



Equity in Higher Education

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Photo by Charlotte May

Promoting Equity in Higher Education

How Doña Ana County supports historically underrepresented college students in the path to graduation.

College enrollment among young Hispanic adults has nearly doubled in the past twenty years. In 1999, less than 1 in 5 (18.7%) Hispanic adults aged 18-24 were enrolled in college in the United States. As of 2019, that number had increased to almost 2 in 5 (36.3%).⁽¹⁾ Yet, higher enrollment does not guarantee greater academic success. Populations who have been historically underrepresented in higher education, including Hispanic students and other students of color and low-income students, often face greater challenges completing college than their peers. In Doña Ana County, only 15.6% of Hispanic adults have a bachelor's degree or higher compared to 45.9% of non-Hispanic White adults.⁽²⁾ Fortunately, New Mexico State University (NMSU) and Doña Ana Community College (DACC) have developed many resources to promote equitable post-secondary education for historically underrepresented students. What differences exist locally in student outcomes, and what are our colleges doing to close the gaps?

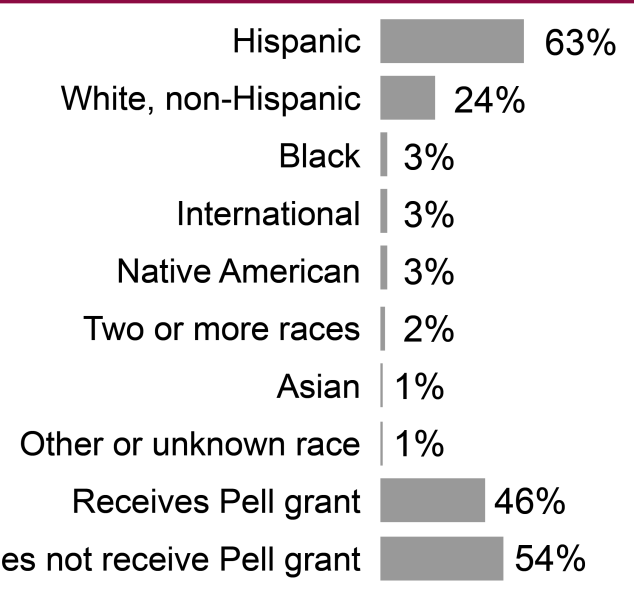
Historically underrepresented students account for the majority of the local student population.

In the United States, "historically underrepresented students" generally refers to racial and ethnic groups that have faced discrimination in the education system, including Black, Asian, Hispanic, and Native American students. The definition also includes other marginalized groups such as veterans, students with disabilities, LGBT+ students, low-income students, and first-generation students.⁽³⁾

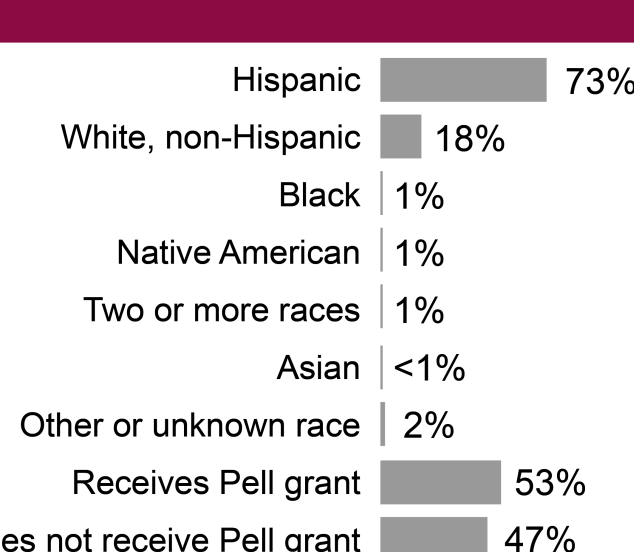
In Doña Ana County, many undergraduates hail from historically underrepresented backgrounds. NMSU Main campus and DACC are Hispanic-Serving Institutions ([Note 1](#)), so it is no surprise that Hispanic students comprise most of the undergraduate population at both campuses (63% at Main campus and 73% at DACC). Black and Native American students account for another 6% of undergraduates at Main campus and 3% at DACC. Roughly half of undergraduates receive Pell grants (a proxy measure for low-income status) at both Main campus (46%) and DACC (53%).^{(4),(5),(Note 2)}

Undergraduate Demographics

NMSU Main Campus (Undergraduates only)

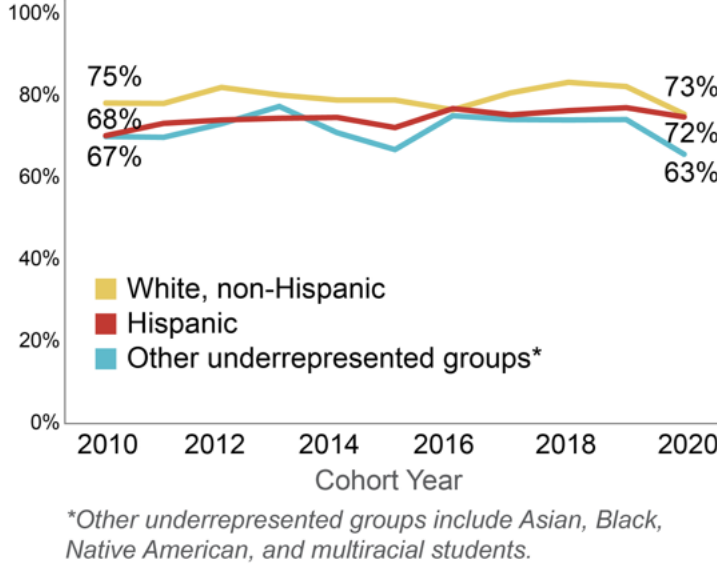


DACC

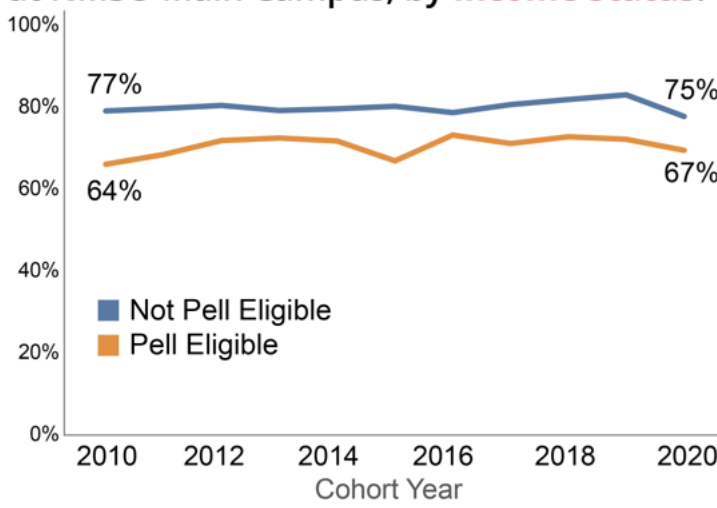


Historically underrepresented students are more likely to drop out during the first year.

First-Year Retention Rates, Undergraduates at NMSU Main Campus, by Race/Ethnicity:



First-Year Retention Rates, Undergraduates at NMSU Main Campus, by Income Status:



NMSU Main campus data reveals noticeable gaps in first-year retention rates between certain racial and ethnic groups over the past decade. Non-Hispanic White undergraduates have seen the highest first-year retention rates, while Hispanic students and those of other underrepresented backgrounds have generally shown lower first-year retention rates.⁽⁴⁾

Breaking down retention rates by income reveals additional gaps. At NMSU Main campus, first-year retention rates for Pell-eligible students have consistently lagged behind students who do not qualify for Pell grants.⁽⁴⁾

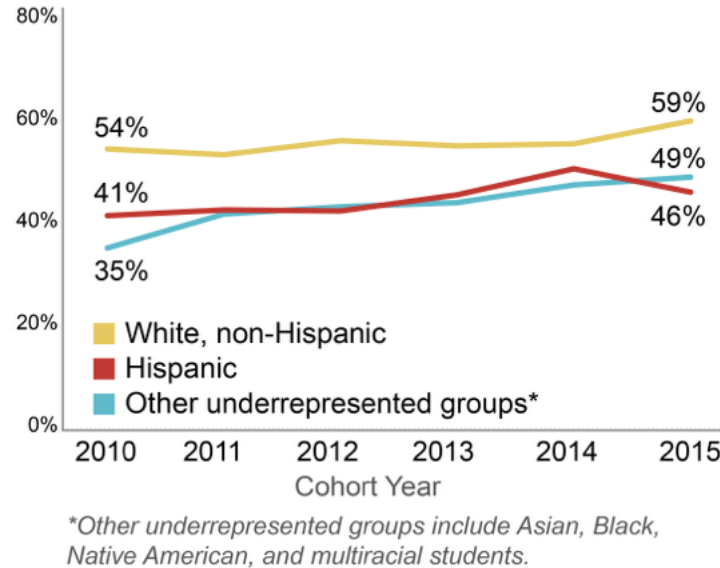
DACC retention rates for these demographic groups are not currently available.^(Note 3)

Graduation rates are tied to student demographics.

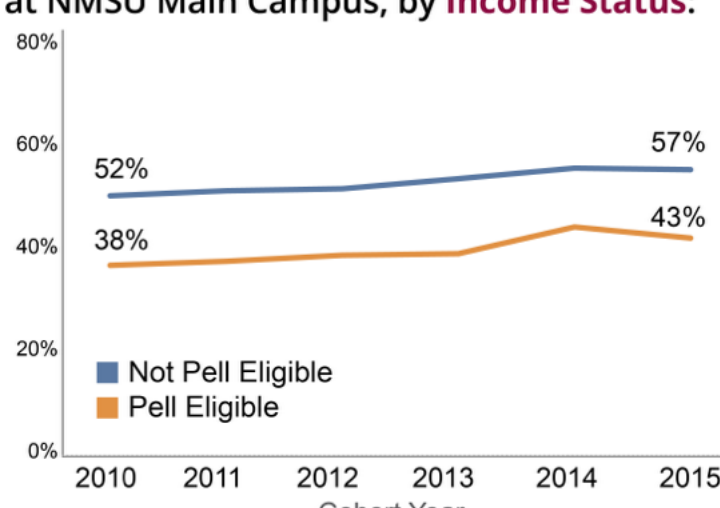
At NMSU Main Campus, non-Hispanic White undergraduate students are more likely to graduate within 6 years compared to Hispanic students and students of other underrepresented racial and ethnic groups. Fortunately, students of other underrepresented groups may be catching up. Since 2010, 6-year graduation rates for students of other underrepresented groups have risen twice as fast as those for White and Hispanic students (about 2.4% per year compared to about 1.2% per year). It may be worth noting that 6-year graduation rates for Hispanic students increased more rapidly between the 2012 and 2014 cohorts before dropping in 2015. This timeline corresponds to the COVID-19 pandemic, as the 2015 cohort would have graduated (within 6 years) by 2021. It is possible that Hispanic students were hit harder by the economic and health effects of COVID-19.^{(4),(6)}

NMSU Main campus also shows disparities in 6-year graduation rates between Pell-eligible students and students who are not eligible. Since 2010, 6-year graduation rates have consistently been about 14% lower for Pell-eligible students compared to students who are not eligible.⁽⁴⁾ However, DACC students seem to follow a different pattern. Pell-grant recipients at DACC generally graduate at slightly higher rates than those who do not receive any grants.⁽⁷⁾ More research is needed to explain this difference, but one possible factor unaccounted for here is whether these non-graduating DACC students dropped out or simply transferred to another institution. For instance, 10% of all full-time, first-time students from the DACC 2017 cohort transferred out.⁽¹⁾

6-Year Graduation Rates, Undergraduates at NMSU Main Campus, by Race/Ethnicity:

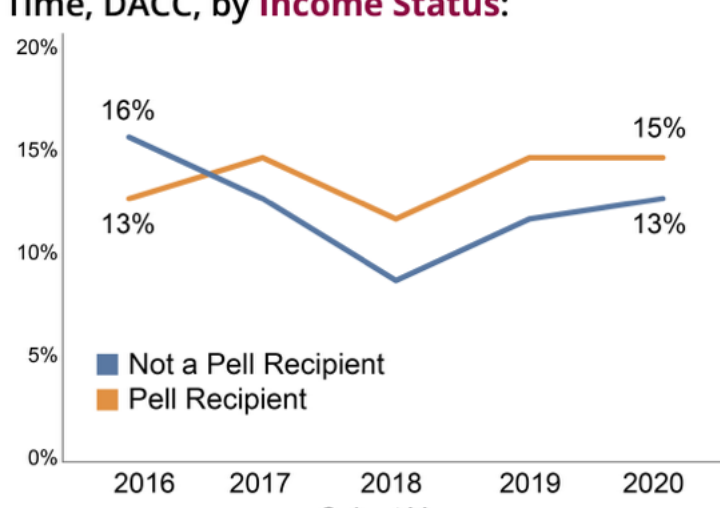


6-Year Graduation Rates, Undergraduates at NMSU Main Campus, by Income Status:



At NMSU, low-income students are less likely to graduate. At DACC, the opposite is true.

Graduation Rates within 150% of "Normal" Time, DACC, by Income Status:



Why are these students at greater risk?



Disparities in postsecondary graduation and retention rates are often connected to opportunity gaps and other barriers. Research indicates that before entering college, many historically underrepresented students attend low-income schools with less-experienced teachers and fewer rigorous classes such as advanced math or advanced placement (AP) classes.^{(8),(9),(10)} Unlike classmates who had access to preparatory resources in elementary and secondary school, these students may need remedial courses and risk disenchantment with the college experience if they are constantly playing catch up. If they live in a low-income or single-parent household, they may have to sacrifice class and study time to help support their families financially or care for children or younger siblings.^{(10),(11)} Some may be first-generation students who lack the social capital needed to navigate the college system.⁽¹²⁾ In addition, many lack the financial capital to continue their education, as unpaid balances from previous semesters prohibit them from registering for future classes.⁽¹⁰⁾

Support is available at NMSU and DACC.



Services like the **College Assistance Migratory Program (CAMP)** support underrepresented students at NMSU and DACC.

Fortunately, NMSU and DACC offer many [resources](#) to promote equitable education. The TRIO Student Support Services program at NMSU supports first-generation students and students with disabilities through peer mentoring and peer tutoring, academic guidance, advocacy, assistance with financial aid, graduate school preparation, computer labs and study areas, and many other resources. The College Assistance Migratory Program (CAMP) offers resources such as tutoring, peer mentoring, community service opportunities, and scholarships to migrant or seasonal farmworker students. At DACC, the Avanza program provides integrated support services like mentoring, career exploration, community resources and social services, food pantries, and childcare resources to all students, with an emphasis on low-income students with young children. Additional support programs and services at NMSU and DACC include the American Indian Program, Black Programs, Chicano Programs, Veterans Programs, Aggie Cupboard, and more.

Final Thoughts and Resources

Higher education is perceived by many as a requisite for career success. In the U.S., greater educational attainment is associated with higher earnings and greater job stability.⁽¹³⁾ Yet, the pathway to a degree can sometimes seem insurmountable for historically underrepresented students. Achievement gaps still exist in Doña Ana County, but our post-secondary institutions are fighting for equitable education. Countless resources are available at NMSU and DACC to help underrepresented students reach their true academic potential.

Additionally, our colleges track disparities between demographic groups that can inform future policy decisions. With the services and data available in Doña Ana County, we are one step closer to academic and career success for all students regardless of socioeconomic status. What other steps can be taken to close the gaps?

Resources:

- [TRIO Student Support Services](#)
- [College Assistance Migratory Program \(CAMP\)](#)
- [DACC Avanza](#)
- [American Indian Program](#)
- [Black Programs](#)
- [Chicano Programs](#)
- [Veterans Programs at NMSU and DACC](#)
- [Disability Access Services](#)
- [Student Assistance Services](#)

Note 1: Hispanic-Serving Institutions are post-secondary institutions in which at least 25% of full-time (or equivalent) undergraduate students are Hispanic. In Fall 2018, there were 20 qualified Hispanic-Serving Institutions in New Mexico, including all five NMSU campuses. (Source: [US Department of Education](#))

Note 2: A Pell grant is a subsidy awarded to undergraduate students who display an exceptional financial need. In most cases, Pell grants do not need to be repaid. (Source: [US Department of Education, Office of Federal Student Aid](#))

Note 3: At DACC, first-year retention rates were 63% for all full-time students and 43% for all part-time students. (Source: National Center for Education Statistics)

Sources:
(1) National Center for Education Statistics
(2) U.S. Census Bureau, ACS 5-Year Estimates, 2019
(3) [Emory University, Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion](#)
(4) NMSU Office of Institutional Analysis
(5) DACC Office of Institutional Analysis
(6) [Latino/a College Student Enrollment Declines Amid Pandemic](#)
(7) National Center for Education Statistics, The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS)
(8) United States Government Accountability Office, [Public High Schools with More Students in Poverty and Smaller Schools Provide Fewer Academic Offerings to Prepare for College](#)
(9) United States Government Accountability Office, [Better Use of Information Could Help Agencies Identify Disparities and Address Racial Discrimination](#)
(10) Rachel Bishop, [Why Do Students Drop Out of College?](#)
(11) Institute for Women's Policy Research, [College Students with Children are Common and Face Many Challenges in Completing Higher Education](#)
(12) Schwartz et al., [I'm Having a Little Struggle With This, Can You Help Me Out?": Examining Impacts and Processes of a Social Capital Intervention for First-Generation College Students](#)
(13) U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, [Learn more, earn more: Education leads to higher wages, lower unemployment](#)



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