

# Top Gainers: Some Public Four-Year Colleges and Universities Make Big Improvements in Minority Graduation Rates

BY JENNIFER ENGLE AND CHRISTINA THEOKAS

Each year, nearly 400,000 minority students enroll as freshmen in a four-year college, hoping to realize all of the opportunities that earning a bachelor’s degree affords. Many arrive on campus having overcome underfunded high schools, an intimidating college-admissions process, and daunting financial circumstances. Yet despite their persistence in surmounting such barriers, more than half don’t attain their goal—a bachelor’s degree—even after six years.<sup>1</sup>

This brief highlights the efforts of public colleges and universities that have boosted graduation rates for minority students—sometimes even closing the gaps between minority students and their peers. The data presented here provide a baseline for colleges seeking to raise minority graduation rates and show that improvements are taking place in a range of settings.

The focus is on the *top gainers* among public colleges and universities in graduating underrepresented minority students—African-American, Hispanic, and Native-American students. Nationally, two-thirds of minority students who attend a four-year college attend a public institution. Given the mission of public colleges to serve the higher education needs of their states, these institutions must do their utmost to ensure that far more young Americans from minority backgrounds earn a college degree.

## HELPING ALL STUDENTS SUCCEED

Several factors can affect graduation rates, including the institution’s size, student population, and available resources per student. But even after accounting for these factors, one thing remains clear: Similar institutions serving similar students show

**Figure 1: Characteristics of Public Colleges and Universities by Carnegie Classification, 2006-07**

	Number of Institutions	Average SAT/ACT 2006-07	Average Student-Related Expenditures/ FTE 2006-07	Undergrad Enrollment Fall 2006	% URM <sup>1</sup> Among Undergrads Fall 2006	Overall Six-Year Grad Rate 2007	URM Six-Year Grad Rate 2007
All Publics	353	1033	\$9,235	11,616	28.8%	55.2%	41.9%
Research	134	1104	\$11,488	17,852	20.7%	61.8%	48.5%
Master’s	186	990	\$7,882	8,396	32.0%	45.0%	35.6%
Bachelor’s	33	982	\$7,563	4,444	44.1%	38.2%	35.4%

<sup>1</sup>URM stands for underrepresented minority students and includes African-American, Hispanic, and Native American students. Sources: IPEDS and College Results Online dataset. This analysis is limited to the public institutions that met the criteria for this study. See Note 2 on page 4.

wide disparities in bachelor-degree attainment. What colleges do to help their students succeed, the data reveal, matters a lot.

To account for some of the main differences among public colleges, this analysis<sup>2</sup> groups these colleges by Carnegie classification—Research, Master’s, or Bachelor’s.<sup>3</sup> (College Results Online, discussed below, further refines these groupings). Figure 1 shows that graduation rates typically are higher at research institutions, which tend to enroll more well-prepared students and have more resources per student available to them. Master’s and bachelor’s institutions, on the other hand, tend to serve a more diverse student body with fewer resources per student. These factors contribute to lower graduation rates on average.

Some colleges might have made gains as a result of becoming more selective in admissions, rather than improving academically, and the analysis attempts to account for this. But because data to measure selectivity changes were incomplete, we could not control for that.

Consequently, we eliminated from this study any college that grew more exclusive by serving significantly fewer minority students among incoming freshmen (a relative decline of 20 percent or more).<sup>4</sup>

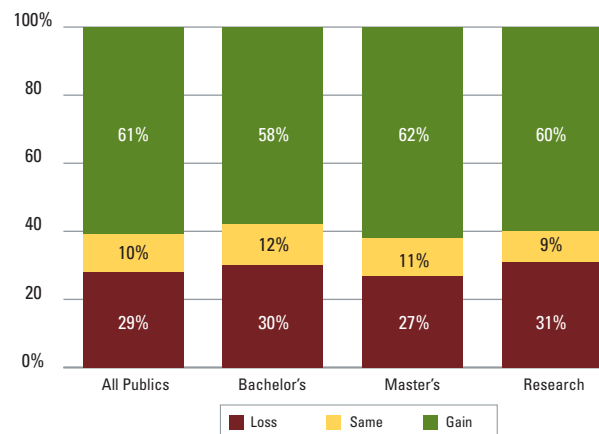
Looking at the progress minority students have made in public institutions from 2002 to 2007, there is a lot of good news to report. A clear majority of all types of public colleges—about 60 percent—have seen improved graduation rates for minorities. The increases average nearly eight percentage points over five years (see Figures 2 and 3).

Some colleges have boosted minority graduation rates considerably more. Twenty-five percent of “gainers” improved by 10 percentage points or more, and 10 percent increased by 15 points or more. Among the top gainers, the graduation rates for minority students rose upwards of 20 points in five years.

As the “Top Gainers” lists show (see Figures 4-6), these improvements are taking place in colleges all across the country—from the **University of Nebraska-Lincoln** and the **University of Utah** in the West to the **University of**

### Gains and Losses in Underrepresented Minority (URM) Graduation Rates in Public Colleges, 2002-07

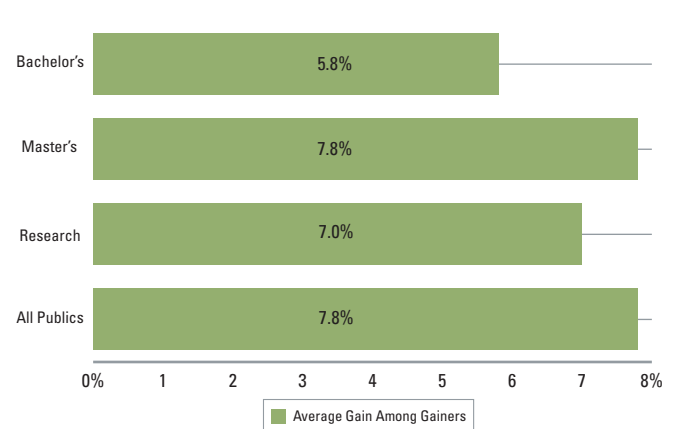
**Figure 2: Percentage of Public Colleges With URM Graduation Rate Gains or Losses**



Source: IPEDS and College Results Online data set.

Notes: In Figure 2, colleges with graduation rates that were within +/- 1 percent from 2002 to 2007 were coded as “same.” This analysis is limited to the public institutions that met the criteria for this study. See Note 2 on page 4.

**Figure 3: Average Increase in URM Graduation Rates in Public Colleges That Made Gains**



### About College Results Online

College Results Online ([www.collegeresults.org](http://www.collegeresults.org)) is an interactive tool designed to provide information about graduation rates for most four-year colleges and universities. CRO allows users to:

- Examine graduation rates and see how these rates have changed over time.
- Compare graduation rates of similar colleges serving similar students.
- Learn about colleges’ track records in graduating diverse groups of students.

Some colleges do a much better job of graduating students than others. At many colleges, significant gaps exist in graduation rates between white students and students of color. But some colleges are proving that low graduation rates—especially for minority students—are not inevitable.

Louisville and North Carolina State University-Raleigh in the South. Small comprehensive institutions such as Kutztown University in Pennsylvania and large research universities such as Ohio State University and Florida State University also have posted gains (see the sidebar on this page).

Some top gainers, such as the University of Wisconsin-Madison, serve proportionately small minority populations but have experienced large improvements among minority students. Others, such as Georgia State University and Savannah State University, enroll large proportions of minority students. Georgia State, a research university in downtown Atlanta, enrolls approximately 19,000 undergraduates—more than one-third minorities, mostly African-Americans. The university ranks fifth nationwide in the number of bachelor's degrees granted to African-American students, according to *Diverse* magazine.

From 2002 to 2007, the minority graduation rate at Georgia State rose by 18.4 percentage points, from 32.3 percent to 50.7 percent. Today, the university's minority students graduate at higher rates than their nonminority peers. This improvement has not come at the expense of other students, however. Graduation rates also grew 11.9 points overall and 8.1 points among nonminority students from 2002 to 2007. At the same time, Georgia State's enrollment grew more diverse as well, with minority enrollment increasing from 30 percent in 1996, when the class of 2002 entered, to 36 percent in 2001, when the 2007 graduates enrolled.

Georgia State made these gains by focusing first and foremost on the data, says Ron Henry, former provost and senior vice president for academic affairs. Henry and his colleagues used data to identify various potholes on the path to a bachelor's degree for GSU students—from high failure rates in introductory courses and low levels of credit accumulation in the first year to high dropout rates between the sophomore and junior year when students transition to their major.

Although Georgia State took an institutionwide approach to improving student success at these critical junctures, administrators found that some programs actually were most effective for minority students. Using program evaluation data disaggregated by race, GSU officials learned that first-year learning communities, for example, were instrumental in lifting freshmen-to-sophomore-year retention rates by a respectable five to six percentage points for all students. For minority students, retention

rates rose an impressive ten to 12 percentage points.

Georgia State's example demonstrates that public institutions can foster access and strive for excellence simultaneously. They do not face an either-or choice.

About four hours southeast from Atlanta, Savannah State University is a small HBCU (Historically Black College or University). The school enrolls about 3,000 undergraduate students, nearly all of whom are African American, two-thirds of whom are from low-income families. For years, the school's graduation rate hovered near 20 percent, among the lowest rates among the 105 HBCUs. In the five years after 2002, however, graduation rates for minority students at Savannah State rose dramatically—from 17.8 percent to 40.8 percent. The institution not

**Ohio State University and Florida State University**, have been recognized for model programs that boost retention and graduation rates among underrepresented populations. At Florida State, the Center for Academic Retention and Enhancement (C.A.R.E.) has been credited with helping improve graduation rates among minority students.<sup>i</sup> Figure 4 shows that FSU not only posted sizeable gains in its minority graduation rate from 2002 to 2007, but it also completely closed the achievement gap between minority students and their peers. Founded in 2002, C.A.R.E. supports minority students all along the pipeline to college. Its programs reach out to high school students seeking help in the admissions and financial aid processes and include orientation, advising, and tutoring for those who enroll. For more information, visit <http://care.fsu.edu>.

Although they still lag behind their peers, minority students at Ohio State University have improved their graduation rates by 10.1 percentage points since 2002. The university's Todd Anthony Bell National Resource Center on the African American Male is considered an important part of the institution's strategy to improve minority graduation rates, particularly among males. The center sponsors programs aimed at better connecting African-American males with the campus, including early arrival freshman orientation, faculty and peer mentoring, and "intrusive" advising. Officials credit the program with significantly boosting the rate at which African-American males return for their second year. The rate rose from 69 percent in 2001 to 91 percent in 2008.<sup>ii</sup> For more information, visit <http://oma.osu.edu/current-students/bell-resource-center>.

<sup>i</sup> Carey, K. (2008). "Graduation Rate Watch: Making Minority Student Success a Priority." Washington, D.C.: Education Sector.

<sup>ii</sup> Nealy, M. (February 11, 2009). "Black Males Achieving More on Campus." *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*. <http://diverseeducation.com/article/12277/black-males-achieving-more-on-college-campuses.html>.

only ranks among the top gainers in public colleges, but from 2002 to 2007 it also was the second highest gainer among all public and private HBCUs nationally. Today, its minority students graduate at nearly the same rate—41.9 percent—as minority students at all public colleges.

Carlton Brown, former Savannah State president, says the turnaround in graduation rates came about because educators worked hard to build a community of success. When he arrived in 1997, Brown and his colleagues started by renovating dilapidated residence halls and academic buildings to create a campus environment that made students feel proud. At the same time, they set out to foster deeper engagement among students and between students and faculty. In fact, a commitment to close personal communication with students is now part of the hiring and performance criteria for faculty. Says Brown: “We created an experience that was so intense, so deep, and made the place so important to them that students couldn’t imagine not being there.”

## FOLLOWING THE LEADERS

The public institutions highlighted in this brief offer evidence that low graduation rates for minority students are not inevitable and that considerable gains are possible. What can other institutions do to follow their examples and improve success rates? Here are some strategies research shows may prove valuable:

- Partner with area high schools to improve students’ college-readiness. At **California State University**,

an Early Assessment Program administers a college-placement test to high school juniors and then provides assignments and other support in the senior year to prepare students for college-level coursework.

- Focus resources on the first year of college, when half of all dropouts leave, by implementing programs aimed at easing students’ transition to academic life. Programs such as “summer bridge,” freshmen orientation, and learning communities help students acquire the skills they need to succeed in college.<sup>5</sup>
- Improve teaching in “gate keeping” remedial and introductory courses. Hundreds of colleges and universities nationwide have redesigned these courses, using the proven technology-driven approach developed by the National Center for Academic Transformation. Others have added peer-led supplemental instruction.
- Closely monitor student progress through “intrusive” advising programs and early warning systems that connect students with the support services they need—tutoring, study skills, counseling—to get back on track with their studies.<sup>6</sup>
- Target institutional grant aid to meet the full financial need of low-income students first and foremost—rather than using scarce resources as merit aid to attract students who would attend college regardless and graduate without the aid.<sup>7</sup>

---

Jennifer Engle is assistant director of higher education, and Christina Theokas is director of research at The Education Trust. © Copyright 2010 The Education Trust.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Ed Trust analysis of BPS:96/01 data using the Data Analysis System online.
- <sup>2</sup> The sample for this analysis includes public four-year institutions with complete graduation-rate data in both study years (2002 and 2007) and with a cohort of at least 30 underrepresented minority students, the minimum number of cases required by accepted statistical standards. The sample also excludes institutions that served significantly fewer underrepresented minority students—a relative decline of 20 percent or more—among incoming freshmen in the study years (incoming 1996 and 2001) in order to eliminate institutions whose graduation rates improved as a result of serving fewer minority students.
- <sup>3</sup> For more than three decades, the Carnegie Classification has been the leading framework for describing institutional diversity in U.S. higher education. It has been widely used in the study of higher education, both as a way to represent and control for institutional differences, as well as in the design of research studies to ensure adequate representation of sampled institutions, students, or faculty. <http://classifications.carnegiefoundation.org>.

- <sup>4</sup> In our sample for these analyses, colleges with a relative decline of 20 percent or more in the percentage of underrepresented minorities among incoming freshmen fell beyond one standard deviation among all public colleges on this measure, indicating that they experienced declines that were much greater than the sample average.
- <sup>5</sup> Smith, B.L., MacGregor, J., Matthews, R., and Gabelnick, F. (2004). *Learning Communities: Reforming Undergraduate Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. Upcraft, M.L., Gardner, J.N. & Barefoot, B.O. (2005). *Challenging and Supporting the First-Year Student*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Higher Education Series.
- <sup>6</sup> Engle, J. and O’Brien, C. (2007). *Demography Is Not Destiny: Increasing the Graduation Rates of Low-Income College Students at Large Public Universities*. Washington D.C.: The Pell Institute. Kuh, G.D., Kinzie, J., Schuh, J.H., Whitt, E.J., & Associates. (2005). *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions That Matter*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- <sup>7</sup> Haycock, K., Lynch, M., and Engle, J. (2010). “Opportunity Adrift: Our Flagship Universities Are Straying From Their Public Mission.” Washington D.C.: The Education Trust.

**Figure 4: Top 25 Gainers in Underrepresented Minority Graduation Rates Among Public Research Universities, 2002-07**

	Undergrad Enrollment Fall 2006	% URM Among Undergrads Fall 2006	Overall Six-Year Grad Rate 2007	URM Six-Year Grad Rate 2002	URM Six-Year Grad Rate 2007	Change in URM Grad Rates 2002-07
Michigan Technological University (MI)	5,630	4.2	63.5	41.9	60.9	19.0
Georgia State University (GA)	19,109	34.7	47.2	32.3	50.7	18.4
University of Louisville (KY)	14,995	14.7	43.7	19.9	37.1	17.2
University of Utah (UT)	23,983	6.0	56.0	29.6	46.6	17.0
University of Missouri-St Louis (MO)	12,459	15.7	43.3	16.5	33.3	16.8
George Mason University (VA)	18,221	14.8	58.3	46.5	62.2	15.7
Missouri University of Science and Tech (MO)	4,515	7.1	60.9	42.1	57.5	15.4
University of California, Santa Barbara (CA)	18,212	22.2	79.9	62.0	75.2	13.2
University of Nebraska-Lincoln (NE)	17,371	6.0	63.4	34.0	46.7	12.7
University of Georgia (GA)	25,437	8.1	77.0	62.8	74.6	11.8
University of Wisconsin-Madison (WI)	29,639	6.3	79.0	48.9	60.4	11.5
University of Oklahoma Norman Campus (OK)	19,573	16.5	60.7	42.3	53.7	11.4
University of Minnesota-Twin Cities (MN)	32,113	7.5	63.4	32.4	43.8	11.4
University of Maryland, College Park (MD)	25,154	18.8	79.9	58.1	69.4	11.3
University of Oregon (OR)	16,529	6.5	65.3	56.3	67.1	10.8
Ohio University-Main Campus (OH)	17,026	5.9	70.3	52.9	63.5	10.6
North Carolina State University at Raleigh (NC)	23,730	12.2	69.7	47.5	58.1	10.6
Ohio State University-Main Campus (OH)	38,479	10.1	71.4	43.7	54.0	10.3
Iowa State University (IA)	20,440	5.5	65.8	42.0	51.8	9.8
University of Texas at Arlington (TX)	19,205	29.7	37.2	27.2	36.8	9.6
University of South Florida (FL)	34,438	24.7	49.3	40.9	50.3	9.4
University of Maryland, Baltimore County (MD)	9,416	18.9	60.5	54.2	63.5	9.3
University of Texas at Austin (TX)	37,037	22.0	77.6	60.9	70.2	9.3
University of Pittsburgh-Pittsburgh Campus (PA)	17,246	10.1	75.1	51.2	60.5	9.3
Florida State University (FL)	31,347	22.9	68.7	60.0	69.0	9.0

Sources: IPEDS and College Results Online data set.

Note: Institutions are grouped by their 2000 Carnegie code to correspond to their classification during the study period. A small number of institutions have changed classifications since then.

**Figure 5: Top 25 Gainers in Underrepresented Minority Graduation Rates Among Public Master's Institutions, 2002-07**

	Undergrad Enrollment Fall 2006	% URM Among Undergrads Fall 2006	Overall Six-Year Grad Rate 2007	URM Six-Year Grad Rate 2002	URM Six-Year Grad Rate 2007	Change in URM Grad Rates 2002-07
Western Oregon University (OR)	4,183	9.6	45.5	17.5	42.3	24.8
Eastern Kentucky University (KY)	13,623	5.1	38.9	13.8	38.5	24.7
Savannah State University (GA)	3,109	96.4	40.5	17.8	40.8	23.0
Worcester State College (MA)	4,626	8.2	39.9	9.1	30.6	21.5
Westfield State College (MA)	4,703	5.5	55.7	41.2	60.8	19.6
Kutztown University of Pennsylvania (PA)	9,189	11.5	54.6	27.9	46.9	19.0
Wayne State College (NE)	2,748	6.1	46.1	14.0	32.5	18.5
Towson University (MD)	15,374	13.7	66.4	47.3	64.4	17.1
Appalachian State University (NC)	13,447	5.4	62.6	44.2	61.0	16.8
Albany State University (GA)	3,515	96.1	41.4	25.6	41.8	16.2
Northwestern State University of Louisiana (LA)	8,248	34.5	37.9	18.9	34.7	15.8
Adams State College (CO)	2,809	35.7	32.0	18.9	34.4	15.5
University of Montevallo (AL)	2,463	15.4	47.1	35.8	51.3	15.5
Ferris State University (MI)	11,413	7.8	37.2	5.6	20.9	15.3
Valdosta State University (GA)	9,489	25.5	41.1	26.8	41.5	14.7
Montclair State University (NJ)	12,365	28.3	61.2	40.9	54.9	14.0
University of Southern Indiana (IN)	9,298	6.2	30.7	4.7	18.7	14.0
California State University, Northridge (CA)	28,491	38.7	40.5	21.5	35.4	13.9
California State University, Sacramento (CA)	23,928	23.1	42.4	22.3	36.1	13.8
Columbus State University (GA)	6,754	37.0	32.3	12.0	25.5	13.5
CUNY Brooklyn College (NY)	12,111	37.8	46.8	28.7	41.8	13.1
University of Wisconsin-La Crosse (WI)	8,341	2.9	65.9	36.4	48.8	12.4
University of Minnesota-Duluth (MN)	10,076	2.9	49.6	16.7	28.6	11.9
Georgia Southern University (GA)	14,483	23.2	45.1	37.9	49.5	11.6
Lock Haven University of Pennsylvania (PA)	4,890	8.6	50.8	24.2	35.7	11.5

Sources: IPEDS and College Results Online data set.

Note: Institutions are grouped by their 2000 Carnegie code to correspond to their classification during the study period. A small number of institutions have changed classifications since then.

**Figure 6: Top Gainers in Underrepresented Minority Graduation Rates Among Public Bachelor's Institutions, 2002-07<sup>1</sup>**

	Undergrad Enrollment Fall 2006	% URM Among Undergrads Fall 2006	Overall Six-Year Grad Rate 2007	URM Six-Year Grad Rate 2002	URM Six-Year Grad Rate 2007	Change in URM Grad Rates 2002-07
SUNY College at Old Westbury (NY)	3,411	46.8	35.9	19.9	38.8	18.9
University of Puerto Rico in Ponce (PR)	3,265	100.0	51.4	34.1	51.5	17.4
University of South Carolina Aiken (SC)	3,241	28.6	40.9	24.6	38.4	13.8
University of Mary Washington (VA)	4,183	6.3	75.7	53.5	64.8	11.3
Mesa State College (CO)	6,126	12.1	40.6	25.4	34.3	8.9
University of South Carolina Upstate (SC)	4,574	28.8	38.3	32.2	40.9	8.7
Richard Stockton College of New Jersey (NJ)	6,726	13.7	67.8	51.0	58.5	7.5
Metropolitan State College of Denver (CO)	21,154	19.3	23.0	16.0	22.2	6.2
University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff (AR)	3,051	96.0	32.9	27.4	33.0	5.6
California State University, Monterey Bay (CA)	3,405	33.1	36.1	31.5	36.7	5.2

Sources: IPEDS and College Results Online data set.

Note: Institutions are grouped by their 2000 Carnegie code to correspond to their classification during the study period. A small number of institutions have changed classifications since then.

<sup>1</sup> There were not 25 public bachelor's colleges that had increased their graduation rates for underrepresented minority students from 2002 to 2007, so only the colleges that had increases near or above the average gain among all bachelor's colleges are listed here.



## 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.



*The Education Trust is grateful to Lumina Foundation for Education for generously supporting our work. The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the foundation, its officers, or employees.*