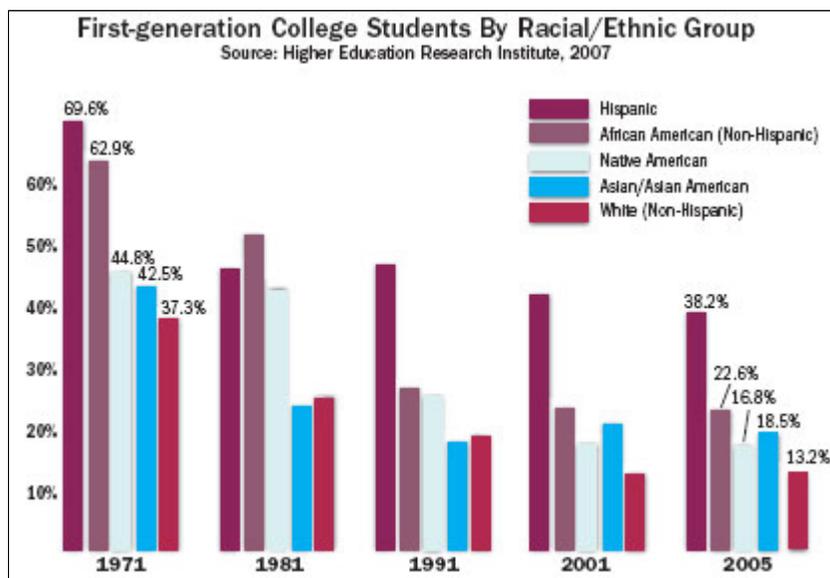
"A lot of our students work part time while going to school full time, and we let parents know that there are jobs on campus," says Shabazz-Snow. "This cuts outtravel time for our students and allows for additional study time. And with many jobs on campus, once students' work is done, they are encouraged to finish their schoolwork."

Community and Connectedness

According to Diverse, UCLA is a top producer of minority bachelor's recipients. It also happens to be the leading school in the country for first-generation students, composing 87 percent of its freshman enrollment, according to The Chronicle of Higher Education.

“UCLA is pretty spectacular in terms of the number of first-generation students we bring to campus,” says Dr. Janina Montero, vice chancellor of student affairs. “We are a competitive public institution, and we have a substantial percentage of students that are low-income, first-generation students. The university is so competitive that there is a high level of student preparedness, and the graduation rate is very high. Transfer students achieve at the same rate as students that come in as freshmen.”

UCLA aims to provide first-generation students with a sense of community and connectedness. An academic advancement program (AAP) provides tutoring, academic support and peer-to-peer support programs.



Dr. Charles Alexander, associate vice provost for student diversity and director of the Academic Advancement Program at UCLA, says the AAP program currently serves 6,000 underserved undergraduate students, 50 percent of whom are Hispanic. Most are from California. Some were born and raised in the United States. Others are recent immigrants and are undocumented students who struggle to pay for college without federal and state financial aid. Echoing many college officials, Alexander says many first-generation students lack a basic awareness about what it takes to succeed in college. But, he says, “We help negotiate that.”

Like its counterparts at other schools, AAP offers the standard fare of tutoring for core courses. UCLA’s academic advancement program is 35 years old and boasts 23,000 graduates, who are leaders in city and state government and other fields, Alexander says. Graduates also support its scholarship program, which provides \$250,000 a year in scholarships.

An important component of AAP’s success is mentoring.

“It is important for students to know what it takes to succeed,” Alexander says.

The program encourages students to attend professional or graduate schools by matching them with graduate student mentors as early as their freshman year. The mentors help students explore their interests, select schools, and fill out applications, Alexander says. The AAP Research Rookies program matches freshmen with UCLA scientists for a fellowship. At the end of the year, the student presents a research paper. The goal of the program is to expose students to graduate school opportunities.

Much of the student support at UCLA is provided in the residence halls, where more than 90 percent of the undergraduate student body lives. Dr. Suzanne Seplow, director of the Office of Residential Life, has been working on developing a program tailored specifically for first-generation students, such as a newly revamped themehousing program, which will offer students the opportunity to live in residences with Chicano/Latino studies and African Diaspora study themes. In addition, UCLA is improving the ratio of residence advisors to students in the residence halls to enhance peer support for first-generation and first-year students.



Whether at CSUDH, McLennan Community College or UCLA, officials agree that as the country sees more first-generation students from diverse backgrounds enter college, it is important that schools offer programs to help these students succeed. It isn't enough to get a first-generation student to college, they say, because raising the education level of the community requires equipping these students with the tools they need to get through college.

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Dr. Margaret Blue, dean of undergraduate studies at CSUDH, says that many first-generation college students come to college without study skills or knowing their learning styles.

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