

 LEADING STRATEGIES

Keep Running with Us: An Innovative Program at a Hispanic-Serving Institution Designed to Increase Graduate Enrollment of Hispanic/Latinx Students

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Underrepresented minority (URM) students face unique challenges when pursuing graduate education, with some not even considering the possibility of pursuing a graduate degree. This paper describes a nontraditional approach to the graduate application process that involves identification of potential applicants by graduate faculty and staff at The University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA), a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) with an underrepresented student population of over 60 percent. UTSA's Keep Running with Us (KRWU) program was developed to address barriers to Hispanic student recruitment, retention, and completion. Undergraduate URM students not considering graduate education and who met graduate program requirements were identified by faculty and staff. These students were auto-admitted into matching master's programs using a streamlined application process that did not require traditional admissions criteria. An evaluation of the program showed that, as compared with students accepted into master's programs via the traditional process, students admitted through KRWU had 1) an increased percent of Hispanic students enrolled, and 2) increased percent graduation rates among all Hispanic students at UTSA. These outcomes demonstrate the effectiveness of KRWU's approach at increasing enrollment and awarded degrees for Hispanic students

Pursuing graduate education opens a world of possibilities for degree recipients, encompassing not just the realm of research and innovative practices, but also offering a pathway to enhanced career prospects, greater social mobility, and their own intellectual and economic impact on society (College Board 2019). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (Hussar, *et al.* 2020, 218), individuals with a bachelor's degree tend to experience increased levels of employment, offering a sense of security and stability. Among young adults aged 25–34, graduate degree holders command a median salary that surpasses those with only bachelor's degrees by 19 percent (Hussar, *et al.* 2020, 214). Recent insights from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS 2023) reinforce this upward trajectory, showing that recipients of master's degrees earn 16 percent higher salaries than their peers with bachelor's degrees. Recipients of doctoral degrees average 25 percent higher salaries over master's degree holders. This trend underscores the profound impact of advanced education, reinforcing a commitment to ensuring that graduate education remains accessible to all, particularly for Underrepresented Racial Minorities (URM)—including Hispanic, Black/African American, Alaska Indian, and Alaska Native—as defined by the National Science Foundation (NSF 2023). Graduate education can serve as a transformative force, opening doors to brighter futures and empowering individuals to reach their full potential and increase their contributions to society.

Recognizing the aspirations of many individuals to pursue graduate education, it is important to acknowledge barriers faced disproportionately by URM populations. These barriers include over-reliance on standardized tests, lack of awareness/mentoring for seeking advanced graduate training, and intimidation of graduate seeking and admissions processes (Borrego, *et al.* 2018; Cano, *et al.* 2018; Gómez, Caño, and Baltes 2021; Ramirez 2011).

Standardized test scores have often been used as filters for admission to graduate programs with admissions committees (Cano, *et al.* 2018; Hernández-Colón 2021; Mitchell, Ellison, and Gleeson 2019; Oltman and Hartnett 1984). Unfortunately, this practice has resulted

in screening out URM students. This is problematic, especially when several studies have reported disparities in standardized test scores, such as the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), with URM students averaging lower scores than their white counterparts (Bleske-Rechek and Browne 2014; Crozet and Dutrevis 2015; Miller and Stassun 2014). As a result, the GRE has proven to be a significant hurdle for URM applicants, including Hispanic students aspiring for graduate admission. In addition to disparities in standardized test scores, URM students, in comparison with their majority peers, often lack the social capital with their professors to forge mentoring relationships. URM students therefore miss the opportunities to receive guidance from faculty on the importance of attaining advanced graduate degrees and learning how to be competitive for graduate program admissions. Writing competitive personal statements, seeking strong faculty letters of recommendation, and the challenge of navigating complex admissions processes are particularly daunting tasks for URM students without faculty mentoring (Ramirez 2011).

With this in mind, the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) Graduate School designed the Keep Running with Us (KRWU) program, recognizing the real challenges that students face in even considering graduate education and then navigating the admissions process. UTSA is located in San Antonio and has a core mission of serving its surrounding community that is nearly 65 percent Hispanic. Importantly, as a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), UTSA serves a student population that mirrors the city demographic with a 65 percent Hispanic undergraduate enrollment. However, UTSA's Hispanic enrollment at the graduate level is significantly lower. KRWU was therefore designed to shrink this gap and increase Hispanic enrollment at the graduate level using a “grow our own” approach. Thus, KRWU aimed to achieve two vital goals: 1) to identify and reach eligible Hispanic and other URM (primarily African-American), as well as first-generation UTSA undergraduates who were not considering graduate education, and/or were overwhelmed by the prospect of attending or applying to graduate school, and 2) to lessen the onerous and often daunting complexities of the application process.

Through KRWU, the UTSA Graduate School built a tapestry of support, offering a seamless application process that prioritizes accessibility. This unique approach empowered faculty to intentionally identify exceptionally-talented URM students who may not yet be aware of the opportunities in graduate programs or may not realize their own potential. Additional barriers were also removed; identified students were automatically admitted without the traditional requirements perceived as barriers, such as standardized tests, personal statements, or formal letters of recommendation. The success of KRWU is a testament to the unwavering dedication of the faculty and staff to nurture the confidence and guide the journeys of the participants. While many initiatives typically focus on doctoral-level participation, KRWU was designed to intentionally target master's-level education. This focus was to ensure maximum participation and serve as a gateway to higher-level jobs and as pathways to future doctoral education. The mission of KRWU aligns with UTSA's fundamental values as an HSI and its deep-rooted commitment to the San Antonio community.

Program Description

KRWU was developed to remove barriers inherent in the pursuit of graduate training and/or the graduate admissions process for URM students, in particular Hispanic students. The target population was students who met graduate program requirements and were either not considering graduate training or who were intimidated by traditional graduate admissions processes. KRWU partnered with faculty and staff to identify recently-graduated or about-to-be-graduated undergraduates and nominate these students to the Graduate School. The selection process was based on classroom performance such as GPA (grade point average) and faculty nomination. Selected undergraduates were eligible for a simplified admissions process in which standardized test scores (*e.g.*, GRE) and other traditional graduate application requirements (*e.g.*, personal statement, multiple letters of recommendation) were eliminated. Instead, a personal faculty nomination or an invitation from the Graduate School to apply served as the sole re-

quirement. In addition, given the socioeconomic status of the majority of KRWU applicants, the application fee was paid by UTSA. The simplified application required only basic demographic information from applicants while colleges compiled the remaining information on behalf of applicants, thereby obviating processes that could discourage a student from applying. Upon official submission of the application, students were automatically admitted and notified. In summary, the KRWU program fast-tracked and streamlined the graduate admissions process for candidates.

Methods

Participant Selection and Outreach

Two pathways were established for participant selection. The first was faculty nominating eligible students based on classroom performance and GPA. The second was initiated by the Graduate School wherein information about students' class performance (GPA of 3.0 or higher, or other metrics established by programs) was collected. In some cases, students were selected through both pathways (*i.e.*, nominated by faculty and also identified by the Graduate School). The two pathways yielded comparable numbers of students with similar academic credentials and demographics such as gender, race and ethnicity. These data were shared with participating program graduate admissions committees for review. After review, the program provided a final list of nominees based on program-specific criteria. These selected students received pre-populated KRWU application forms. Students were required only to provide basic demographic information and return the signed form. Upon receipt of the completed KRWU application form, the student was sent immediate notification of admission into the graduate program by the Graduate School. This approach differs from the traditional application process, where applicants are required to submit documentation such as standardized test scores, personal statement, transcripts, etc., to be reviewed by an admissions committee—a relatively longer, more complex, and often daunting process. Thus, the Graduate School took a proactive approach by identifying eligible

TABLE 1 ► Proportion of Hispanic/Latino Students Enrolled by Academic Year

Application Type	2019	2020	2021	2022
KRWU	50	56 ^a	58 ^a	56
Traditional	47	49	50	53

^a Proportion is significantly higher

undergraduates who might otherwise not have considered graduate education and asks programs to consider nominating these students. KRWU intentionally served Hispanic and other URM populations through targeted outreach and guidance about the impact of graduate education via information sessions for first-generation students, Dreamers (defined as persons who have lived in the United States without official authorization since coming to the country as minors), and the large population of Hispanic students in a minority-majority city. Other than admissions assistance, no other special programming was provided for KRWU admitted students during the course of their graduate program of study.

Quantitative Data

Participant data for those who completed graduate programs through KRWU were acquired from Institutional Research (IR) to examine program outcomes, including demographics, degrees awarded, and traditional admissions process data for comparison. Proportions of students enrolled/graduated through KRWU vs. through traditional processes were tested for differences with a chi-square analysis.

Qualitative Data Collection

Qualitative data was collected directly from participants who completed graduate programs through KRWU. A survey was distributed using Qualtrics to a participant list provided by IR. The online survey included open-ended questions regarding outreach and involvement in KRWU. For example, participants were asked if they planned to pursue graduate education before learning about KRWU and whether participation in the program was a factor in completing a graduate degree. The sur-

TABLE 2 ► Proportion of Hispanic/Latino Students Earning a Master's Degree by Academic Year

Application Type	2019	2020	2021	2022
KRWU	51	50	55 ^a	58 ^a
Traditional	44	45	47	48

^a Proportion is significantly higher

vey was sent to 200 graduate degree earners and resulted in a 7 percent response rate.

KRWU Program Outcomes

To date, 1,527 URM students have been selected for master's degrees through KRWU. Over half of KRWU participants identified as Hispanic, compared to slightly under half of those starting graduate programs through the traditional application process. The success of this program was measured using quantitative and qualitative data collected from participating students.

Quantitative Measures of Success Enrollment

Table 1 shows that the proportion of Hispanic participants enrolled in master's programs through KRWU was greater than that through the traditional admissions processes. Chi-square analyses showed the proportion of Hispanic students enrolled through KRWU was significantly higher than the proportion of Hispanic students admitted through the traditional application process in 2020; $\chi^2 (1, N=1996)=5.07, p=0.02$; and in 2021; $\chi^2 (1, N=2689)=8.39, p=0.004$.

Master's Degrees Awarded

Table 2 shows the proportion of Hispanic KRWU graduates increased annually over the proportion of traditionally-admitted Hispanic graduates. In academic year 2019, 51 percent of Hispanic graduates were admitted through the KRWU program as compared with 44 percent admitted through the traditional application process. This trend was seen in all years reported and reached significance in 2021, $\chi^2 (1, N=1570)=5.68, p=0.02$, and in 2022, $\chi^2 (1, N=1343)=7.89, p=0.005$.

TABLE 3 ► Survey Questions Regarding the “Keep Running with Us” (KRWU) Program

How did you learn about the VIP or auto-admit¹ program?

Were you planning to pursue graduate school before learning about the VIP or auto-admit program?

Do you believe the nomination or invitation you received for the VIP or auto-admit program was a factor in completing and submitting your application?

Do you believe your involvement in the VIP or auto-admit program helped in completing your degree?

Is there any else you would like to share about being in the VIP or auto-admit program that would help us to understand your experiences here?

¹ VIP and auto-admit were used interchangeably with KRWU in the programming.

Qualitative Measures of Success

The KRWU program also had a qualitative impact on students’ pursuit of an advanced degree. Current and graduated KRWU students were surveyed using five questions listed in the questionnaire in Table 3. The survey was approved by UTSA’s IRB.

Responses to the survey questions suggested that faculty and staff play an instrumental role in promoting graduate programs. For instance, one student stated, “A professor approached me about KRWU in the first semester of my senior year.” Student feedback also praised the streamlined application process: “The program allowed me to continue higher education, and the application was [completed] with ease.” Moreover, the survey results indicated the opportunities offered by KRWU influenced students’ consideration of graduate school among those not considering or unsure of applying. For example, when asked, “Do you believe the nomination or invitation you received for the KRWU program was a factor in completing and submitting your application?” one participant stated, “Absolutely. I would not have submitted an application without it.” Another respondent mentioned, “Had I not known about the KRWU, I would have probably not have pursued my master’s.”

The survey results demonstrated positive reactions in response to being selected for participation in KRWU. To illustrate, one respondent expressed, “I am very thankful for it, and I am pleased to have been afforded the opportunity. I believe that my graduate studies helped prepare me for more technical roles in the workforce, and my degree earned will better qualify

me for these careers in the eyes of potential employers.” Furthermore, KRWU appears to have played a pivotal role in student success. Most participants indicated that involvement in KRWU facilitated degree completion. This is supported not only by the quantitative results shown above but also by responses such as, “The KRWU program made a positive impact as I was able to attain a graduate degree as a first-generation student.”

Implications

The KRWU program was designed to mitigate uncertainties about the graduate school application process arising from unfamiliarity with expectations and lack of social and cultural capital; both of which can result in significant barriers, particularly for Hispanic students. KRWU contributes to efforts for equity in access to graduate education by providing a sustainable model for Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) and other institutions that serve a large population of URM students to increase URM enrollment in graduate programs.

By relying on students’ relationships with faculty and program coordinators as well as past academic performance, KRWU provided students who would not have otherwise considered/applied to a graduate program a streamlined path to graduate education. This was a significant step toward reducing barriers identified by Hispanic and other URM students in previous studies who reported feeling overwhelmed by the application requirements (Cochran, Hodapp and Brown 2018; Gómez, Caño, and Baltes 2021; Kovacs 2022; Ramirez 2011). Outcomes of KRWU at the institution demonstrate

that the program was successful not only through promoting access to graduate education, but also through completion rates for Hispanic graduate students.

Most important, participants thrive and were successful in their graduate programs of study. Therefore, early identification and guidance through partnerships between the Graduate School, Institutional Research, faculty/staff interactions, college and departmental leadership, and a streamlined application process that does not impose unnecessary barriers are absolutely essential in broadening participation of Hispanic/Latino students at the master's level. These partnerships are foundational to the success of programs such as KRWU. Of equal importance is the broader impact on the local community since the majority of KRWU students originate from the local community. KRWU graduates thus have the potential to have significant economic and cultural impacts in the local community upon graduation.

Limitations and Future Research

Limitations to both the evaluation and the KRWU program must be addressed. With regard to the evaluation,

data are from a limited period of time. Longer-term studies are needed to better understand the impact of programs like KRWU. In addition, the response rate for the qualitative portion of the study was quite low and may not be representative of all KRWU enrollees and/or graduates. In future research, the authors plan to increase the response rate by providing small incentives and will broaden the methods to include focus groups and interviews.

The KRWU program relies to some extent on faculty identifying prospective applicants. This may be difficult for Hispanic and other URM students given that most are not exposed to the socialization process through which faculty can introduce them to graduate studies. Approaches to increasing the number of students identified for the program such as hosting networking events for URM students and faculty and classroom information sessions need to be considered. In addition, programs like KRWU require high staff engagement and collaboration between multiple units. In order to ensure sustainability, more automated processes and forms of communication need to be developed and implemented.

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About the Authors



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Jeffrey Ragsdale, Ed.D., is the Assistant Vice Provost of Graduate Studies at the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA). He and his team lead student success initiatives involving DegreeWorks, Annual Review and IDP and the Bold Doctoral Staged Orientation series. Together

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