

UC Davis as an Emerging Hispanic-Serving Institution

Embracing a Hispanic-Serving Identity



By Lorena Oropeza



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Introduction

The University of California, Davis (UC Davis) has yet to reach 25% Latinx undergraduate full-time enrollment, the threshold necessary to formally become a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). Nonetheless, the campus' commitment to its HSI initiative and vision stands apart from any official U.S. Department of Education (ED) designation. For more than three years, UC Davis has vigorously developed and pursued its own HSI vision of institutional transformation. Together, campus staff, faculty, students, and alums conceptualized the opportunity at hand and articulated HSI priorities at UC Davis in a path-breaking 2019 report, "Investing in Rising Scholars and Serving California: What it Means for UC Davis to be a Hispanic-Serving Institution." This brief will highlight the momentum leading to the report as well as what has occurred afterwards in terms of implementation. As other campuses engage in the reflective work necessary to become and/or strengthen their HSI identity, we hope that our experiences as a campus can be helpful in their endeavors.



Conceptualizing an HSI Identity at UC Davis

The work began in June 2018 when Chancellor Gary May convened a task force of 29 distinguished scholars, administrators, community members, and students. The task force was asked to define what success meant for a research-intensive, public land-grant, HSI in California. This exercise resulted in the 2019 report, "Investing in Rising Scholars and Serving California: What it Means for UC Davis to be a Hispanic-Serving Institution."

Over the course of a year, task force members held 9

engagement forums with community members in Davis and at the Health Center in Sacramento, including a specific session just for students and one for staff. Each session sought to survey existing efforts on campus and listen to what else needed to be done to best serve not only the over 7,000 Latinx undergraduates enrolled in Davis but all Rising Scholars⁰¹. Through these efforts, the report advocated investing in culturally relevant services and opportunities to support the growing Latinx demographic and all Rising Scholars on campus.

Paying attention to what they heard, and guided by the relevant academic literature, including Critical Race Theory (Solorzano, Ceja, Yosso, 2000; Yosso, 2005), the 2019 HSI task force members outlined four core values to guide the UC Davis' HSI Initiative:

- > **Define** the campus' emergence as an HSI as an equity project foremost.
- > **Move** from a deficit model regarding students who may be first in their families to attend college to recognizing the intrinsic worth of all undergraduate "Rising Scholars."
- > **Foster** a culture of belonging for undergraduates in recognition that a welcoming climate "guided by cultural sensibility and humility" is critical to student success.⁰²
- > **Embrace** UC Davis' status as an R1, land-grant institution to advance its HSI work in terms of teaching, service, and research.

The report noted that the campus already supported endeavors consistent with these values. These included: a vibrant and critical Chicana and Chicano Studies Program, which enrolls up to 400 students per quarter in its intro course; "El Centro"—the Center for Chicanx and Latinx Student Academic Success that provides undergraduates study space, tutoring, and a sense of community; and the AB540 and Undocumented Student Center, which provides resources for students and training for all members of the campus community.

The utility of the report for other UC campuses was how clearly it articulated what could be done based upon a deep familiarity with what the campus was already doing. Building on this commitment, the task force report recommended more than 60 action items, 11 of which were listed as "high-priority," including hiring an HSI director, dispensing innovation grants, launching a communications and fund-raising campaign, and pursuing outside funding. As the report warned, "[V]isionary—even inspirational—recommendations lose meaning if there is no chance of implementation."⁰³

01 The term "rising scholars" comes from Byron P. White, "Beyond a Deficit View," *Inside Higher Ed*, 19 April 2016.

02 2019 UC Davis HSI Task Force report, 15.

03 2019 UC Davis HSI Task Force report, 3.

Innovative Implementation

Since then, the task force received a new charge: Phase Two-Implementation! In the 2020-2021 academic year, an even wider swath of campus community members pursued implementation of some of the report's main goals. During this time, determined faculty and staff twice secured funding for HSI projects despite the lack of the ED's official designation. In spite of the challenges of the pandemic and its budgetary implications, the expertise and generosity of task force members and their strong desire to see UC Davis advance its HSI mission, continued over Zoom. Task force members were asked to join one of the following four implementation subcommittees: recruitment, student retention and persistence, communications, or grant-writing.

Over the course of the 2020-2021 academic year, each subcommittee generated innovative ideas that they piloted with Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) funds. A brief application form—appropriately entitled, “Five Questions for Five Thousand Dollars”—contained standard questions such as who was applying and what was the proposed project. Question No. 4 specifically asked, “How is this project in service of HSI implementation?” The goal here was to continue to focus on moving the HSI initiative forward despite the financial obstacles brought forth by the pandemic.

The answers were varied and remarkable. Three are highlighted below:

1. The **retention and persistence subcommittee** linked UC Davis's land-grant mission and agricultural expertise with currently enrolled Latinx students through the production of a five-minute bilingual Spanish-English video. The video introduces students and their parents to the 23-acre UC Davis Student Farm. Devoted to the cultivation of vegetables, fruits, and herbs in a sustainable and earth-friendly way, the Student Farm employs up to 20 students per quarter. The video highlights the experiential learning opportunities available at the farm by centering student voices and experiences. It specifically celebrates Rising Scholars' cultural roots and land-based learning, thus making the campus a more welcoming and accessible place for first-generation students, especially for those from farmworker families. Given the origins of UC Davis as an agricultural school, and its close ties geographically and economically with the agricultural producing heart of the state, this video welcomes Latinx students at UC Davis to become part of the university's history.
2. The **communication subcommittee** built on the report's recognition that our HSI journey is part of a much longer struggle for educational access and curricular relevance on the part of Latinx students, staff, and faculty. This

subcommittee is constructing a Chicana/Latinx Timeline at UC Davis that will be displayed on the web and convey a message of belonging. Under the guidance of UC Davis faculty and staff, including Roberto Delgadillo, a research librarian, undergraduates were charged with identifying key events in Davis Chicana/Latinx History and conducting oral history interviews with the people who participated in these events, including those who helped found Chicano Studies at UC Davis 50 years ago. Students in Professor Natalia Deeb-Sossa's 2021 Spring community participatory research class conducted the first set of oral history interviews and spoke movingly of their experience. They expressed feeling a profound sense of gratitude in learning that they were not alone nor the first to undergo the struggles they have faced in pursuing higher education.

3. The **recruitment subcommittee** studied how best to increase our yield rate. Like its sister UCs, every year UC Davis admits thousands of undergraduate students, Latinx students included, who ultimately decide to go elsewhere. Simultaneously, studies show that many students of color find a sense of belonging to be one of their deciding factors in choosing to matriculate (Ong, Jaumot-Pascual, Ko, 2020; Thompson 2020). The challenge to foster that sense of welcoming during the pandemic was met by offering two “Diversity and Inclusion Networking Events” in 2021. More than 500 admits over the course of the two events were able to speak directly to representatives from 38 student organizations, including several that were Latinx-specific, through a virtual platform that mimicked the use of tables in a big hall. A great success according to surveys collected, this style of event will outlast the pandemic.

Creative Funding Necessary

Official HSI status matters because most federal agencies rely upon ED's designation before unlocking access to HSI-specific federal funds.

Ironically, the campus commitment to serving Latinx students has actually *undercut* its goal of obtaining official HSI status because of two peculiarities in the methodology that ED utilizes to determine Latinx undergraduate enrollment. UC Davis supports undocumented students of all backgrounds through its AB540 and Undocumented Student Center. However, ED does not count students who are undocumented, despite the significant number of Latinx students who fall within this category. While its methodology does count international students, ED does not consider their ethnic or racial background.

The combined effect shrinks the numerator of Latinx-specific undergraduates while increasing the denominator of

the overall campus undergraduate population. Consequently, in the case of UC Davis, the ratio of Latinx students to non-Latinx students has come tantalizingly close to 1:4 but not reached it. In 2019, UC Davis undergraduate Latinx enrollment was 23.2%; in 2020, 24.1% in 2020—less than 1 percent short of the threshold.⁰⁴

In contrast, UC Davis has more than 25% Latinx students enrolled when the race/ethnicity of all students, regardless of citizenship, is included. The campus also reaches the 25% threshold when the student population used to determine HSI status is restricted to domestic students only.

Under these circumstances, the campus has developed alternative strategies to advance its HSI mission. One is to partner with existing HSIs. UC Davis Professor Karen McDonald, in Chemical Engineering, serves as a principal investigator on a UC-HSI Doctoral Diversity Initiative grant called, “Advancing Diversity by Educating the Professors of Tomorrow” (ADEPT). ADEPT aims to build an academic pipeline for students interested in biotechnology that runs straight from Sacramento State University, a local California State University, to UC Davis. This effort has been invaluable in increasing participation amongst Latinx students who comprise 30% of Sacramento State’s undergraduate population.

Another strategy is to work with funders that allow certification defined by law in 502 of the Higher Education Act of 1965 (20 U.S.C. 1101a), under the category: *“My institution is not on ED’s most recent Eligibility Matrix but is an HSI as defined by law.”* Last fall, Dr. Damon Tull, of the Graduate School of Management, received National Science Foundation (NSF) funding for an HSI Strategic Innovation Summit for Advanced Research and Instruction in Artificial Intelligence and Quantum Information Sciences. The grant gave UC Davis a prominent role in bringing together researchers, educators, and industry experts to explore ways to increase the capacity of HSIs across the country to support their students in these fields.

Looking Forward

Now in October of the 2021–2022 academic year, the campus continues to work with elected representatives to ask ED to reconsider its methodology. No matter the outcome, the campus commitment to all undocumented and international students remains unchanged.

Similarly, the dedication of HSI task force members to overseeing the work of institutional transformation continues undiminished. Although their charge to implement technically ended on June 30, 2021, members will continue to advise DEI staff and campus leaders on this important initiative for the foreseeable future.



Dr. Lina Mendez, a graduate of the UC Davis School of Education, is the university’s inaugural HSI Director.

They will also advise our inaugural HSI Director. In spring 2021, the Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion under Vice Chancellor Renetta Garrison Tull made hiring a HSI Director a top budget priority. Dr. Lina Mendez began her new job as HSI director on October 1. A graduate of the UC Davis School of Education, with deep ties to UC Davis students, alumni, and staff, Mendez is an expert on closing the student opportunity gap and was the founding associate director of the Chicanx/Latinx Academic Student Success Center (El Centro) at UC Davis. She has been a member of the HSI task force since its inception and she will spearhead the HSI Initiative and continue to see it flourish. In short, the work goes forth despite the Department of Education’s criteria that does not consider UC Davis a HSI. It is important for us to highlight that UC Davis has hired an HSI Director prior to ED official designation in order to continue the important work at hand.

UC Davis will continue to work hard to embrace its HSI identity by continuing to set ambitious goals and do the work necessary to implement and achieve them. While the report was critical in situating UC Davis as an HSI, it is only the beginning of what is to come.

¡Adelante!

04 All enrollment data was provided by Jason Stewart, assistant director in the Office of Budget and Institutional Analysis who also supports the campus DEI leadership team with data and analysis related to UC Davis faculty, staff, and students.

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