INNOVATING TOGETHER

Results from the University
Innovation Alliance

2014-2020

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Part 1
THE CHALLENGE

The University Innovation Alliance (UIA) launched in fall 2014, driven by a sense of urgency that not enough students were graduating with quality degrees - and that as a sector, institutions of higher education were failing first-generation students, students of color, and students from low-income backgrounds. The alliance set out to solve two persistent problems in higher education: institutions were not producing enough high-quality graduates across the socioeconomic spectrum to meet the U.S.'s future economic competitiveness needs, and too many efforts to address the problem were conducted in isolation on campuses and failed to scale. The UIA's 11 founding presidents and chancellors shared a belief that working separately to solve these intractable problems was a waste of time, energy and money – and students were paying too high a price.

These problems are rooted in historical design: of institutions, their internal process, broader sector incentives and rankings.

The reality is that universities are not fundamentally designed around helping students reach graduation – for proof, look no further than colleges boasting about the number of students they don't admit. In addition, when universities do not work on student success solutions, the competitive nature of higher education means that they usually work alone, without sharing their successes and failures. Furthermore, these efforts often are not thoughtfully designed for the overburdened professionals who have to drive and sustain that transformation on campus. The UIA's 11 members also shared a belief that higher education doesn't have to be that way, and they came together to put that idea to the test.

UIA set a bold initial goal: In just 10 years, UIA institutions would graduate 68,000 more students than they were otherwise projected to graduate, and at least half of those additional graduates would be from low-income backgrounds. That timeline meant institutions would have to pilot, assess, and scale interventions fast. They all signed on to a three-pronged commitment to rapid experimentation; deep collaboration; and radical sharing of challenges, insights and data – a commitment they made public at a White House summit in December 2014.

From the outset, five core principles have been essential to the UIA's work:

1. Using data to measure progress and catalyze change and transparently sharing data across institutions

2. Reengineering institutions around students, using process mapping and design-thinking strategies to focus on what is and is not serving students – and what would serve them better

3. Fostering a collaborative, empowered environment across the UIA network

4. Embracing continual improvement and using data, organizational learning, and annual evaluations to monitor progress

5. Setting ambitious goals and holding each other accountable

Six years later, the UIA can proudly say that it has met its goal of graduating 68,000 additional students. In fact, the institutions have already exceeded that goal by 5,000 graduates, and they are four years ahead of schedule. The UIA has also produced 36% more low-income graduates and 73% more graduates of color since the alliance started. Those numbers matter because they represent thousands of talented students succeeding in higher education, despite the odds against them. But even more than the numbers, the work has shown that, with the right focus and collaboration, institutions can rapidly scale promising innovations. The process wasn't perfect: Implementation was sometimes uneven, and resources varied widely, as did campus structures and culture. In other words, these weren't 11 superhuman institutions. But they were 11 super committed institutions that showed it's possible to get results by collaborating to achieve shared goals.
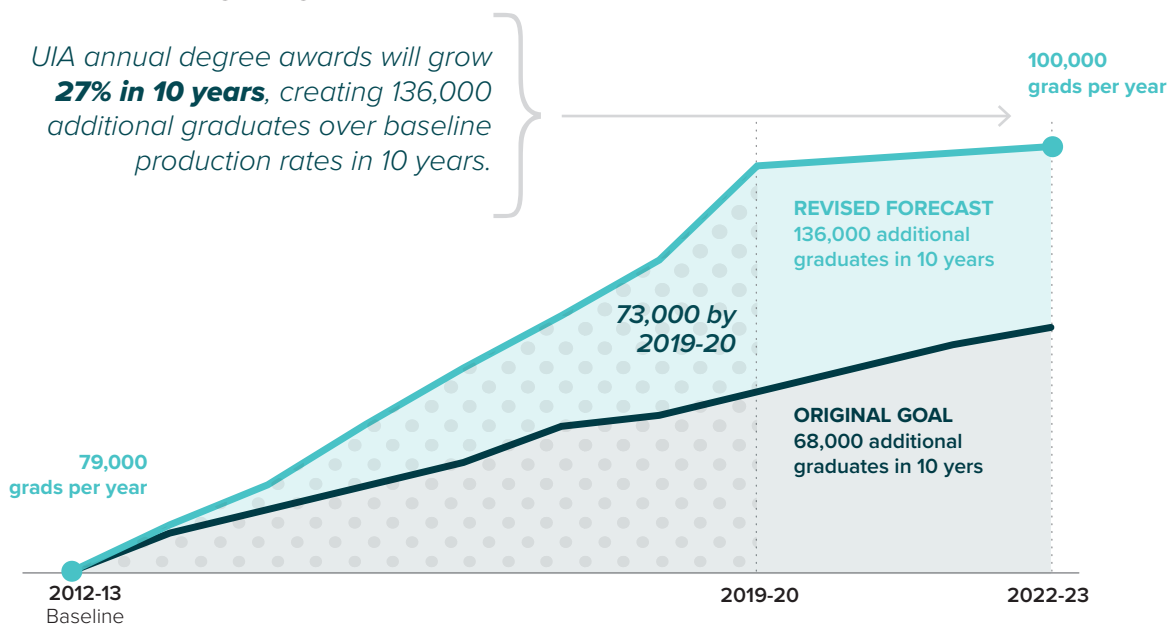
This kind of work can scale even more broadly across higher education. As part of the UIA's commitment to holding its members accountable and sharing what they've learned along the way, the following brief provides a deeper dive into what UIA institutions look like, the results they saw, and what innovations they found worth considering. The UIA's hope is that this work inspires and informs colleges and universities well beyond the alliance. What worked at 11 institutions can also work at 1,100 — and the thousands of lives the UIA has changed can grow to millions.
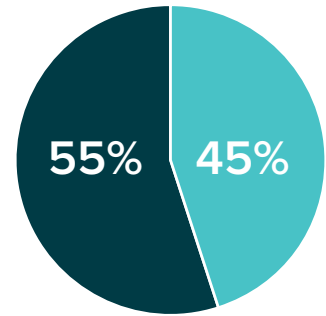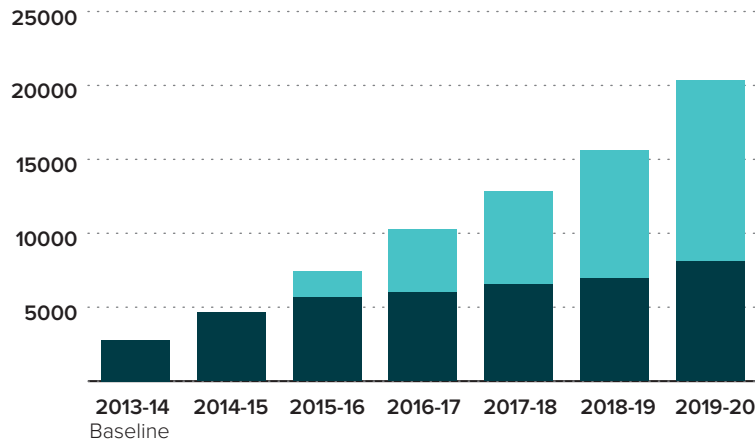
Part 2
THE RESULTS

The UIA's efforts have already produced 73,000 additional graduates (above existing stretch goals) between academic years 2014 and 2020, exceeding its 10-year goal of 68,000 in just six years.

UIA Exceeding Degree Goals

*UIA annual degree awards will grow **27% in 10 years**, creating 136,000 additional graduates over baseline production rates in 10 years.*

100,000
grads per year

REVISED FORECAST
136,000 additional
graduates in 10 years

*73,000 by
2019-20*

ORIGINAL GOAL
68,000 additional
graduates in 10 yers

79,000
grads per year

2012-13
Baseline

2019-20

2022-23

Low-Income UIA Graduates

Bar chart (Low-Income UIA Graduates):

Year	Value
2013-14 Baseline	~3000
2014-15	~4800
2015-16	~7600
2016-17	~10300
2017-18	~13000
2018-19	~15600
2019-20	~20300

■ Other (non Low-Income) UIA Graduates   ■ Low-Income UIA Graduates

Pie chart: **55%** / **45%**
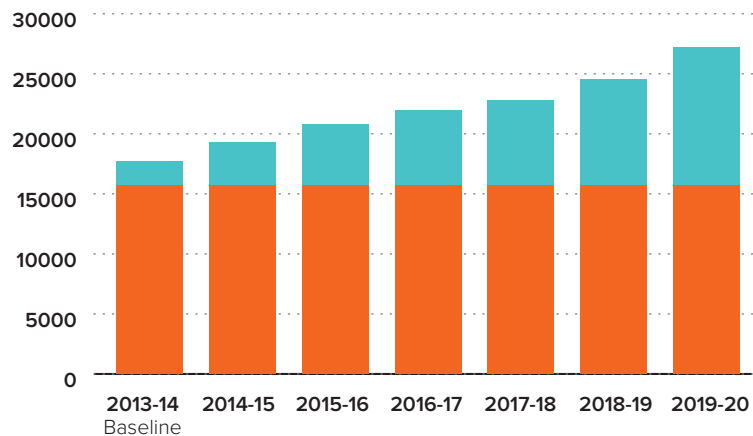
Seven Years of
Additional Graduates

*More than half of those additional graduates – **55%** – have been low-income students.*

__Six in 10__ additional graduates have been underrepresented students of color.

Pie chart: **60%** / **40%**

Seven Years of
Additional Graduates

Underrepresented Students of Color UIA Graduates

Bar chart (Underrepresented Students of Color UIA Graduates):

Year	Value
2013-14 Baseline	~18000
2014-15	~19500
2015-16	~21000
2016-17	~22000
2017-18	~23000
2018-19	~24700
2019-20	~27500
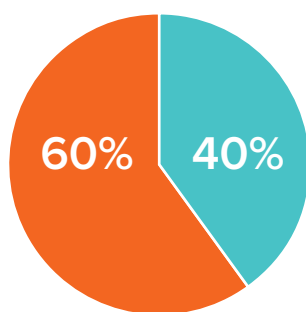
■ Other   ■ Underrepresented Students of Color UIA Graduates

Part 3
WHAT WORKED, WHAT DIDN'T, WHAT YOU CAN DO

The results UIA members have seen over the past six years speak to what higher education institutions can accomplish with collaboration and a focus on driving innovation that scales. The UIA began its work by laying a foundation focused on predictive analytics and open data sharing. When the alliance started, predictive analytics was still in its early stages at many institutions. Presidents and other campus leaders shared a general sense that they needed to invest more in data and analytics tools, but too few were clear on exactly why. The UIA ultimately succeeded by hitting pause and asking key questions together and separately: What is the value of prediction? What problems is the alliance trying to solve?

By starting there, institutions could then focus on their unique needs and contexts in selecting approaches and vendors and building out datasets and in-house tools. The eight institutions that didn't already have a predictive analytics infrastructure in place set to work implementing new systems – with the input and learnings from fellow UIA institutions like Georgia State University and Arizona State University. Importantly, they also focused on changes to policy and practice that would need to occur to make the data more useful. After all, a prediction in and of itself doesn't matter – how it's put to use does.

Monitoring Advising Analytics to Promote Success (MAAPS)
Building on the understanding that predictive analytics is a powerful tool only insofar as it drives practice, the UIA embarked on its first scale project MAAPS was a three-year experiment focused on implementing "intrusive" advising built on analytics, testing whether this approach could move the needle on retention and graduation for low-income and first-generation students.

Specifically, institutions provided eligible students with:
- Intensive, proactive advising to help them create individualized academic maps and navigate key choices
- Early and real-time alerts to let them know when they went off path
- Timely, targeted advising to get them back on track.

The project, which received a federal First in the World grant, was designed by Tim Renick from Georgia State as a randomized control trial of 10,000 students across 11 campuses. This approach allowed the UIA to test what impacted outcomes and what didn't. Institutions saw positive but varied results:

Students in the treatment group at **Georgia State**, for example, showed a 5% higher credit success rate than their peers who weren't receiving this targeted advising, meaning they were more likely to earn academic credit for courses they attempted. These students earned 3.46 additional credits compared to their peers and had GPAs that were 0.18 points higher on average. These outcomes were particularly notable for lower-performing students, precisely the students who needed additional support and could benefit most.

Students in the treatment group at **Purdue University** also showed a higher GPA than their peers, by about one-quarter of a letter grade or 0.08 points. And students in the treatment group at **UT-Austin** earned credits at a rate 3% higher than their peers. After three academic years, this amounted to about one additional course they could count toward their degree.

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Earning more credits, completing them more efficiently, and achieving a higher GPA all contribute to a shorter time to degree and lower cost to students and the institution. They also decrease the likelihood of academic probation, which can stall progress. Improving low-income and first-generation students' outcomes on these measures is critical to raising their graduation rates, eliminating achievement gaps and helping to ensure institutions can graduate more of these students across the country.

Importantly, the MAAPS results showed that the fidelity of project implementation had a major impact on outcomes – and institutions that had decentralized advising functions faced a steeper curve in implementing the approach. Moreover, while the implementation process proved time-consuming and complex on many campuses, it revealed important areas for broader improvement. **Arizona State**, for example, identified a significant gap in the support it provides for students after they transition from their first year to their second. **Michigan State** identified a need to clarify degree plans in a number of programs where the curriculum made it challenging for students to graduate in four years. And the **University of Kansas** found that students benefited from the single point of contact that MAAPS provided amid a decentralized advising structure.

Those insights – and the steps institutions took to address them – were powerful in moving the needle on student success and have continued to inform advising practice across the UIA's 11 institutions.

Completion Grants

Too often, students are on track to finish their degree but get tripped up by financial barriers close to graduation. In 2017, the UIA decided to test what would happen if institutions could remove those barriers with small – less than $1,000 – completion grants. Unlike retention grants, which may be awarded to students at any point in their college career, the UIA's completion grant program was oriented toward students nearing the end of their college journey who needed modest financial aid to complete their degree.

Over the course of three academic years, the 11 institutions provided completion grants to over 5,000 students combined. **More than 83% of these students who were at risk of dropping out remained enrolled or completed their degree within three terms.** The project also paved the way for UIA institutions to help students stay on track to graduate amidst the COVID-19 pandemic – a time when financial constraints for students and their families dramatically increased. Amidst the pandemic in 2020, 1,116 students received completion grants to help them stay enrolled and on track.

Overall, the project gave institutions a better understanding of the financial challenges that students face and the lengths to which they are going to scrape together enough money to complete. For example, financial aid staff at several institutions were concerned by the number of students paying balances with credit cards. Those students could technically pay but were potentially setting themselves up for unmanageable interest and debt payments – raising important questions about how to define students' ability to pay a balance. Other students might be stretching by adding more hours at work or borrowing from friends and family, potentially creating additional challenges to completing and remaining solvent down the road.

Institutions also had to grapple with questions about the timing of the awards based on their different policies around registration and nonpayment. Five universities had policies to drop students from the current term for nonpayment, so they focused their grants at the beginning of the term – while the other six targeted grants later in the enrollment cycle.

Importantly, the project led institutions to rethink a host of policies and practices around billing and registration. In particular, it revealed just how many different offices across a campus have authority to place a hold on a student's registration for nonpayment of fees and just how little control many enrollment and financial aid teams have. The **University of Central Florida** created a "hold committee" to examine all the holds that prevented students from registering and which offices could create holds. This led to the removal of registration holds for parking and library fines and an increase in the balance students could carry while registering for a subsequent term. Two other institutions – The **Ohio State University** and **University of California, Riverside** – changed their drop for nonpayment policies, providing students additional flexibility to continue.

Additionally, the completion grant project required campuses to build cross-functional teams to identify students in need of financial support and to respond quickly – capacities that became critical during COVID-19, as financial constraints for students and their families dramatically increased. Developing processes for administering completion grants gave UIA institutions a head start when it came to distributing emergency aid through the CARES Act and other funds. 1,116 students received completion grants to help them stay enrolled and on track amidst COVID-19 in 2020.

Bridging the Gap from Education to Employment (BGEE)

As higher education has continued to focus on improving outcomes, institutions have increasingly recognized that it's not just graduation that matters – it's also what students are graduating into. Jobs, and ultimately careers, matter. With that in mind, the UIA launched a three-year initiative to use process mapping, systems mapping and design thinking to redesign career services to better support low-income students, first-generation students, and students of color. The objective was to not only improve career outcomes for those students, but also to develop new tools, strategies, and prototypes to share with the field.

The **University of Central Florida**, for example, partnered with the [NACE Faculty Career Champions](#) initiative to create a program to incentivize faculty to incorporate career competencies into their curriculum and assignments. The idea was to address a key piece of feedback from employers that staff had consistently heard over the years: Students were well-prepared and had great work-based or project-based experiences, but they weren't able to articulate their skills and competencies in applications and interviews. Twenty faculty members were initially selected to redesign their courses alongside career staff at the university. They included competency statements in their syllabi and incorporated assignments such as writing a cover letter.

Students who took the redesigned classes reported an increase in self-confidence and said they were more likely to apply for and obtain internships. One student who described herself as "having extremely low self-esteem" said the course she took gave her the confidence to apply for a dream internship, which she landed. She was imminently qualified, but the course gave her the framework to know how to articulate her skills and the boost to go for it.

Faculty gave the program a net promoter score of 87% and generally said that the experience motivated them to keep focusing on the career applications of what they teach. Their ability to do so improved as well, with their awareness of NACE competencies more than doubling. University of California, Riverside tackled a different need with its career initiative: not enough students from first-generation and low-income backgrounds got internships. The university partnered with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to

create a six-week immersive internship where a cohort of students focused on reducing food waste at the university. Students received an EPA mentor and worked closely together on the project.

Students cited the sense of community and belonging created by the cohort as a key motivator. Overall, they reported that they were more confident in their self-efficacy, presentation skills, and communication skills, as well as their ability to explore and plan for careers. Five out of 6 interns reported a better understanding of the steps they need to take to achieve their career goals, and four out of six said they were more confident that they "will graduate with the knowledge and skills needed to be successful in the workplace."

Across all seven UIA institutions participating in this project, deep collaboration between employers and stakeholders across the campus was key. The project has also highlighted the importance of designing with students, not just for them. Often, helping to increase students' confidence proved as important as any particular career-oriented skills the programs taught. To be successful, institutions must listen to students about their challenges, what they value when it comes to planning for careers, how they want to be communicated with, and whom they trust and turn to for advice. Across the institutions, students were especially clear that they most value advice from faculty and employers, but they often don't know how to connect with them.

Tools aiming to help students make those connections have exploded in the past three years – but as with analytics tools, it's all too easy for an institution to get caught up in the "good to have" without focusing on the most-pressing student needs. The UIA's experience has shown that college-to-career tech can be incredibly helpful, but only if institutions are discerning and recognize that policies, practices and culture may still need to change.

Part 4
LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

As the UIA moves into the next phase of its work, the alliance is committed to continuing to scale successful, student-centered innovations across campuses. UIA institutions are currently testing the use of artificial intelligence-powered chatbots to improve communication with students and ultimately boost retention. The technology has already proven powerful in admissions – reducing summer melt and increasing enrollment – and holds great potential for improving student outcomes. When Georgia State expanded the use of its chatbot to retention efforts, it saw an increase in Free Application for Federal Student Aid renewals and spring-to-fall retention. Other institutions are seeing similarly promising results.

In the coming years, the UIA plans to redouble its focus on improving outcomes for students of color. The alliance's network will be expanding UIA's impact by adding select new institutions that are especially committed to expanding access and success. Moveover, the UIA will be expanding its outreach and sharing with institutions beyond its immediate network. UIA members have proven that they can remake their campuses to increase the number of students they graduate. Now, it's time to seed a true transformation across higher education.