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News

Raising Graduation Rates, and Questions

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Last weekend was graduation at San Diego State University, and as the black-gowned students collected their diplomas, the university had plenty to celebrate, too.

Students at San Diego State are graduating at almost double the rate they were 10 years ago. The gap between white students and underrepresented minorities has narrowed. Against a backdrop of state budget cuts, the university increased its proportion of low-income students and raised graduation rates faster than any other four-year research university in the country. The rest of the California State University system is now trying to replicate its success, and the university has been heralded as a national model by initiatives such as [Access to Success](#).

Still, in some ways, San Diego State now resembles its nearest neighbor, the University of California at San Diego, more than it does its peers in the historically less competitive Cal State system. The two universities now admit comparable proportions of their applicants (though they don't compete for students, given the University of California's tougher admissions standards), and San Diego State has increased its focus on research.

When [even more selective admission criteria took effect](#) for last fall's freshman class, there was an outcry from legislators, community college administrators and San Diego citizens, in part because the California master plan specifies how selective each level of institution should be. San Diego State may have raised its profile, those groups argued, but it has lost sight of its state-mandated mission to serve the students in its region.

As the federal government and nonprofit organizations continue to emphasize college completion, many have questions about whether institutions can make progress in that direction while still admitting students who are historically less likely to succeed. After all, the easiest way to improve a college's graduation rate is to raise the bar on whom it enrolls in the first place. San Diego State's example is likely to inform the debate, perhaps providing ammunition to both sides.

15 Years of Change

Of the freshman class that enrolled in 1996, when President Stephen Weber took office, only 38 percent graduated within six years. Of the class that enrolled in 2004, 65 percent did. For minority groups, the gains are even more dramatic: 21 percent of Hispanic students enrolling in 1996 graduated within six years, compared to 62 percent of those who enrolled in 2004. The rate for black students climbed from 29 percent to 63 percent. Administrators say they are most proud of reducing the racial disparities.

"When we started, the university as a whole wasn't really looking at graduation rates," says Ethan Singer, associate vice president for academic affairs. "It was what it was."

No one cites a single overriding factor in San Diego State's success. The university started many initiatives and directed resources toward the group that it termed most at-risk: low-income students who were the first in their families to attend college. Administrators established mentoring programs, created a class to help students on academic probation get back on track, made orientation mandatory and urged students to live on campus, among other measures. A big factor, officials say, was focusing on offering enough classes that no one would delay graduation because a required course was unavailable.

They also made it clear that expectations had changed. In the past, students were encouraged to take less than a full courseload during their first semester as a way to ease into college. San Diego State now urges a full 15-unit semester from the outset. “The view was that if we increased expectations for students, that the students would in fact rise to those levels of achievement,” Singer says.

And one early change made a big difference: the university became more selective. Where it previously had let in all Californians who met the admissions requirements, starting in 1999, San Diego State admissions officials could pick and choose.

That year, the state granted San Diego State **“impacted” status**, meaning that the university had more qualified applicants than it could afford to enroll based on state funding levels. The CSU system was designed to offer a place to the top one-third of high school students statewide. The new status meant that San Diego State could limit its enrollment, making admission more competitive for all students who did not live within its designated service area -- part of San Diego County and all of nearby Imperial County. It also made admission to specific majors and programs more selective.

Administrators say the change made a big difference because it let them admit more-qualified students, but that the increased selectivity was only one factor in the improved graduation outcomes. “We are more selective in some ways, but not in all ways,” says Geoffrey Chase, dean of undergraduate studies.

The policy created a split within the student body. On one side were the more academically competitive students from elsewhere in the state, as well as the more accomplished students from San Diego. On the other were the students from San Diego admitted because they met the minimum requirements. But even for the least academically qualified students -- Singer used the example of a B-minus student with a combined SAT score of 840, who would just meet San Diego State's local admissions criteria -- graduation rates increased by more than 10 percentage points. About 40 percent of those students now graduate in six years, Singer says, adding that there is still room for improvement.

Administrators and outside observers say San Diego State succeeded by changing its environment. “It comes from a culture that’s made access and success a nonnegotiable priority,” says Jane Wellman, executive director of the National Association of System Heads, which oversees the Access to Success project along with the Education Trust.

The university’s critics say the same, but they don’t see the changed culture as a good thing. “The university has its own issues that are different from the people of San Diego county,” says Richard Dittbenner, director of public relations and government information for the San Diego Community College District, who said students have been having difficulty transferring to the four-year institution since the completion push began. “Their interests are to become a major research institution.”

In 2009, San Diego State admitted 36 percent of applicants. The University of California at San Diego, a supposedly more selective institution, admitted 38 percent.

As it accepted fewer applicants, San Diego State also began attracting more research funding. It is the only institution in the CSU system to be designated as a high-activity research university by the Carnegie Foundation. In 2007, it ranked 126th in federal research expenditures, just missing the top 10 percent nationwide for all institutions.

Transferring into San Diego State has become increasingly difficult, Dittbenner says. By law, students who graduate from a California community college are guaranteed admission to a CSU institution. But he says the university has used procedural roadblocks, like a supplemental admissions form that some students did not complete or not counting students who took a community college class outside the service area as local, to keep them out.

“Twenty years ago, it was not that way,” Dittbenner said. “It’s been little by little creeping along in that direction.”

The focus on research, and a reputation for distancing itself from the CSU system, are a “longstanding cultural reality” at San Diego State, Wellman says. The university predates the state system, and in many ways -- its Carnegie classification, its increased selectivity -- it sets itself apart.

But even as the impacted criteria came into play, San Diego State continued to admit a diverse student body, she says. A common criticism of measuring graduation rates is that the fastest way to increase them is to admit students more likely to succeed and to limit the number of higher-risk students.

San Diego State seems to buck that trend: its student body has not become less diverse, more wealthy or more academically qualified since 1999, when admissions standards changed. Average composite SAT scores for first-time freshmen have always stayed between 1000 and 1100. The proportions of black and Hispanic students in the student body increased slightly. Selectivity increased largely

because applications skyrocketed, more than doubling between 1999 and 2009.

In one way, the university, and budgetary realities, did limit access. As more and more students sought admission -- many of them qualified under the pre-1999 standard -- the undergraduate student body grew at a much smaller rate. It increased by about 5,000 between 1999 and 2007. Since then, the growth was reversed: in 2009, the university enrolled only 2,000 more undergraduates than in 1999.

"They're having a level of demand that they are not able to accommodate," Wellman says, adding that California's budget crunch meant the university has had to work within size constraints, but did good work all the same. "They really are a case where they've not traded off success and access."

The question now is whether that will remain the case. San Diego State was again declared an impacted campus in 2009, but this time, the guaranteed admission for local students was ended. Students from the service area still get a boost on their applications equivalent to 400 extra points on the SAT, and the university has said it will remain at least 37 percent local.

The new admissions policy stirred up anger in San Diego. The legislature even passed a law requiring colleges to use more transparency when changing their admissions process. When the class of 2010 was admitted, it had the university's highest average SAT verbal and math composite ever: 1087. Critics [accused university officials of using higher enrollments as an excuse](#) to do what they'd wanted to do for years -- make San Diego State more selective.

University officials say they don't expect graduation rates will continue to climb so quickly, although they hope to focus more on the four-year graduation rate, which for freshmen who entered in 2006 was only 28 percent.

As for the increased selectivity, they say it all comes down to capacity. And that won't change until the political situation changes in California and frees up more money for higher education.

"Students aren't getting in who, if we had the resources, would," Chase says.

— **Libby A. Nelson**