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The Working Middle Class

By David Surrey

Whenever faculty and administrators from Saint Peter's University meet peers from other AJCU institutions, we are inevitably told something to the effect that "You are doing what we all ought to be doing." Yet doing what we do means facing major challenges related to the diversity of our student community, their economic background, and our urban context.

Saint Peter's is among the most diverse universities in the nation, public or private. Seventy percent of students are from minority populations, with 30.5 percent identifying as Hispanic. Fifty-two percent of the fall 2014 incoming class are first-generation college students, and 27.4 percent are immigrant or generation 1.5 Americans.

Consistent with these statistics, our students have heavy financial need. Compared to 36 percent nationally, 55 percent of Saint Peter's undergraduates are Pell Grant recipients. Sixty-seven percent of our Latino population and 64 percent of our African American populations receive Pell. Forty-three percent of Pell students are from families with a zero estimated family contribution.

We are located in Jersey City, New Jersey – the most densely populated city in the most densely populated state. Twenty-one percent of Jersey City residents have incomes below the poverty level, compared to 12 percent statewide. Totally urban Hudson County accounts for 42 percent of our undergraduates. Although there are some strong public and private schools, the largest local school districts – Jersey City, Hoboken, and Newark – have been taken over by the state for "failure to deliver adequate education."

Not surprisingly, most of our students face academic as well as social disadvantages, making them "high-

risk." Low-income status, lower standardized test scores, the quality of our feeder schools, and the fact that our students' parents are frequently without a college degree all signal challenges related to academic preparedness. Additionally, 60 years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, it is clear that race remains tied to academic success.

Within this context, the university mission and our faculty's commitment underscore our very real embrace of the challenges we face. We seek to educate "a diverse community of learners ... and promote justice in our ever changing urban and global environment." According to faculty surveys, 95 percent understand and appreciate this commitment, and 71 percent say they are "very satisfied" or "satisfied" with their jobs. Ultimately, Saint Peter's serves our students because we believe we should and because we want to.

Consequently, we have quantifiable successes that really come down to our belief in the university mission. Our Educational Opportunity Fund, serving academically and financially needy students, generally has the university's highest retention and graduation rates. This program begins the summer before the first year and offers paired courses, tutoring, social events, and peer mentoring. A second program that has boosted student retention, Academic Success, targets underprepared students through a reduced-price, credit-bearing summer academy, service learning projects, supplemental classes, mentoring, and tutoring. A new articulation agreement with our local community college has eased the transfer process and allows us to offer scholarships that bring tuition costs close to state tuition rates, making a private

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Following the Mass of the Holy Spirit, students, faculty, and staff of Saint Peter's University continued the celebration in front of the Mac Mahon Student Center.

Jesuit education affordable to transfer students. Whenever possible, we also provide individual financial counseling for all new students and their families, examining the cost of attendance and all scholarship, grant, work-study, and loan options.

Our commitment to meeting students where they are and moving forward together has been most recently exemplified in our latest Title V grant, now in its fourth year. This grant has particularly helped our Latino students: first-year retention has risen to 82.3 percent; six-year graduation rates are up 8 points; and first-year GPA has risen to 2.71. The Title V grant has enabled us to narrow the success gap through a series of connected interventions, including establishing an ESL center; providing laptops, book vouchers, and financial supplements; training a total of 100 of our 115 faculty in cultural inclusiveness, ranging from broadening the curriculum to understanding the financial and social backgrounds of our students; sponsoring summer research projects; developing work study jobs; funding students to participate at professional conferences; working with high school students in after-school programs and allowing rising juniors and seniors to earn college credits toward degree completion; providing a more friendly campus

atmosphere with events and classes tailored to Latino students; and developing bilingual workshops for college and high school families on financial aid and the college experience.

Yet beyond these successes, we have much more to do to expand educational opportunities and improve the academic attainment of high-need students. Though 70 percent of our students are members of minority populations, only 15 percent of our faculty are minorities, depriving our community of diverse role models and perspectives. In spring 2015, Saint Peter's president, Eugene Cornacchia, publicly challenged us to do better and created a task force to address this issue. Since our incoming students often lack adequate academic preparation, faculty and administrators are also exploring possibilities for expanded summer programs, reconstituting core classes to add supplemental instruction, and working more with local high schools to better prepare incoming classes.

As we concentrate on these two major challenges over the next few years, we will continue to give substance to our university mission and thus, we hope, confirm our distinct leadership role among AJCU institutions. ■