

The Atlantic

A University That Prioritizes the Students Who Are Often Ignored

With the national college-graduation rate for black students half that of whites, this school is changing the rules of the game—and beating the odds.



Rutgers commencement spring 2016

Mel Evans / AP

MEREDITH KOLODNER

TEXT SIZE

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Newark, N.J.—Protests focused on entrenched racism rocked campuses around the country this year. Many top colleges enroll small numbers of black students, and the four-year college [graduation rate](#) for black students is half that of whites.

In response, many admissions officers have been scouring the country—and the globe—to attract “qualified” black and brown students, striving to meet diversity targets while avoiding students they consider “at risk” of dropping out.

But a growing group of colleges and universities think that the calculation for who is “at risk” is fundamentally wrong. They not only accept students often turned away by other four-year universities, but also aggressively recruit them, believing that their academic potential has been vastly underrated.

Rutgers University-Newark in New Jersey has a graduation rate for black students that is far above the national average. But instead of offering out-sized athletic scholarships or perks to potential out-of-state students, the university is doubling down on a bid for students who are often ignored—low-income, urban, public high-school graduates with mediocre test scores.

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Rutgers offers free tuition for low- and moderate-income Newark residents and local transfer students, regardless of their GPAs and test scores. Its newly minted honors program doesn't consider SAT scores for admissions. It has put emotional and financial supports in place. Course offerings have been enhanced.

And administrators don't see their efforts as charity.

“We’re a land grant public institution with a commitment to our state and our city, and that’s the talent we should be cultivating,” said Nancy Cantor, who has been chancellor at Rutgers-Newark for two years. “There’s phenomenal knowledge and talent out there, and that contributes so much to the institution. We don’t have the traditional view that we’re somehow ‘letting these kids in’ to be influenced by us.”

In 2015, Rutgers-Newark’s six-year graduation rate was 64 percent for black students and 63 percent for white students, according to administrators, compared with [40 percent](#) and [61 percent](#) respectively at public institutions nationally.

“These are very talented students who, for a variety of reasons, rarely having to do with their own issues, are going to get bypassed.”

Among public universities whose student populations are at least 5 percent black and one-quarter low-income, Rutgers-Newark had the second-highest [black male graduation](#) rate in the nation in 2013 and the fifth-highest black graduation rate overall. It also had a much higher percentage of low-income students and African American students than the four universities above it.

“These are very talented students who, for a variety of reasons, rarely having to do with their own issues, are going to get bypassed if we don’t draw them into the education system,” Cantor said.

Bashir Ali is one of those students who slipped through the cracks for a long time.



Bashir Ali student at Rutgers-Newark (Meredith Kolodner)

“Growing up in Paterson, I sometimes felt that there weren’t many options,” said Bashir, 52, who will graduate from Rutgers-Newark in December.

He attended a year of community college after graduating from high school in 1982, but it was difficult to find work and pay tuition at the same time. He left to join the Navy, believing it was a better path to a secure future and because it seemed safer than staying in Paterson in those days.

“Race did play a role in my decision not to go to college,” he said, “although

not as a personal attack. I watched my peers going to prison, getting shot. I've been stabbed ... in Paterson it wasn't easy. Finances, life, it all got in the way."

Ali meant to finish his degree when he was discharged, but he had bills to pay and eventually two kids, so he went to work. After volunteering at a local school in Newark with children who had discipline issues, and loving it, he was convinced he needed a degree to get a more meaningful and well-paying job. He got his associate's degree from Essex County Community College and transferred to Rutgers, which he chose for its connection to Newark and so he could study with urban historian Clement Price (who died in 2014).

Ali is vividly aware of how easy it is to get thrown off track, and he credits college faculty for encouraging him and seeing his potential. He also reaches out to other African-American students, especially older males, to help guide them and for support.

"It's easy to get lost when you don't feel like you are measuring up."

"It's easy to get lost when you don't feel like you are measuring up," said Ali, bearded and wearing a bright red Rutgers sweatshirt over a flowing white robe. "You might be returning from prison, and any bump in the road can derail you—a sick child so you miss an assignment; a broken-down car so you need to work more. Maybe you feel disrespected in class by other students or professors. You need people to talk to and to feel like you're being heard."

It has become clear to more and more administrators nationwide that emotional issues can be as disruptive as financial ones when it comes to keeping students in college.

Faculty and staff at Rutgers-Newark now have a phone number and email

they can use to alert a group of counselors if they think a student might be in trouble. The counseling team is aware that many students won't seek assistance, so they've set up "listening tables" at gathering points on campus. Doctors and counselors are posted in academic building lobbies, student lounges and cafeterias to offer counseling and wellness advice and referrals on stress reduction, healthy relationships, sexual assault and other issues.

That same hesitancy to seek help sometimes trips students up financially, as well, university staffers say.

They were losing hundreds of students mid-stream for financial reasons. In 2009, between 800 and 900 student registrations were cancelled because students had not paid their bills, according to administrators. A program called Registration and Recovery Efforts has cut that number by two-thirds. The Business Office identifies students who are behind in payments and puts the word out to faculty advisors, residential advisors and the veterans and disability offices, to name a few. The idea is that people who already have a relationship with a student are in a better position to identify what the problem might be and help solve it before the student has to drop out.



Sam Goodman, Anthony Austin, Jr. and Adegoke Fakorede (Meredith Kolodner)

Anthony Austin Jr. got caught in that kind of bind when he first tried college more than a decade ago. He felt like he didn't really belong during most of his first year at the University of North Carolina in Charlotte, and he struggled financially, as well. When he got a job offer in sales, he took it and didn't look back—until he ran into the financial limitations of having only a high school diploma. He considered the flagship Rutgers campus in New Brunswick but chose Newark for its diversity.

“I wanted to hear a lot of different perspectives and see how they made sense of things,” said Austin, 35, who graduated on Wednesday with a degree in psychology.

Rutgers-Newark is one of the most diverse campuses in the country. The 7,700-undergraduate student body is 18 percent African-American, 24

percent Latino, 25 percent white and 21 percent Asian—including many students from India, Bangladesh and the Middle East. Close to half receive a federal Pell grant, for low-income students.



Shelley Kusnetz

Rutgers' Run to the Top program offers free tuition to local community-college graduates and Newark residents whose families make less than \$60,000 a year. Since most first-generation college students start at community college, Rutgers-Newark has also made transfer pathways from local community colleges easier, by guaranteeing credit for most majors.

And admissions officers have begun to go to local public schools, churches, and community events to aggressively recruit Newark residents.

“I’ve been here 10 years,” said Engelbert Santana, a senior counselor in

Rutgers' guidance program for low-income students. "Things have really changed."

The difference in Rutgers-Newark's approach can also be seen in its honors college, the Honors Living-Learning Community (HLLC), which opened in 2015. Accepted students get a scholarship that covers housing and a meal plan. Admissions require an essay and two interviews; standardized test scores are not considered.

This contrasts sharply with many honors colleges, which use their high SAT scores as a selling point. The [median SAT](#) score at Rutgers-Newark is only a few points above the [national average](#).

"You read about honors colleges filtering out students with narrow predictors of success. So who is deemed deserving and capable of an honors education?" said Corlisse Thomas, vice chancellor of student affairs at Rutgers-Newark. "We're building global leaders from Newark in Newark."

"A lot of places put a huge amount of emphasis on SATs and ACTs that don't predict well for these groups," said Cantor, the chancellor. "If you have a commitment to cultivating this kind of talent, why would you pay attention to those things?"

This year's HLLC class of 60 was chosen from an applicant pool of 740 students. About three-quarters are from Newark, more than half are first-generation college students, close to half are transfers from community colleges and 80 percent are black or Latino, according to a university dean.



Students in the class Black Lives Matter: HBO series “The Wire” (Meredith Kolodner)

Adegoke Fakorede is one of them. He chose Rutgers because it is close to home, is affordable and has a good debate team. On a Tuesday afternoon in April, he was sitting in a class called Black Lives Matter: HBO Series “The Wire,” listening to an animated debate about how the fourth season of that drama, which focused on Baltimore’s public schools, showed how some characters in the first season—a heroin addict and a gang leader—came into being.

“The kids are going to turn into the adults that the system already failed,” said one student. “The system keeps reproducing the same outcome.”

A professor referenced a previous assigned reading by Frantz Fanon. A young woman described what she saw as the “performance of masculinity.” Some heads nodded, more hands shot in the air. Disagreements ensued and discussion was passionate during the three-hour class.

“I watched the show with my older brother two years ago, and for me at that time it was purely for entertainment purposes, like any other thriller... like *The Godfather* or *Scarface*,” said Fakorede, 18. “We saw drug dealing and killings and these are things that existed around our neighborhood every day outside, but I guess it was better to see it on the TV screen.

“When I got into the class I saw a whole different kind of environment,” he

continued. “We’re not watching this for entertainment purposes, we’re watching it because of correlations between issues in the show and issues that exist in society right now, with the Black Lives Matter movement. There’s sociological, economic, political issues in it.”

“One question I have is, does the show actually highlight issues or does it make black life a spectacle for people who don’t have to live in that reality to look in and watch and be entertained?” said Fakorede, who graduated from a magnet public high school in Newark.

The students in the classroom were about half African-American and the rest a mix of other ethnicities—Arab, South Asian, white and Latino.

“More than anything I learned tolerance in this class,” Fakorede added.

Part of the Rutgers-Newark overhaul of the last couple of years has included a challenge to the faculty—welcomed by many—to create courses that will better engage students from diverse backgrounds and develop critical thinking and writing skills.

“I worked at Columbia [University], and a lot of those kids are given permission to think critically, but not all of our young people have been,” said Marta Esquilin, the new associate dean for the HLLC. “Traditionally used canons are dominated by white males. You can gain the same skills—critical thinking, civics, writing—through different content that feels more relevant.”

Classes such as Shakespeare and Race, Literature and Controversy, and Love Stories Old and New (taught by a professor of medieval literature), have been added to the course catalog.

Faculty and staff object to the idea that this approach will in any way bring down the academic level in the classrooms.

“Are we dumbing down when we talk about meeting students where they’re at?” asked Sherri-Ann Butterfield, the senior associate dean of the faculty of Arts and Sciences and a sociology professor who co-teaches “The Wire” course. “Why is that necessarily a lower quality or less rigorous? That’s not what we think.”

Several students said they took practical lessons from the class about Black Lives Matters and “The Wire.”

“What *The Wire* tries to teach you is that there’s an issue, but it’s not as simple as it seems,” said Austin, who, like Ali, hopes to get a job after graduation helping improve the prospects and opportunities for young people in Newark. “It’s not necessarily a bad cop, it’s the system of how they’re being taught, and how they perform what they’re told to do; the obedience they kind of require and that they’re protected by their own. ... You can’t really change the system until you understand how it works.”

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