

Leading the Way in Diversity and Degrees

Rutgers University-Newark



The Education Trust

TO THE POINT

For years, Rutgers University-Newark struggled with its nontraditional student population. As recently as the 1990s, students reported feeling unwelcome based on their race, ethnicity, religion, or sexual preference. Fast-forward two decades, and Newark has become a haven for nontraditional students of all types, leading to increased overall completion rates and a black/white grad rate gap that is almost negligible. What changed?

- ▶ Institution and systemwide leaders made diversity a priority and an integral part of campus culture.
- ▶ Departments and councils across campus began to collaborate, all with student success in mind.
- ▶ Support systems and resources are targeted to first-generation, remedial, and other nontraditional students.

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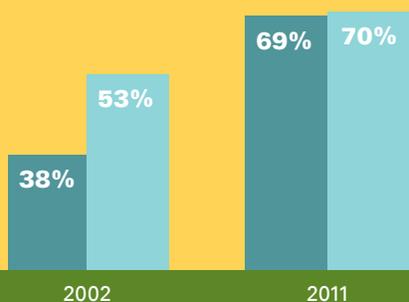
BY SUSANA NAVARRO

“A great public university should serve the public and provide many avenues for students to enter ... and to ultimately complete their studies. It should add value to students’ lives and open new opportunities to them,” says Courtney McAnuff, vice president of enrollment management for the system of Rutgers University. For Rutgers University-Newark, that has become a mantra that permeates the institution, representing its commitment to admitting and retaining underrepresented minority and low-income students and ensuring that they complete an undergraduate degree.

That commitment shows up in the university’s graduation rates. Between 2002 and 2011, six-year graduation rates for all students increased, but the rate of increase for African American students was almost double that for white students. Graduation rates for black students rose from 38 percent in 2002 to 69 percent in 2011; for white students, rates increased from 53 percent to 70 percent. As is clear, the black/white graduation rate gap has been reduced to an almost negligible 1 percent. And while there was a decline in the graduation rate in 2012, declines in both groups means that the gap increased only slightly to 2 percent.

SIX-YEAR GRADUATION RATES Rutgers University-Newark

■ African American Students
■ White Students



Such dramatic improvements don’t happen by chance. They are, instead, the product of intentional, multifaceted, and multilayered changes in values, commitments, policies, and programs. And so it has been at Newark that change has occurred over time, relatively steadily, and has involved a wide range of actors across the campus working to communicate and collaborate, support and retain students, and create an environment where all students are welcomed.

A NEW NARRATIVE ON DIVERSITY

Newark was founded in 1946 — the product of a merger between the University of Newark and Rutgers University (the State University of New Jersey, a public research university founded in 1766). The university’s roots, though, go back to the establishment of the New Jersey Law School in 1908, which joined with several smaller institutions, including Dana College and the Newark Institute of Arts and Sciences, in 1936, to create the University of Newark. With this multi-institutional legacy also came a focus on educating nontraditional students: students who are first-generation college students; those for whom English is not the first language; for commuter and working students; and for students of diverse racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds.

Today, Newark enrolls almost 7,700 undergraduates and 4,200 graduate students and has been designated by *U.S. News & World Report* as the most diverse — racially and ethnically — national university in the country. About half of freshmen are low-income, and about 40 percent of undergraduates are underrepresented minorities, including 18 percent African American students and 21 percent Latino students — though at Newark, there is no predominant population, with white students only making up about a quarter of the students.

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Source: College Results Online, www.collegeresults.org



Rutgers University-Newark students. All photos courtesy of Rutgers University-Newark.

While Newark has been serving nontraditional students for almost 80 years, the university has not always been the most welcoming place for such students. The administrators and faculty we talked to told us that as recently as the mid-1990s, the campus had a rather negative stance toward diversity and difference of any kind. Students, at the time, reported either poor treatment or not feeling welcome based on their racial, ethnic, religious, or sexual preference identification.

In 1997, however, *U.S. News* published its first ranking of colleges and universities for “campus ethnic diversity,” and Newark was ranked No. 1 across the country. The ranking measures the proportion of all undergraduates who are students of color — African American, Latino, Asian, American Indian — but does not include international students. The No. 1 ranking, which Newark has kept for the 17 years since, became a source of pride for campus leaders. It also, in a sense, forced the campus to deepen thinking about what diversity meant. Campus leaders convened administrators, faculty, and staff to discuss what the role of diversity was on campus and in the university’s relations with the community. The ranking, along with several other events, including the historic student takeover of a building (Conklin Hall) in 1969, pushed the university to come to terms with how it had dealt with diversity up to that point and made possible a transition to a different narrative for the campus and a different approach to students of color.

CHANGING CULTURE, BEGINNING AT THE TOP

Among the key drivers leading to enhanced outcomes for students of color and low-income students was a strong, unified commitment to the success of these students shared by individuals across Newark. “Before the early 2000s, work on student success, in general, and

on minority student success, in particular, happened because of people working independently on the issue,” said John Gunkel, vice chancellor for academic programs and services. Around 2002-2003, however, things started to change. “There were lots of different people working at this from different positions: administrative leaders and staff; young, more diverse faculty; new deans.” Ensuring minority student success became much more intentional, more strategic, and, thus, more effective. “While there was never a mandate, the mission was clear: a focus on minority, poor, and nontraditional students and providing them as much of what they needed as possible,” said Gunkel.

In 2002, a key change in campus leadership occurred when Steven Diner assumed the provost position (later titled chancellor) and deepened the attention to diversity. Similarly, at the Rutgers University system level, Richard McCormick became president in 2002, and he, too, placed a high priority on improving access and success among students of color and low-income students. Several individuals noted that campus and system leaders explicitly told them of the priority focus on minority student success as they were being interviewed or were first on the job.

“In every single speech made by President McCormick, he talked about the importance of access and success at Rutgers. He was very proud of the multiculturalism at Rutgers,” said McAnuff. “He set the tone for it by reinforcing it in every single setting, especially with the academic deans. ... That support from the top influenced both deans and a lot of faculty because the president meant it ... and people knew it.”

This newfound focus affected who was hired and how resources were invested. Chancellors were evaluated based, in part, on improvements in access and completion among low-income students and students of color. Deans focused on hiring faculty of color, building

more diverse admission pools, and creating holistic review processes that placed student performance within a socioeconomic context. It also led to the creation of more extensive support mechanisms to ensure that all admitted students were provided academic, financial, and other supports necessary for success at Rutgers.

Additionally, the emergence of new, young faculty and staff of color, in particular, brought a new energy and creativity to the work of improving student success and ultimately to helping turn around graduation rates at Newark. McCormick achieved this through a “cluster-hiring” approach. Cluster-hiring creates new faculty positions in a new academic field of study — such as urban entrepreneurship or Latin and Caribbean studies — bringing together top professors to build a new department. Many of those new faculty members were able to identify with the issues facing students of color — many of them had lived it themselves, some even at Newark. This provided a new momentum for the creation of new programs (and the improvement of existing ones) to engage, connect with, and support students pushing toward success.

All of this has helped transform the culture of Newark from one that was less than welcoming to one that prizes diversity, is deeply committed to providing opportunities, and that understands that those opportunities are only truly valuable if they link access with retention and completion. “It’s less the programs, though we have lots of them, that have made the difference. It’s really about a culture of access and success that’s been built into the institution,” said Gunkel.

COLLABORATION FOR A NEW VISION

One of the more significant changes that has occurred at Newark is the breaking down of individual silos. Instead of administrators working in isolation from others in the organization, they are collaborating across schools, departments, and offices and across the academic/administration/program divide. Many of the individuals interviewed noted that where people used to work on their own or in informal groupings of like-minded people, the norm is now communication across the board.

Among the structures that support cross communication and collaboration is the Committee for Undergraduate Student Academic Services, which in addition to the advising and instructional deans from each of the schools also includes representatives from financial aid, admissions, student accounting, registrar, academic scheduling, and information technology, as well as student life, athletics, and the New Jersey Educational Opportunity Fund (*see sidebar*). The group meets monthly to share challenges facing various support and service

Educational Opportunity Fund

The New Jersey Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) was created as a result of the civil disturbances in Newark in 1967. In an effort to develop a college-educated public that reflects the diversity of the state, EOF seeks to ensure access to higher education for low-income students and students of color across New Jersey. The fund assists low-income residents who are academically capable and motivated but lack adequate preparation for college by providing supplemental financial aid to cover such college costs as books, fees, and room and board — many of which are not covered by state financial aid. The legislative goal, although not a mandate, is that every university in New Jersey enrolls at least 10 percent of entering freshmen who are low-income.

At Newark, EOF recipients also have access to personal, academic, and financial aid advisers, peer counselors, academic support courses, and student leadership development. Because many EOF students are first-generation college students, EOF staff on campus also work closely with individual campus departments and schools to make sure that any trouble spots are identified early so they can get in touch with students and begin interventions as soon as possible — whether students think they need it or not. EOF also requires recipients to fulfill community service through support programs for high school students.

The extra support has paid off: Graduation rates for EOF students at Newark were 6 percentage points higher than those for non-EOF students in 2012.

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– Kenneth Sanders, Dean of Academic Services



offices with an aim to mutually work toward finding solutions. The problem-solving orientation of the group has been critical to its success.

Other examples of cross-campus communication include the Writing Advisory Council, which includes the associate dean for undergraduate education and two representatives each from the humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences — in addition to the writing program and writing center directors. The Core Curriculum Committee and the Instructional Computing Initiative Committee, currently in operation, and the Honors College Council, which is being revived, also meet regularly to discuss curriculum, pedagogy, and academic services for undergraduates and have cross-campus representation.

Beyond learning and instruction, this cross-communication and collaboration even helps with the most mundane tasks such as making sure students pay their bills — and have the resources to do so. For years, students who didn't pay their tuition fees were automatically deregistered without question (400 students in 2005). But leaders started to learn that many of these students hadn't paid their bills because they simply didn't know (correspondence going to the wrong address, for example) or they were intimidated by lengthy, often complicated financial aid forms. As a result, the office of Business and Financial Services started reaching out to students — sending 3,000 emails, snail mail, and other reminder cards last year alone — and offering help, whether that meant applying for financial aid, obtaining a loan, or appealing for additional funds.

Perhaps most important, the office enlisted the help of deans and faculty to talk to students directly. "Nobody wants to hear from the business office saying, 'Where's the money?'" said Sanjana Rimal, executive director of business services. But a plea from a dean or a professor, who is more entrenched in the academic success of the student, can mean a lot more. "It's all a matter of approach," she said. Each week, she shares the list of students who haven't paid with their respective departments; as the deadline approaches, she begins sending those lists daily. Last year, they cut the deregistrants in half — to 187.

SPOTLIGHT ON RETENTION

Once students register, multiple offices work to ensure that students stay. For example, the dean of academic services in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences-Newark has enlisted the help of advisers, online tools, and graduate students to increase retention rates among transfer students and students on academic probation. For the latter, the office connects them to advisers, with whom

they're required to meet three times each semester; academic workshops that teach students study skills, note-taking, and time management — of which they need to take two in the first half of the semester; and such resources as early registration for the following semester to ensure they stay on a path toward a degree while they work to improve their grades.

"We can't abandon them," said Kenneth Sanders, dean of academic services. "I think there is a moral and ethical responsibility once you accept a student and they start; you need to work with them as much as possible, trying to get them to succeed." These efforts, in place for two years, have helped students get back to healthy academic standing. Newark dismissed 20 percent of students on academic probation last year, down from 35 percent.

Perhaps the simplest change to help retain transfer students involved launching a Blackboard "shelf," a portal often used for online courses. Instead of posting syllabi or class assignments, the dean's office uses the portal to remind students of institutional deadlines, like registration and the last day to drop/add classes, and other important resources, like how to get in touch with an adviser. When new information is posted, transfer students get a notice in their email. It's a low-effort, low-cost tool — mostly only requiring staff time — but retention among transfer students increased 19 percentage points (from 67 percent to 86 percent) in just one year.

In addition to these efforts, deans throughout the university system pay close attention to their enrollments, facilitated by a new systemwide budget model that indirectly spotlights student retention. In 2006, the Rutgers University system implemented significant changes in the budgetary model, which provided campuses and schools the ability to control the size of their annual budget. This was so because they were able to retain — and knew they would retain — a proportion of the tuition revenue from enrollment growth. The new budget model was accompanied, at almost the same time, by greater control over and responsibility for undergraduate students, including their advising and retention.

McAnuff, the head of enrollment management, also created a Student Success Committee to look at student retention and completion with representatives from each of the three campuses. He analyzes student success data by ethnicity, gender, and department and provides those data to deans. Before 2007, these types of data had not routinely been provided. But with the new budget model, leaders began to look at retention and completion data in terms of lost or gained tuition revenue from students who leave their program before completion or are retained. McAnuff also added two full-time research positions to



Rutgers University-Newark student working in a lab.

pull warehouse data from Rutgers Institutional Research, do further analysis, and provide meaningful data to decision-makers. Twice a year, he meets with deans and their associate deans to review the data for their departments and discuss the implications of lost tuition revenue, among other things. These meetings, and the data, form the basis for further discussions with leaders as they look at their departmental retention and completion data and work to address issues such as why students are leaving their programs, where they are going, what potential factors are associated with their departure, and how to identify approaches to stop the loss. At Newark, sessions with deans to date have been limited to the Business School, but with the recognition that they need to be broadened to include all deans.

One of the top issues for any university to address in its quest for better retention and completion is how to support students who come to campus with less than adequate preparation. When Newark convened its Writing Advisory Council to examine its coursework, leaders saw that the writing program was not uniformly preparing students for the rigor they'd face across the curriculum: Writing courses, from remedial to credit-bearing, weren't aligned, and classes were almost exclusively taught by teaching assistants and part-time lecturers.

The overhaul of the program started with the creation of full-time assistant instructorships, which fostered consistency and stability in the curricular program and also served as the core for building a much more solid program. The program was then moved from the English Department and placed in a new building, absorbing the developmental writing program that had been in the Education Department. It became an autonomous entity, controlling its own budget and reporting to the

associate dean of undergraduate education. Program administrators developed a unified, aligned writing curriculum — for everything from honors and freshman composition courses to developmental writing — with clear and measurable learning outcomes for all courses, consistent syllabi, and uniform grading criteria. They also expanded the focus of all writing courses from an introduction-to-literature, expressive writing focus to one that built analytical and expository writing skills, with much greater emphasis on critical thinking, critical reading, and analytical writing. To increase accuracy and ensure placement of students in skill-appropriate courses, they changed the program's placement criteria and refined placement policies. Finally, they increased their connection with area community college faculty and K-12 teachers to let them know the level of writing skill needed by prospective university students.

The rebuilding of the remedial math program was more gradual. First, Newark created a new position to oversee and restructure the sequence of courses from remedial math to calculus. At the same time, remedial math was moved from the education department to the mathematics and computer science department. Previously taught in two courses, it was reduced to one term, including an intensive version of the course for those needing it; college algebra was provided in three different versions to better target the varying needs of degree programs; and the department invested in full-time, non-tenure track instructors to teach developmental and elementary math courses almost exclusively. Several courses were completely revised, and the entire set of courses is subject to constant review and revision by a standing committee.

SUPPORTING STUDENT SUCCESS

Part of the strategy behind remedial education, though, is helping students even sooner than freshman year by creating and supporting programs in the community that are focused on growing students' college potential and preparing them for the rigors of postsecondary life. An easy, systemwide resource available online to virtually anyone interested in attending any of the three Rutgers campuses is My Rutgers Future (myrutgersfuture.rutgers.edu). It targets eighth-graders and determines their readiness for college. Students input the courses they are taking and the grades they've received, as well as their career goals, and the website gauges the student's readiness for coursework at Rutgers and any courses they should take before enrolling. It also outlines the admissions process and what students should do before applying.

In a setting like Rutgers, which draws large numbers of top-performers from within the state and across the country, ensuring that low-income students and students of color can survive the academic rigors and meet the challenges of university courses is as important as accepting them. An important mechanism for setting students up for success are the summer bridge programs, including those within the Educational Opportunity Fund, which bring students to one of the Rutgers campuses for up to six weeks the summer before their first fall semester. While there, students take intensive math, English, and science courses that will give them a foundation for their credit-bearing classes in the fall. (And for parents who haven't attended college, the university provides a full-day orientation program, as well as other strategies and resources that will help them support their children through graduation.)

The staff for the summer bridge programs collaborate with departmental faculty to ensure that the curriculum, particularly in mathematics and writing, is fully aligned with the demands of entry-level courses. For students enrolled in the most competitive programs (business, pharmacy, and science), they acquire solid grounding in courses in their field, and they also pick up skills necessary for success across the curriculum such as writing. With campus stays, the hope is that students also learn important time management, note-taking, and study skills.

To attract more high-achieving low-income students to one of three Rutgers campuses — and particularly students who are the first in their families to go to college — the Rutgers system also launched the Future Scholars Program (FSP), which identifies some 200 seventh-graders each year and supports them toward graduation and college enrollment. The program guarantees a full tuition scholarship to Rutgers, paid through federal, state,

and university grants, if students keep up academically. The program helps them do that through tutoring, academic enrichment opportunities, career exploration activities, summer internships, and SAT prep. They also get opportunities to take college-level coursework in high school and intensive academic programs on campus.

Students are eligible if they are low-income and live in one of the Rutgers regional communities (Newark, Camden, Piscataway, and New Brunswick). The program was founded in 2008 through funding from private donors, corporations, and foundations, and they continue to sustain the program each year. Of the 183 students who started in the inaugural class, 97 percent graduated from high school, and 163 students are in college — 99 of them at Rutgers. FSP is now developing a blueprint that could be used across the state to reach a far larger group of low-income students.

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– Todd Clear, Provost

CREATING A WELCOMING CAMPUS

With the supports, communication, and instruction aligned and driven by student success, Newark had one last thing to repair: its campus image. In some ways, it still reflected the life of traditional students. Classes and offices opened during the day, and not much of anything happened at night. Newark needed to become a 24/7 hub if it truly wanted to best serve its nontraditional student population.

To enhance residential life, campus leaders developed partnerships between housing staff and faculties in the schools of Arts and Sciences and Criminal Justice, among others, to make academic advising, tutoring, and counseling available off-hours for students. Advisers became available from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m., either in their offices, online, or by phone; and registrar representatives would open early and stay late — and come in on some weekends — during enrollment periods to make sure nontraditional students got into needed classes. Newark campus leaders also began scheduling classes at more convenient times for students (particularly those with jobs or families), including early morning and in the evening; and they also introduced classes that met once a week (versus two or three times weekly) or on weekends to ensure that students made progress on their path toward a degree, irrespective of economic, family, work, and other pressures.

In residence halls, housing staff collaborated with the Educational Opportunity Fund to connect students with necessary supports. This was made possible, in part, by the chancellor's office, which prioritized housing scholarships for EOF students, especially those who dealt with disruptions at home — or had no home at all — and were likely to be unable to attend school without campus housing.

To help faculty better understand and connect with Newark's diverse student body, part-time lecturers received professional development that aimed to broaden their curricular focus to include a range of cultural, racial, ethnic, and socio-cultural perspectives. In addition, when lecturers noticed students missing classes or experiencing academic or other problems, they were encouraged to contact housing and EOF staff, who could intervene much more quickly than they otherwise would be able to — and before problems escalated or became intractable. Although some of these initiatives are no longer in place, they continue to serve as models for what can be done to support students more extensively and are directly credited for making Newark a more welcoming campus.

MOVING FORWARD

In the last 10 to 15 years, Newark has moved strategically to make its mission of serving nontraditional students a reality and a central element in its success. Over time, as faculty, staff, and administrators noted, rather than apologizing for who and what Newark is, an ethic of deep pride in its students has developed. University faculty and staff are proud to be in Newark and see it as an asset. Increasingly, as Provost Todd Clear noted, "Newark and this profile [are] our strength, and we're becoming more assertive about that. We are proud that our students are first-generation and can't do what they want in their lives without us."

Still, many agree that there are some on campus who want Newark to be more like the system's more selective flagship campus in New Brunswick, who believe that too many of Rutgers-Newark students are poorly prepared and not up to high-level college work, and who still function as gatekeepers trying to keep out all but "the best" students. More and more, though, faculty, staff, and leaders stay at the university because they value what it is and what it is trying to do, and because they believe deeply that this is an important place in which to invest time and energy. In no way do they see Newark's students as deficient, lacking, or problematic. They understand that Newark's students may not have the same SAT scores upon entry to university, but that, upon graduation, they compete well with graduates from across the country and indeed can and will do better than many.

Both Chancellor Nancy Cantor, who took the position in January 2014, and Clear see Newark as an integral part of the city and the city as an integral part of the university. They see the university as an engine to work with the city and others to help transform Newark into a vibrant arts, media, and culture center. They believe that high school graduates from the region's urban districts, including Newark, Jersey City, and Elizabeth, are Newark's target students, as are the more than 30,000 students across the state who attend college out-of-state.

It seems clear that, while Newark has already done much to be proud of, there is much more to come. The celebration of who they are and who they serve should result in even greater benefits to the region's countless African American, Latino, and other students of color, as well as to students across the state fortunate enough to attend Newark. ■

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.



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