



Mentor Case Study: Rutgers University - Newark Newark, New Jersey

Overview of Rutgers University – Newark

Rutgers University – Newark’s vision is to be a national leader in 21st century higher education through a commitment to the values of educating a diverse citizenry, producing high impact scholarship, engaging in our community as an anchor institution, and drawing the connection between local and global, for the improvement of the economic and social well-being of society as a whole.

More than 14,000 students are currently enrolled at Rutgers University – Newark’s 38-acre campus in a wide range of undergraduate and graduate degree programs offered through the Newark College of Arts and Sciences, University College, the Graduate School-Newark, Rutgers Business School-Newark and New Brunswick, the School of Law-Newark, the School of Criminal Justice, and the School of Public Affairs and Administration. Rutgers University – Newark awards approximately 300 doctoral and law degrees, 1,200 master's degrees, and 1,600 baccalaureate degrees each year, and is ranked among the best in the nation for quality among small research universities by the National Faculty Productivity Index.

Rutgers University – Newark has a long, respected tradition of involvement with issues affecting the national and global community in the areas of social and economic justice, civil rights, politics, business, law, journalism, and scientific discovery. In a host of ways, Rutgers University – Newark is deeply committed to engagement with Newark and surrounding communities through teaching, research, public service, experiential learning, free lectures, conferences, and concerts open to the public, as well as mentored student research and field work in Newark. Rutgers University – Newark’s social mission is also grounded in its history of educating first-generation college students, those of modest means, and people from diverse racial, ethnic, national, and religious backgrounds.

At a historical moment when our cities, our state, our nation, and our world desperately need higher education to fulfill its promise as an engine of discovery, innovation, and social mobility, Rutgers University – Newark is exceptionally well positioned to fulfill that promise. It has a remarkable legacy of producing high-impact scholarship that is connected to the great questions and challenges of the world. It has the right mix of disciplines and first-rate interdisciplinary centers and institutes to take on those questions and challenges. It is in and of a city and region where its work on local challenges undertaken with partners from sectors resonates powerfully throughout our urbanizing world. Most importantly, Rutgers University – Newark brings an incredible diversity of people to this work—students, faculty, staff, and community partners—making it more innovative, more creative, more engaging, and more relevant for our time and the times ahead.

How did Rutgers University-Newark get started on the “student success” path?

Historically, Rutgers University – Newark has maintained its commitment to cultivating talent to people who might not have the same educational opportunities as others, especially first and second-generation immigrants that have come to the area in large numbers. System-wide strategic planning was critical for bolstering commitment to student success.

After more than a decade operating without a system-wide strategic plan, Rutgers initiated a strategic planning process in 2012-13 that would roll out to each of the universities within the system over the next two years. The process started at Rutgers University – Newark shortly after Chancellor Cantor arrived in 2014. It was, in many ways, a bottom-up effort. Chancellor Cantor had several days of listening tours around campus and the community, and charrette groups that would bring people together from different constituencies to have facilitated discussions around a specific question. One of those very important questions discussed in a charrette group was “what does the world expect from higher education institutions today?” The question was intentionally decentering—it was not framed in terms of what does our Board of Governors or what does our new Chancellor want, for example. The discussions stemming from that charrette group resulted in the realization that Rutgers University-Newark wanted its work to be about supporting students and engaging with the local community instead of being an ivory tower that only engages with other ivory towers.

How do you sustain the student success movement? What is the role of leadership and of culture change?

Leadership and culture change go together and are key to the student success movement. Leadership is crucial for making the culture that goes deep and broad through discourse (what we talk about and how we talk about it), who is placed in leadership roles, expectations we place upon people, and focusing on collaborative efforts rather than narrowly-defined outcomes.

At some level, postsecondary education is about trying to create knowledge and educated citizens and the work Rutgers University-Newark has embarked on is about changing the mentality around how to achieve those goals and how to determine success. The work is about shifting from a gatekeeper approach—such as the approach of national rating systems that use the number of students rejected as a measure of the quality of a postsecondary institution and proportion of grades of C or lower as a measure of rigor— to an affirmative approach— a mentality that emphasizes the ability to think about what students need and finding ways to make sure students are able to get what they need in order to clear obstacles on the path to achieving their goals. This shift in approach has been the work not only in many of the academic spaces but also of other areas. For example, in financial aid offices, the ability to say ‘no’ is often viewed as a sign of compliance; thus, the work at Rutgers-Newark has been focused on helping employees

in the financial aid office find ways to make things work for students rather than standing by and defending the policy without understanding and assessing the situation in its entirety.

Data Tracked to Measure Progress

Rutgers University – Newark has a core set of data points it tracks for assessing how well it is serving its students, how well it is increasing access to a research university to students from populations that do not historically enroll at research universities, and how well it is decreasing gaps in graduation rates. The institution focuses on data points of the past five years since Rutgers University – Newark’s strategic plan was finished in summer 2014.

One area highly emphasized by Rutgers University – Newark is enrollments from the city of Newark. Enrollments from the City of Newark and Greater Newark have continuously grown (as a percentage of total undergraduate enrollment and in number) in the past five years. In the past five years, enrollments from the City of Newark have grown from 660 to 1,232 during a period of time during which counterpart institutions elsewhere are focusing less on enrolling students from the community in which the institution is located.

While not intentionally sought, the undocumented student population has grown very rapidly in Rutgers University – Newark during the last five years. This rapid growth may be in part due to annual informational sessions provided (with other participating institutions that are mainly New Jersey County Colleges) to students about resources and opportunities available to undocumented students and Rutgers University – Newark’s expansion of funding opportunities for undocumented students.

Another area to highlight is graduation rate gap reduction. While cohorts are fairly small at Rutgers University – Newark, resulting in fluctuation from year to year from just a change in three or four students, data show that in two of the last six years Black students have had a higher six-year graduation rate than White students. Also, after many years of a double digit gap in graduation rates between White and Hispanic or Latino students, the six-year graduation rate gap has been in the single digits six of the past ten years and Hispanic or Latino students had a higher six-year graduation rate than White students in one of last five years.

Consistently, transfer students coming in with a degree graduate in three years (150% time) at higher rates than first-time freshmen students graduate at the comparable 150% time (six years).

These data points are connected to the efforts made at the university to increase access for students from populations that historically have not enrolled at a research university and also to improve graduation rates and eliminate gaps in graduation rates that have historically existed between different subpopulations.

Discuss any significant challenges the institution has faced and how those challenges were overcome.

In the 90s, under Governor Christine Todd Whitman, the State of New Jersey dissolved the Board and Department of Higher Education. The highly deregulated nature of higher education in the state of New Jersey, in which there is very limited executive and legislative branch intervention in higher education, has created a series of ongoing crises for Rutgers University-Newark and other higher education institutions in New Jersey that are related to the associated lack of coordination and lack of bond issues, among other things.

At a time during which there was talk about separating the Rutgers system into universities with no tie to one another, the strategic planning process addressed some of those challenges by articulating a single direction at the system level while also giving greater autonomy to each campus. The increased coordination in conjunction with increased autonomy (having a separate budget for the first time) has allowed Rutgers University –Newark to re-focus on student success and anchor work while other parts of the system have been able to focus on other goals.

The highly deregulated nature of New Jersey higher education created a series of ongoing crises for the institution but strategic planning, starting with the arrival of President Barchi followed by the arrival of Chancellor Cantor at Rutgers – Newark and Chancellor Haddon in Rutgers – Camden, really helped focus the institutions.

Based on what you feel you have achieved, what important work remains?

What Rutgers University – Newark got right was engaging everyone from the beginning of the strategic planning process. In some of the initial stages, the institution did not pay enough attention to pedagogy and curriculum and things that went on in the classroom and around the classroom. A lot of initial student success work was focused on the enrollment offices, restructuring financial aid both in terms of how the money flows and staffing (much of staffing has turnover in about five years in the financial aid office). Student advising is also much different now compared to five years ago. However, in the past year, leadership has been engaging faculty a lot more and a lot more work is being done with respect to looking at individual course outcomes. At some level, this work could have started earlier but there was a strong consensus that it was not the area that was presenting the most challenge. Now to make further progress, Rutgers – Newark will need to do more of this level of work.

Advice for those just starting the student success journey

Student success work requires collaboration across the entire institution—it is work that fundamentally cannot be done alone— and leadership, at every level, plays a critical role in creating that collaborative environment.