



The Education Trust

# REPLENISHING OPPORTUNITY IN AMERICA

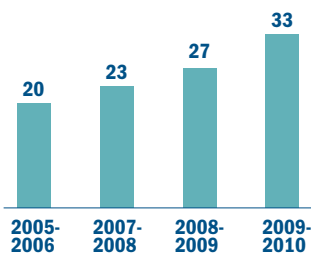
The 2012 Midterm Report of Public Higher Education Systems in the Access to Success Initiative



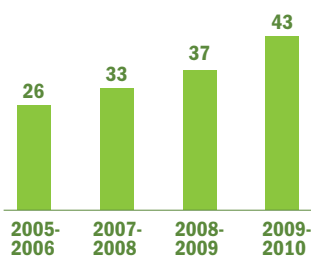
## San Diego State University San Diego, California

### AN INCREASINGLY DIVERSE RESEARCH INSTITUTION

#### % Pell Among Freshmen



#### % URM Among Freshmen



Source: Education Trust analysis of the Access to Success data set  
Note: Data include full-time and part-time students.  
In the CSU system, URM refers to underrepresented minority students, including African Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, and Native Hawaiians/Pacific Islanders.

### BUILDING A CORRIDOR TO GRADUATION: SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY

by Rima Brusi

San Diego State University (SDSU) is one of 23 four-year institutions in The California State University system, a participant in the Access to Success Initiative, and one of the largest public higher education systems in the United States. SDSU is an urban research university serving an increasingly diverse undergraduate population. Today, more than 1 in 3 incoming students are low income and more than 2 in 5 come from underrepresented minority backgrounds.

From 2005 to 2010, San Diego State more than halved its graduation rate gap for underrepresented minority freshmen — from 19 to 8 percentage points. Graduation rates increased for all students during this period, but rose an impressive 22 points for underrepresented minority students. Among transfer students, the university posted double-digit increases in underrepresented minority graduation rates while cutting the gap nearly in half. SDSU also raised rates and narrowed gaps between low-income students and their peers.

SDSU leaders did not narrow gaps overnight, but worked intentionally to turn the institution into what they call a “corridor to graduation.”

### Turning a Revolving Door into a Corridor

San Diego State University’s success with gap closing can be traced back to the leadership of Stephen Weber, who became president in 1996. “Swamped” with students every year, the institution failed to offer students the classes they needed to graduate, recalls Nancy Marlin, SDSU’s provost since 1998. Dean of Undergraduate Studies Geoffrey Chase remembers how Weber, who recently retired, described SDSU in the early years of his tenure: “a revolving door that let students in, only to spin them back out after a year or two.”

Weber vowed to transform this revolving door into a corridor to graduation. “He doesn’t take a lot of credit for this, but when the president grabs on to an issue [and] starts asking questions, that filters throughout the whole organization,” explains Ethan Singer, associate vice president for academic affairs.

To begin improving student success, SDSU increased the number of classes students were expected to take each term. The goal was to get students to 15 credits per semester. Today’s SDSU students carry an average credit load of 14.9, compared with 12.1 in 1999.

Change wasn’t easy. Raising expectations seemed to conflict with a campus culture that was locally oriented and focused on

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access. Efforts to manage enrollment, especially in those majors where demand exceeded available spaces, needed to reflect SDSU’s commitment to admit local students, especially students of color and low-income students, while providing those students the support they needed to be successful.

### Coloring Within the Lines of Culture and Governance

Looking back, Marlin says she believes the leadership’s respect for shared governance helped SDSU remake itself. “You have to appreciate faculty, love what they do and, in that sense, really value their opinions and perspectives because they are the ones who will make these changes,” she says, noting, “When I have a problem, often the first person I call is the [University] Senate chair.”

Patricia Huckle is a retired professor who chaired the SDSU University Senate for three terms. “Before Steve Weber, there wasn’t much shared governance,” she recalls. The senate’s discussion of soaring enrollment and how that affected majors resulted in “Principles to Guide Impaction and Enrollment Management Practices,” a

senate document championing access and diversity, affirming SDSU’s commitment to the region, and requiring the Senate to evaluate the results of changes implemented annually. As a result, the numbers of Pell-eligible and minority students have actually increased in recent years.

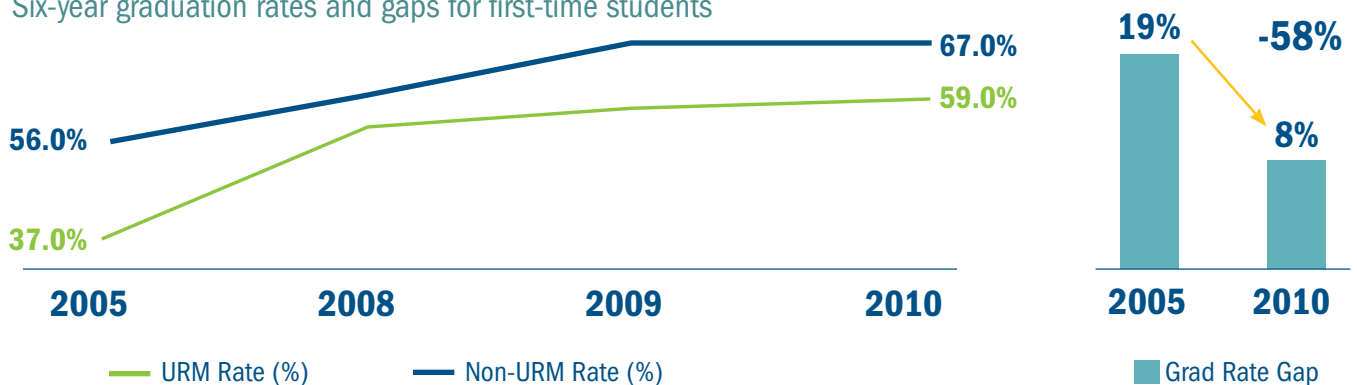
Engaging faculty is worth the time and work it takes, Marlin says: “It doesn’t matter what the initiative is . . . you can’t run out there as the lone leader, saying ‘this is where we’re going to go, because you turn around, and there’s nobody behind you.’”

### Moving From Best Practices to Practices that Work

SDSU leaders worked hard to create a culture of success, largely by increasing expectations and support for students. This shift, and the need to increase the average credit load, inspired the revision of academic advising. Campus advisors halted their long-standing practice of urging at-risk and struggling students to decrease their course load from 15 to 12 credit hours. Today, all incoming students receive a four-year MAP (Major Academic Plan) to their degrees. In the first year, they are

## RAISING GRAD RATES AND CUTTING GAPS FOR MINORITY FRESHMEN

Six-year graduation rates and gaps for first-time students



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force-registered into their foundational and required remediation classes. Students in need of remediation are required to enroll in the Early Start Summer Program. Freshmen and transfer students have mandatory orientations. In addition, SDSU now has an early warning process, tied to its Degree Audit System.

Most practices directed at increasing retention target student learning and achievement. A Student Academic Success Center offers a variety of tutorials, services, learning modules, and social networking tools. Meanwhile, the Office of Educational Opportunity Programs and Ethnic Affairs provides a suite of services for minority and low-income students, like academic support and counseling, supplemental orientations, and summer transitional programs. If grades drop and students fall into probation, a Bounce Back retention program helps them to keep studying while they navigate obstacles. SDSU is currently piloting a “Learning Commons” project, located in the main library, open late and on weekends, offering writing support across the disciplines.

The corridor to graduation also has strong pre-college components, including AVID, GEAR UP, and Upward Bound. SDSU’s successful collaboration with a local school district that serves large numbers of low-income and Latino students, the Sweetwater Union High School District Compact, starts in seventh grade and combines college-going information, aspiration, and preparation. Students who stay in the compact through senior year, and complete its curricular and GPA requirements, are guaranteed admission to SDSU and join a campus community of “Compact Scholars.” A similar compact has been developed with the nearby City Heights Educational Collaborative as well.

### Using Data to Guide Change

Many institutions collect and analyze retention data annually, but a recent survey suggests that only 40 percent use the data “to a great extent” in actual retention efforts.<sup>1</sup> SDSU exemplifies the powerful impact of putting data to use. Campus stakeholders use data for multiple purposes: to start conversations, clarify goals, measure progress (such as retention and graduation rates for particular groups), and to develop interventions and test their outcomes.



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— Nancy Marlin, provost,  
San Diego State University





Measuring program outcomes has helped shape strategic investments. As part of its retention plan, SDSU comprehensively reviewed data on the use of its support programs to ensure that the “right students” get the “right intervention” at the “right time.” Assessing their programs also revealed that underrepresented populations were not gaining enough access to the kinds of high-impact practices that improve both retention and learning outcomes. The Division of Undergraduate Studies has strengthened and expanded its Undergraduate Research Program to specifically target underrepresented students, pairing them with faculty so that they can get research experience before graduating.

Data is used at SDSU to gauge intervention effectiveness, and boost change efforts with needed successes. It showed, for example, that the number of students placed on probation at SDSU decreased as a result of the Early Start Program and Bounce Back.<sup>2</sup> It also suggested that

low-income, at-risk students who lived on campus were much more likely to be retained and graduate than those who didn't. As a result, SDSU now has advisors help families figure out ways for low-income students to live on campus, and a new program, Casa Azteca, gives commuters a taste of the learning community experience.

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When asked how they achieve such levels of student success, campus administrators point to long-term, visible leaders who, with clear goals and a respect for institutional culture, color within the lines drawn by decades of shared governance. They list key, high-impact practices that lift student learning and achievement. And they cite the continual, strategic use of data. At SDSU, as in other top-improving educational institutions, there is no quick fix but rather sustained, smart, purposeful work to nurture a culture of student success.<sup>3</sup> Work that, leaders are the first to add, is still in progress.

1. College Board Advocacy & Policy Center. “How Four-Year Colleges and Universities Organize Themselves to Promote Student Persistence: The Emerging National Picture” (New York: The College Board, March 2011).
2. Maria Hanger, Julie Goldenson, Marsha Weinberg, Amy Schmitz-Sciborsky, and Reynaldo Monzon. “The Bounce Back Retention Program: One-Year Follow-Up Study,” *Journal of College Student Retention*, (2011): 13 (2), 205-227.
3. See, for example, Kevin Carey, “Choosing to Improve: Voices from Colleges and Universities with Better Graduation Rates” (Washington, D.C.: The Education Trust, January 2005); and Jennifer Engle and Colleen O'Brien, “Demography is not Destiny: Increasing the Graduation Rates of Low-Income Students at Large Public Universities” (Washington, D.C.: The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, 2006).



## The Education Trust

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### THE ACCESS TO SUCCESS INITIATIVE

Launched in 2007, the Access to Success Initiative joins the leaders of public higher education systems in working toward two ambitious goals: increase the number of college graduates in their states and ensure those graduates more broadly represent their states' high school graduates. Indeed, A2S leaders have pledged that by 2015 their systems will halve the gaps in college-going and completion that separate African-American, Latino, and American-Indian students from their white and Asian-American peers — and low-income students from more affluent ones. Now counting 22 member systems, 312 two-year and four-year campuses, and 3.5 million students, the A2S initiative remains the nation's only concerted effort to help public college and university systems boost attainment.

### About The Education Trust

The Education Trust promotes high academic achievement for all students at all levels — pre-kindergarten through college. We work alongside parents, educators, and community and business leaders across the country in transforming schools and colleges into institutions that serve all students well. Lessons learned in these efforts, together with unflinching data analyses, shape our state and national policy agendas. Our goal is to close the gaps in opportunity and achievement that consign far too many young people — especially those who are black, Latino, American Indian, or from low-income families — to lives on the margins of the American mainstream.

### About the National Association of System Heads

The National Association of System Heads (NASH) is the association of the chief executive officers of the 52 public

college and university systems of higher education in the United States. Unique among higher education associations in its focus on systems, NASH seeks ways to leverage system capacity to meet current and future needs for higher education. NASH collaboratives, such as the partnership with The Education Trust, are voluntary, and bring together system and campus leaders interested in working together toward the common goal of improved effectiveness.

### Acknowledgment

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**ACCESS**  
TO **SUCCESS**

**NASH**  
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