

Commitment to Latino students earns national certification



Sac State's energetic approach to helping Latino students achieve their goals, and its success in doing so, places the University among an elite group of institutions to be recognized for that work. (Photo courtesy of Strategic Diversity Initiatives)

By Cynthia Hubert

Sacramento State has received a prestigious Seal of *Excelexia* for its commitment to Latino students.

The University is one of five institutions in the country this year and among just 14 since the first cohort was named in 2019 to have received the certification, which highlights data, policies and practices that support the success of students who identify as Latino.

“It’s a very distinct recognition that your university is going above and beyond in intensively serving Latino students.”

The Seal will be presented virtually today, Oct. 1, by *Excelencia* in Education, a national organization launched in 2004 and based in Washington, D.C. The group promotes Latino student achievement and conducts analysis to inform educational policies and practices.

Sac State was designated a Hispanic-Serving Institution in 2015 after meeting the threshold of 25% of its full-time undergraduate students identifying as members of that group. The designation makes the University eligible for federal grants designed to help advance Hispanic education.



CAMP, which offers support to students from migrant and farmworker backgrounds, is one of Sac State's signature programs on behalf of Latino/a students. (Photo courtesy of Strategic Diversity Initiatives)

But the Seal designation is about far more than enrollment figures, according to *Excelencia* in Education. It demonstrates an “unwavering commitment to intentionally serving Latino students, while serving all,” according to its mission statement.

Certified universities have meticulously illustrated their impact on students through data, leadership practices, and programs, according to the organization.

Sac State has made steady progress in recent years in enrolling and graduating Latino students, said Viridiana Diaz, associate vice president for Strategic Student Support Programs. In fact, Latino students at the University are graduating at a slightly higher rate than the general population, she pointed out.

In 2019, the four-year graduation rate for Latino students was 20.7%, compared to 20.4% for the general population. “In other words, at Sacramento State the ‘achievement gap’ for Latino students was closed last year,” said Diaz.

Such strides have occurred in part as a result of the University’s commitment to its Finish in Four and Through in Two graduation initiatives, she said, as well as other programs and institutional practices built to help all students graduate in a timely manner.

“We address the social, emotional and physical needs of our students as well as their academic needs,” she said.



“It’s not just one thing that contributes to the success that our Latino students are having,” she added. “We have aligned many different pieces, and built a sense of family and home for them. They see Sac State as an institution that embraces them and is proud to have them on campus.”

Embedded in the strategy, she said, is “a strong understanding of the importance that family plays in the lives and decisions of Latino students.” Sac State sponsors events and activities designed for Spanish-speaking students and their families, including presentations, field trips, and educational fairs.

The University recruits transfer students from high schools and community colleges by providing early exposure to Sac State and helping them navigate their transition, Diaz said.

Once enrolled, students can take advantage of programs geared toward Latinos. These include the College Assistance Migrant Program, or CAMP, which offers support to students from migrant and farmworker backgrounds; the Serna Center, which focuses on political knowledge, activism, and community service; the Educational Opportunity Program, which serves low-income students; and the Dreamer Resource Center, which assists undocumented students.

Maribel Betancourt, who graduated from Sac State in May with a bachelor’s degree in Social Work and is now attending graduate school, said programs like CAMP were invaluable as she navigated college life.

“CAMP assisted me through my transition from high school to college,” she said. “The program definitely exposed me to meet and network with professionals and encouraged me to get out of my comfort zone.

“CAMP challenged me to explore what being engaged meant, and within the program I had to fulfill 40 hours of community service. All exposing me to opportunities for personal growth.”

Alondra Villapando, a Sac State Child Development major who hopes to graduate in 2023, also attributes her success in college in part to programs such as CAMP.

“They make sure that students are well taken care of,” she said. “I never once felt that I was alone or helpless because they were there.”

Sac State is among five institutions to receive the Seal of *Excelexencia* certification this year, said the organization’s spokesman, Chino Chapa. The others are the University of Texas, Austin; the University of Texas, San Antonio; the University of Illinois, Chicago; and Long Beach City College. Nine other colleges and universities, including CSU Channel Islands, were last year’s inaugural recipients.



President Robert S. Nelsen offers his familiar "Stingers Up" gesture while participating in the Oct. 1 announcement.

“It’s a very distinct recognition that your university is going above and beyond in intensively serving Latino students,” Chapa said. “It’s extremely selective. It’s a very special recognition.”

Sac State President Robert S. Nelsen called the certification “an incredible honor” for the University.

“The *Excelexencia* framework will enable us to further advance our understanding of how best to support Latino excellence through data, best practices, strategy and leadership,” he said. “I look forward to our ongoing partnership with *Excelexencia* in Education as we work together to transform the narrative around Latino college students.”

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