

A photograph of a university hallway with a glass and steel ceiling. In the foreground, a young man with dark hair and sunglasses, wearing a plaid shirt, smiles broadly. To his left, a young woman with blonde hair, wearing a grey t-shirt, is looking towards him. In the background, other students are visible, and a banner hanging from the ceiling reads "ATHLETE OF THE YEAR".

UNIVERSITY  
OF  
CALIFORNIA

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# First-Generation Student Success at the University of California

August 2017

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**“Educating first-generation students is a big part of what this university is about. When faculty members identify themselves as mentors who have experienced many of the same circumstances and challenges, it creates an environment where students are more comfortable seeking guidance. Students are inspired to achieve.”**

Janet Napolitano  
President, University of California

## INTRODUCTION & KEY FINDINGS

The University of California has long served as an engine of economic mobility for all Californians, regardless of income or background. This fall, an estimated 45 percent of new UC freshmen — about 16,500 students — are working to be the first in their families to earn a four-year university degree. This policy brief highlights some of the unique ways that UC serves first-generation students and empowers them to achieve their goals.

- **UC educates more first-generation students than other institutions of its caliber.** Some 42 percent of all UC undergraduate students are first-generation college students, up from 36 percent a decade ago. This fall, an estimated 45 percent of the freshman class will be striving to be the first in their families to earn a four-year university degree. UC enrolls a higher proportion of first-generation undergraduate students than other selective public institutions (27 percent) and selective private institutions (18 percent), and more than the national average for all four-year institutions (36 percent).
- **UC academic preparation and outreach programs put first-generation students on an early path to college.** UC's academic preparation and outreach programs — which reached first-generation and low-income students in more than 1,100 K-12 public schools and all 113 California community colleges in 2015–16 — serve as a vital pipeline preparing students from all backgrounds to enroll and succeed in college. Once they're ready to apply, UC's comprehensive review admissions policy is designed to ensure that students from all California high schools, including less-resourced schools, have the opportunity to gain admission.
- **First-generation students don't just attend UC — they thrive.** Eighty-one percent of UC first-generation students graduate within six years. That's a significantly higher rate than the national six-year graduation rate for all undergraduates at public institutions (about 60 percent). It also runs counter to troubling national figures: studies have found that only 11 to 50 percent of first-generation students earned a degree in six years. In UC student experience surveys, the majority of first-generation students report a sense of belonging on campus and satisfaction with their UC experience at the same level as their peers.
- **A UC degree expands future earning power for first-generation graduates.** The earnings of UC first-generation graduates far exceed California residents with a high school degree alone, whose median income of \$27,963 they surpass just two years after graduation. Within six years of earning their degrees, UC's first-generation graduates have a higher median income than their families' total income at the time of their college enrollment. UC first-generation graduates go on to careers in a variety of public service-oriented fields, including health care, K-12 education and government.
- **UC's commitment to first-generation students contributes to an economically and ethnically diverse student body.** As a whole, UC first-generation students reflect greater ethnic diversity and come from households with lower median incomes than their undergraduate peers. Their success as students and graduates is a tribute to their hard work and to the lasting value of a UC education.

### UC’s First-Generation College Students

The UC system serves a large and growing population of students working to be part of the first generation in their families to earn a four-year university degree. In 2016, there were 88,242 first-generation undergraduates systemwide, of which over 67,000 entered UC as freshmen while 19,800 began as transfers from California community colleges. An estimated 45 percent of all incoming UC freshmen this fall will be first-generation students. In 2017, UC Irvine awarded a record 54 percent of its bachelor’s degrees to first-generation students.<sup>1</sup>

#### Demographics

About one-third of Californians (32 percent) have graduated from a four-year college, mirroring the national average of 30 percent. UC continues to enroll and graduate large numbers of students whose parents are among the 68 percent without a bachelor’s degree, part of a continuing expansion of college attendance in the state. Across the UC system, the number of first-generation students has grown 6 percent over the past 10 years (Fig. 1).

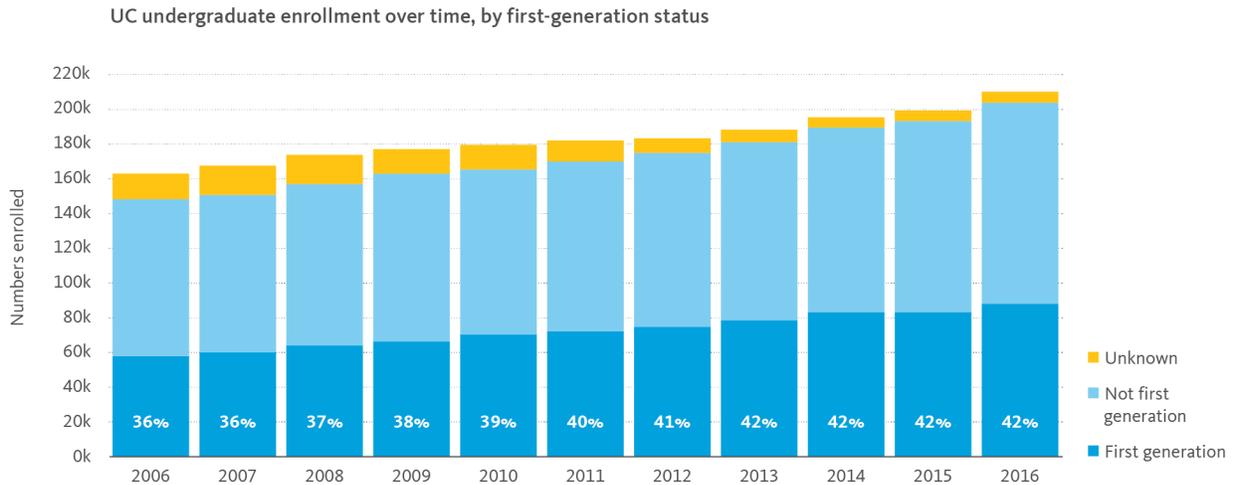
Not only does UC enroll more first-generation students than it did a decade ago, it also enrolls significantly more than other academic institutions of its caliber. An average of 42 percent of UC undergraduates entering from 2013 to 2015 were first-generation students, far exceeding the proportion enrolled at other selective public institutions (27 percent) and selective private institutions (18 percent), and more than the national average for all four-year institutions (36 percent).

UC’s first-generation students reflect greater ethnic diversity and come from homes with a lower median income than their undergraduate peers. First-generation UC students are more likely to receive Pell Grants — the federal aid program for families with incomes of roughly \$50,000 or less — and to come from households where English is not the first language (Fig. 2).

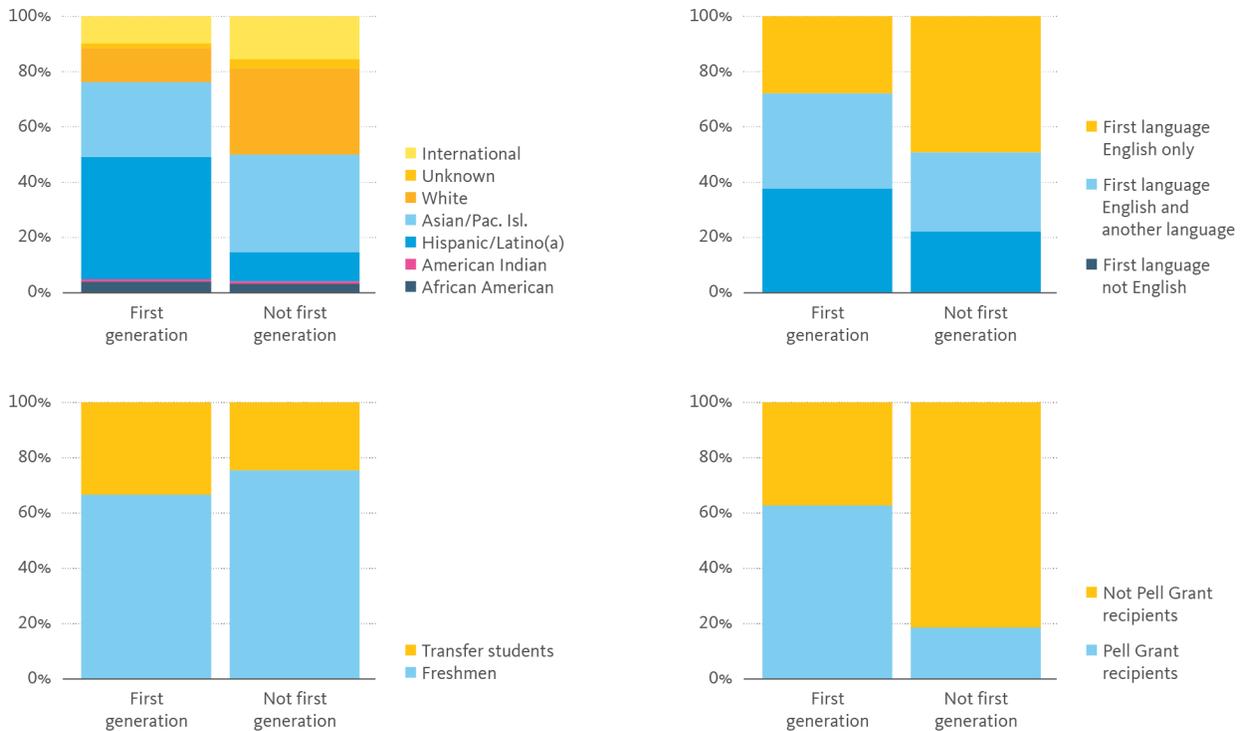
**Table 1.** Average enrollment of first-generation students at various university institutions. The number of institutions in each group is shown in parentheses at left. UCSF is excluded from the UC group as it comprises graduate students only. The American Association of Universities (AAU) represents 60 top research universities in North America. Source: College Scorecard, averaging 2013–14 and 2014–15 entering cohorts of federal aid recipients.

Enrollment, first-generation			
	Average Cohort	Number of Students	Average Percentage
UC (9)	1,241	11,171	42%
AAU Public (30)	1,115	33,462	27%
AAU Private (25)	161	4,032	18%
All Institutions Nationally (1,756)	411	721,920	36%

<sup>1</sup> University of California 2017. “First-generation students the majority of Class of 2017,” <https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/news/first-generation-students-majority-class-2017>



**Figure 1.** UC undergraduate enrollment over time, by first-generation status. The proportion of first-generation undergraduates has grown 6 percent from 2006–2016, from 36 to 42 percent.



**Figure 2.** The demographics of first-generation students across UC campuses, whose population is a higher proportion Latino, transfer student, low-income and coming from homes where English is not the first language. The 2.8 percent of students whose first-generation status is unknown are excluded from these graphs.

### Building a Pipeline to College

For decades, UC has worked to expand the number of California students — particularly those who are first-generation, socioeconomically disadvantaged or English-language learners — who are able to pursue a four-year degree. Operating at all levels of the California education system, from pre-kindergarten through high schools and California Community Colleges, UC's [academic preparation and outreach programs](#) work to raise student achievement levels and close achievement gaps for students from underserved backgrounds.

Data show that students in UC's academic preparation and outreach programs, which are concentrated in less-resourced schools, have higher rates of academic achievement, college readiness and college enrollment than non-participants.<sup>2</sup>

Students who were 12th-grade participants in UC's Early Academic Outreach (EAOP), MESA and Puente programs in 2015–16 matriculated to public California colleges at high rates, with 62 percent of EAOP seniors, 69 percent of MESA seniors and 70 percent of Puente seniors enrolling.<sup>3</sup> These students matriculated at significantly higher rates than California high school graduates as a whole; in fall 2009, the most recent year for which data are available, 41 percent of 2008–09 California public high school graduates matriculated to a UC, CSU or CCC.<sup>4</sup>

### Recruitment and Application Process

To ensure that prospective students know that a UC education is attainable, representatives from UC's nine undergraduate campuses conduct targeted recruitment of students at California schools throughout the state, with a focus on schools with lower than average college-going rates. These visits, which reach large numbers of first-generation and low-income students, are designed to increase awareness among all California students of financial aid, scholarships and other assistance that can put a UC education within reach.

Once students are ready to apply, UC's comprehensive review admissions policy is designed to provide prospective students — particularly those from underrepresented groups — with an opportunity to gain admission to UC. For example, UC's [Eligibility in the Local Context](#) (ELC) admissions policy guarantees admission to all students who are in the top 9 percent of their high school class throughout California. This policy provides students from all California high schools, including those who graduate from less-resourced schools, with the opportunity to gain admission, as admissions officers take into account the important and unique educational context of every applicant. These far-reaching changes in admissions policy have been instrumental in helping first-generation and other underrepresented students, who often come from less-resourced schools, gain a significant foothold at UC.

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<sup>2</sup> University of California — Student Academic Preparation and Educational Partnerships (SAPEP) 2015–16 Program Outcomes: <http://ucop.edu/diversity-engagement/resources-publications/sapep.html>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Comparison data are for fall 2009 enrollments by the Class of 2009, the most recent year available from the California Postsecondary Education Commission's study of statewide college-going within California: <http://www.cpec.ca.gov/StudentData/CACGRCounty.asp>

### First-Generation Student Experience

To ease what can be a challenging transition for students from communities where college-going is not the norm, UC works centrally and at each of its 10 campuses to support first-generation students and their specific needs.

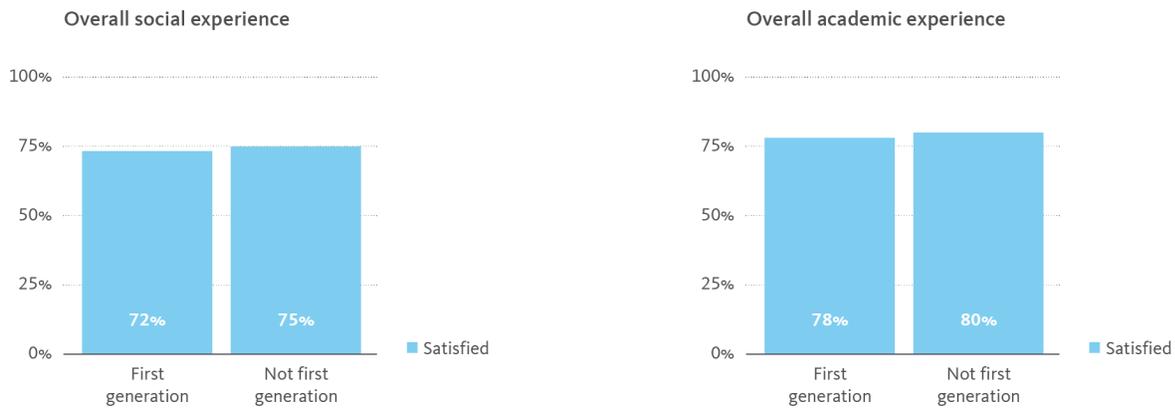
UC campuses offer an array of services aimed at helping first-generation students succeed. Every UC undergraduate campus maintains a dedicated program that supports first-generation students through mentorship, academic support, financial advising and assistance, networking and social activities.<sup>5</sup> Some also provide resources such as first-generation student housing, dedicated summer bridge programs and workshops — such as UC Irvine’s [First Generation, First Quarter Challenge](#) — to help students build community and orient them to university life. University faculty and graduate students drive and advance the research into what works to enhance first-generation student success, findings that shape UC programs and services.

This fall, all 10 UC campuses have united in a systemwide mentorship effort to connect first-generation college students with first-generation faculty mentors who have walked in their shoes, and to facilitate access to resources and tools that can help first-generation students succeed at the college level. Information about UC’s coordinated first-generation faculty effort, along with resources, tools and profiles of first-generation UC students and faculty, can be found at [firstgen.universityofcalifornia.edu](http://firstgen.universityofcalifornia.edu).

These efforts, in addition to other vital support structures in place on UC campuses, pay dividends in first-generation student outcomes and overall satisfaction. The University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES), most recently administered in 2016, shows that first-generation UC students thrive alongside their undergraduate peers. Nearly 80 percent of first-generation students expressed satisfaction with their academic experience, and 72 percent said they were satisfied with their social experience at UC (Fig. 3) — ratings so similar to other students as to be statistically indistinguishable.

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<sup>5</sup> University of California Educational Opportunity Programs — <http://ucal.us/eop>



**Figure 3.** Undergraduate student ratings of their college experience, by first-generation status at all UC undergraduate campuses. Each survey category represents a grouping of “somewhat” and “very” responses as well. Source: University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES), 2016.

First-generation students also gave high ratings on questions about their sense of belonging, feelings of being valued and whether they would enroll again, ratings that were again nearly identical to their undergraduate peers (Table 2).

**Table 2.** The percentage of undergraduate students who strongly agree/agree/somewhat agree with having various positive college experiences, by first-generation status at all UC undergraduate campuses. Source: University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES), 2016.

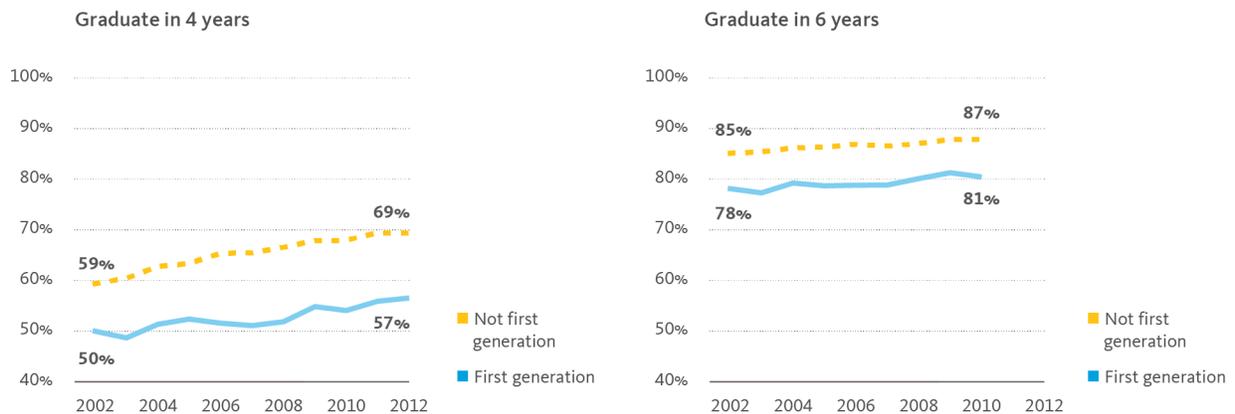
	First generation	Not first generation
“I feel that I belong at this university”	78%	81%
“I feel valued as an individual at this institution”	69%	70%
“Knowing what I know now, I would still choose to enroll at this campus.”	80%	82%

Graduation Rates

Data on national graduation rates for first-generation students is sparse, but the few studies that exist show a dramatic completion gap between first-generation students and other undergraduates. Recent national studies have found that just 50 percent of all first-generation students, and as few as 11 percent of low income first-generation students, earned a bachelor’s degree after six years.<sup>6,7</sup>

UC first-generation students graduate at far higher rates, with around 80 percent of first-generation UC students graduating within six years since 2008 (Fig. 4). The number of UC first-generation students who graduate in six years is also significantly higher than the national six-year graduation rate for all undergraduates at public institutions, which is about 60 percent.<sup>8</sup>

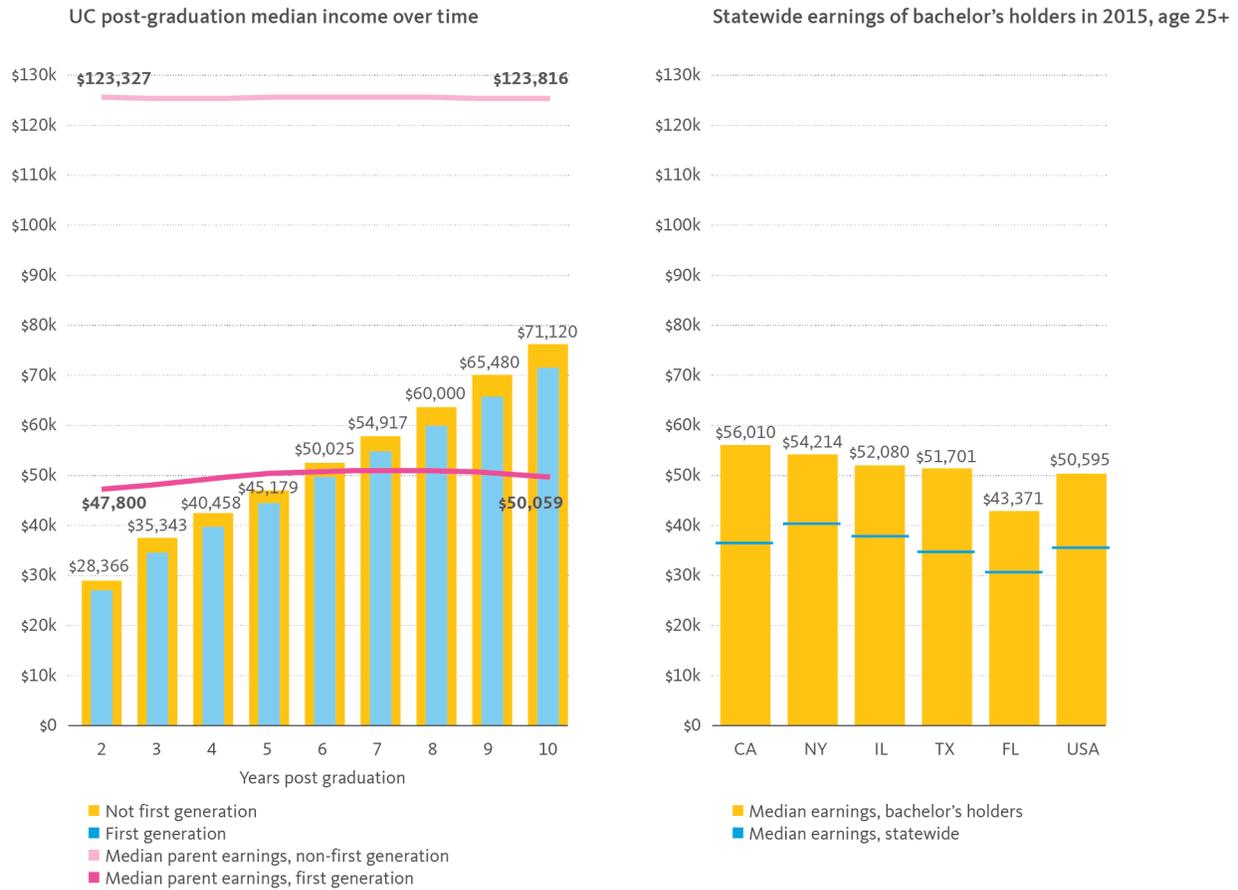
**Figure 4.** Graduation rates for first-generation and other UC undergraduates entering from 2002–2012. Source: UC Data Warehouse



<sup>6</sup> DeAngelo et al., 2011. Completing College: Assessing Graduation Rates at Four Year Institutions. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA. <https://heri.ucla.edu/DARCU/CompletingCollege2011.pdf>  
<sup>7</sup> Engle and Tinto, 2008. Moving Beyond Access — College Success for Low-Income, First-Generation Students. Washington, D.C.,: Pell Institute. [http://www.pellinstitute.org/publications-Moving\\_Beyond\\_Access\\_2008.shtml](http://www.pellinstitute.org/publications-Moving_Beyond_Access_2008.shtml)  
<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2017. The Condition of Education 2017 (NCES 2017-144), Undergraduate Retention and Graduation Rates. <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=40>

Earnings and Employment

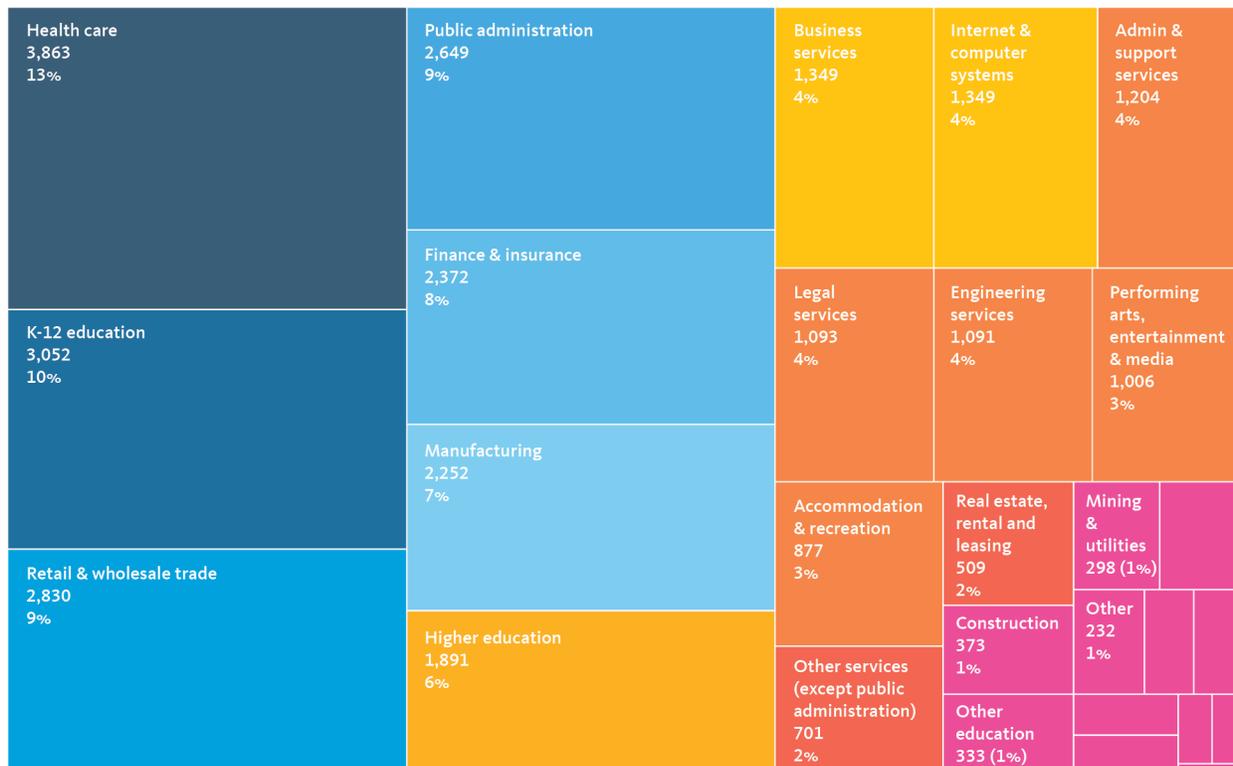
A UC degree enhances incomes significantly, conferring profound economic benefits compared to not attending college. UC first-generation graduates surpass the median income of California residents with a high school degree alone — \$27,963 — just two years after graduation. And as a group, first-generation UC students who entered the university between 2005 and 2014 also surpassed their parents’ households in median income just six years after earning their degree (Fig 5A). The median earnings of UC first-generation alumni also exceed the median for all of California bachelor’s degree holders after seven years — a testament to the unique value of a UC degree (Fig 5B).



**Figure 5.** The median incomes of first-generation UC alumni over time surpass that of their parents’ households after six years and meet that of the statewide median for bachelor’s holders after seven, compared against 2015 earnings. Note earnings labels on the left are for first-generation alumni. Sources: UC Data Warehouse and the American Community Survey 2011–2015 five-year estimate, US Census.

After graduation, first-generation UC alumni go on to careers in a broad range of public service-oriented fields such as health care (13 percent), K-12 education (10 percent), and government (9 percent) (Fig 6). The data below reflects the pathways of first-generation UC graduates who have remained in California, many giving back to their communities through public service.

UC post-graduation median income over time  
Employment 10 years post-graduation by broad industries



**Figure 6.** Employment of first-generation alumni in California at 10 years post-graduation, by broad industry grouping. The size of the rectangles is proportionate to the number of alumni working in each industry, also shown in numbers and as a percentage of total first-generation alumni.

## CONCLUSION

Educating first-generation students is a critical component of the University of California's missions of education, research and public service, and we continue to work to improve educational experiences and outcomes for this important group. In a time of deepening inequality, with many colleges and universities struggling to serve this critical population of students, UC's commitment to enrolling and graduating growing numbers of first-generation students; to providing resources key to student success; to maintaining a supportive learning environment in which first-generation students feel a strong sense of satisfaction, belonging and value; and to delivering an education that boosts post-graduation earnings in careers across key sectors of the California and U.S. economies, ensures that UC will continue to serve as a powerful engine of economic mobility for the state and the nation.