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STUDY

Getting Pell Grant Students to the Finish Line

One college's holistic approach
leads more low-income students
to graduation

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Ascendium Education Group is a nonprofit working to strengthen opportunities and outcomes for learners from low-income backgrounds so they can secure good jobs and achieve upward mobility. Our philanthropy aims to clear the path for those whose route to and through postsecondary education and workforce training contains a disproportionate number of stumbling blocks.

One way we do this is by partnering with organizations like The Chronicle of Higher Education to share promising tools and insights. The Different Voices of Student Success is a vital resource for elevating solutions anchored in the experiences and perspectives of those doing the hard work every day to improve outcomes for learners across the country.

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PHOTO COURTESY OF STAN LIM, U. OF CALIFORNIA AT RIVERSIDE

The Chicano Student Programs, a collection of academic services and social groups, celebrated its 50th anniversary this year at the U. of California at Riverside. Here, students study and enjoy each other's company in the Chicano Student Programs office.

As a promising high-school student, Natalie Maldonado was confident about pursuing her goal of becoming a primary-care physician. But she did have concerns. Coming from a household led by working-class immigrant parents, Maldonado couldn't rely on family income or savings to get her through college. What's more, as the first member of her family to consider college, she wondered if she could find an institution that would make her feel comfortable — and not like an outsider.

“It was really important to feel that people like me were welcomed,” says Maldonado, and now a sophomore microbiology major. “There's this stigma that Hispanics can't achieve as much as other students. I wanted to get away from that.”

Friends who attended the University of California at Riverside, a public research institution a half-hour drive from her Redlands

home, encouraged her to check out the campus. At around \$14,000 per year for in-state students, Riverside represented a more affordable option than private colleges and many public ones. As she considered her college choices, Maldonado and her parents learned that Riverside could offer her financial aid, including a federal Pell Grant.

But her interest in the institution went beyond affordability. “It was all they had to offer — just so many programs,” Maldonado says. That includes learning communities for each major, a dedicated center for Hispanic students, a stream of campus events, and a wraparound suite of services that could help keep her connected to others on campus and on track academically.

“I’ve put myself under some pressure to succeed, but the environment here has given me more confidence,” says Maldonado, whose grade-point average stands at 3.7. “I made a strong choice.”

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Natalie Maldonado, a sophomore studying microbiology at U. of California at Riverside



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As colleges increase their emphasis on student-success practices, gather more student data, and install new technologies to monitor academic performance in the hope of keeping and graduating more lower-income students — including the six million nationwide who receive Pell Grants each year — Riverside focuses on lessons it has learned during the past half-century. The university swathes its students with attention.

It surrounds them with advisers, peer mentors, tutors, and other service providers to keep them on top of their courses and grades. It links them with students of similar backgrounds and interests, and gets many of them working on college credit even before their first semester begins.

By doing so, Riverside has markedly lowered the number of students getting

D's and F's, or withdrawing from courses (or, in short, DFW's). Beyond that, the university works very hard to make sure each student feels like they are in the right place to further their education — a key, its leaders say, to keeping them around long enough to graduate.

“Our job is to support belonging and success,” says Robert Ream, a professor of education and associate dean for student success at Riverside and a contributor to several of its student-success programs. “It’s central to our mission that students feel that the campus and its people are benevolent and trustworthy, so they seek them out when they need help.”

A BLANKET OF GRANT PROGRAMS

Included in that mission is a commitment to help most of Riverside’s 27,000 students pay for college. The university sits in the Inland Empire region of California, which has long maintained a sizable lower-income population. More than half of the area’s people are Latina



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Robert Ream, a professor of education and associate dean for student success at U. of California at Riverside

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and Latino, many of them first-generation Americans who, like Maldonado, are the first in their families to attend college. Half of Riverside students receive need-based Pell Grants.

While several colleges around the nation, including Howard University and the University of Pittsburgh, have worked to retain Pell recipients by offering them matching institutional grants, Riverside combines federal, state, and its own grants to create aid packages that often eliminate a student’s financial worries. It also uses small grants — typically, \$250 each — to encourage “early start” students to earn up to 10 course credits during the summer before their freshman year.

Those strategies have long worked to draw in and retain lower-income students. Around 90 percent of Riverside freshmen return for a sophomore year — tops in the nation, according to *The Chronicle’s* 2023 “Recruiting and Retaining Students in a Challenging Market” [report](#). And 97 percent of early-start freshmen return for a second year — six percentage points higher than those who did not sign on for pre-semester courses.

When the Pell is combined with other grants, the average amount per student is \$12,700 per year — almost enough to cover the total bill for tuition and fees. Including

all grant programs, nearly three-quarters of Riverside’s students receive some grant aid.

“Our mission in the financial-aid office is to make sure low-income students can get here and stay here,” says Jose Aguilar, executive director of financial aid. “We make sure we do all we can to help those students avoid taking on debt for their education or worry about having to leave because of college costs.”

A FOCUS ON GRADUATION

The results, particularly within the last decade, have been notable. The institution formed a graduation-rate task force in 2013 to explore how it could bump up its completion rates and narrow the graduation gap between students from underrepresented groups and others. The task force recommended giving incoming freshmen an early start on coursework, offering them high-demand and critical courses more often, and linking freshmen students with courses led by the university’s best lecturers.

Since then, the six-year graduation rate has increased by 12 percentage points. Students from underrepresented groups now graduate at nearly the same rate (74 percent) as other students (77 percent). In 2019 the university graduated an all-time-high number of Pell recipients— 2,317 — with a graduation gap between Pell and non-Pell students of only two percentage points. Riverside’s six-year Pell grad rate [ranks among the best](#) in the nation, at 75 percent. Its performance far surpasses national graduation gap averages, which researchers have tabbed at six points or higher.

“The task force’s work showed us that we could and should do much better” for Pell students, particularly in terms of offering more academic support, says Louie F. Rodríguez, vice provost and dean of undergraduate education.

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF STAN LIM, U. OF CALIFORNIA AT RIVERSIDE

Top: Jose Aguilar, executive director of financial aid; Bottom: Louie F. Rodríguez, vice provost and dean of undergraduate education

Over the past decade, Riverside has earned a reputation for retaining and graduating a high number of low-income students, fulfilling the mission of many public institutions: creating more social mobility for those who especially need it.

GETTING STUDENTS TOGETHER — AND LEARNING

Each major at Riverside's seven colleges contains its own learning community, which links incoming groups of freshmen with mandatory peer tutoring in their most difficult math or science course each semester. It also offers an extra seminar that gives tips on navigating their major. Older students who performed well in courses supply the tutoring.

The extensive use of experienced students does more than prepare newer ones to succeed. “We talk about students helping other students as a high-impact practice. Our students learn more through teaching and giving.”

The extra attention may be helping young students earn better grades. Those who join have higher grade-point averages (3.23) than those who don't (2.87) and, in one college, joiners sport higher retention rates (94 percent versus 83 percent).

“The learning community gets students close and working together,” says Annette Milman, a freshman biology major and an aspiring veterinarian. “We

regularly use a group chat, help each other study for quizzes, and brainstorm on projects. You feel connected to people who study alongside you.”

Outside of those major-centered communities, 160 academic student employees serve 7,000 students each year. Riverside identifies courses with a history of high DFW rates for first- and second-year students. Then, it targets students in those courses with supplemental instruction and peer tutoring. Students who attend five or more supplemental-instruction sessions will start to see their classroom performance improve. Those who go about twice as many times will see their course grade rise from one half to a full letter grade, Ream says.

In addition to putting successful students to work helping others learn, Riverside offers 25 peer-mentoring programs. Student mentors are assigned to students as soon as they land on campus. Natalie Maldonado's mentor helped her map out four years of microbiology and pre-med coursework, then helped ease her fears about challenging subjects.

“I was anxious about taking chemistry, but my mentor calmed me down by reminding me of all the help I'd get,” she says. “Peer mentors are like friends. You can always ask them about where to get services on campus.”

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Students can also find connection outside of learning — something that can make them feel more at home and less likely to drop out. By supporting nine ethnic and gender centers across campus, Riverside provides a place for virtually everyone to belong.

Through the Chicano Student Programs, a collection of academic support services and social groups all offered through one campus office, Maldonado says she can explore her heritage, as well as see how her ethnicity and major intersect. “It’s basically a support system. You feel just ridiculously welcomed there,” she says. “There are a lot of Latinx students there doing pre-med. So, I can see people who share both my background and my interests.”

“Many students have listed our office as a key factor in keeping them in college,” adds Arlene Cano Matute, assistant director of the Chicano Student Programs, which is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year. “Especially during their first transitional period, these places give them a place to land, a base from which to build a successful college career.”

Riverside is one of 11 founding members of the University Innovation Alliance, a public-college coalition that looks for ways to keep more students enrolled through to graduation. Like other members, the university is looking to further improve its strategies through modernization. Next year, it will expand its capacity to reap and analyze student data with the help of a new campuswide customer-relations management tool.



PHOTO COURTESY OF STAN LIM, U. OF CALIFORNIA AT RIVERSIDE

Arlene Cano Matute, assistant director of the Chicano Student Programs

While the new platform will help it more readily identify students who are falling behind, it won’t replace Riverside’s personal touch.

“Scholarship revolves around social capital, including the need for close ties, trust, and caring,” Ream says. “I’m not exactly sure what the secret sauce is that explains why we do well by our students, but I firmly believe that all these programs and services have a lot to do with it.”

Questions or comments about this report? Email us at ci@chronicle.com.

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