

PRACTICES EXCHANGE NEWSLETTER

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<https://yeswemustcoalition.org>

Issue 63

Growing the Coalition If you know a school that should be a member of the Yes We Must Coalition, please connect us with them. Growing numbers make us stronger in the work we do together and the voice we raise on behalf of low-income students. Please get in touch with Gloria Nemerowicz, President, at glorianemerowicz@yeswemustcoalition.org.

YWMC MEMBER SHOWCASE: Fresno Pacific University (CA)



Originally founded in 1944 as Pacific Bible Institute, **Fresno Pacific University** (FPU) is the only accredited Christian university in California's Central Valley and is a proud Hispanic Serving Institution. FPU's affiliation with the Mennonite Brethren Church gives the University's programs an emphasis on values, ethics and character development to help graduates improve their lives and contribute to the well-being of their families, professions and communities. Fresno joined the Yes We Must Coalition in 2024.

Beginning with an initial enrollment of only 28 students, FPU now welcomes more than 2,900 students—including traditional-age undergraduates and seminarians to adults returning to school for bachelor's and master's degrees. Students pursue their education on the University's

main campus in Southeast Fresno, at the regional campuses in North Fresno, Visalia, Bakersfield and Merced, and online. The regional campuses offer courses mostly for adult students who are enrolled in the University's degree completion program or are pursuing graduate degrees. Over 8,000 professionals nationally take advantage of continuing education courses from FPU each year.



Students at Fresno Pacific represent the face of the Central Valley. Some 60% of traditional undergraduates are the first in their families to attend college, and 59% of FPU students identify as Hispanic. The four-year graduation rate of 66% and six-year graduation rate of 67% are the highest in the region and include those first-generation and Hispanic students.

FPU includes two schools: the School of Arts and Sciences and the School of Graduate and Professional Studies. Small class sizes assure students of personal interaction with their professors, over 80% of whom hold doctorates. These close interactions with faculty can be a resource for internships, academic and professional recommendations, and the basis for a strong, life-long relationship with the University.

Outside the classroom, cocurricular activities help to educate students as whole individuals. FPU's NCAA Division II Sunbird athletic teams compete in 17 sports and have won national championships in women's volleyball, men's and women's tennis and men's swimming. Music ensembles and theater productions are a community resource, and the Office of Spiritual Formation offers a variety of worship and service opportunities. Students are fortunate to be just a short commute from some of the finest art venues, museums, galleries, theaters and art organizations in the world, providing a wide variety of opportunities for visiting, volunteering and doing internships.

Fresno Pacific University is nationally respected. In 2024:

- *The Wall Street Journal* placed FPU at number 78 on its Best Colleges 2024 list and rated FPU number 4 in social mobility.
- *Washington Monthly* ranked FPU number 48 nationally in its Master's University category and number 18 in its Western category as a Best Bang for the Buck school.

- *U.S. News & World Report* listed FPU number 41 overall in the Master's Universities—West category and, among these schools, number 4 in social mobility and number 12 among best values.
- *Money* gave FPU 4.5 stars out of 5 in its rating of more than 2,400 four-year colleges nationally by quality, affordability and student outcomes.

For more information, please contact Becky Bradley, Vice President of University Marketing and Communications, at Rebecca.bradley@fresno.edu.

Institutional Resources/Practices

Helping First-Generation College Students Succeed at Rockford University

For many years the primary method for encouraging student success at **Rockford University** (Rockford, IL) was focused on monitoring academic alerts and providing tutoring services. Recognizing that students need much more than tutoring in order to succeed in college and acknowledging the importance of meeting the needs of the growing population of first-generation and/or low-income students, Karen Walker, Dean of Academic Support, embarked on a mission to create a student support program that would provide wraparound services built on four pillars: social-emotional support, academic support, financial support, and career support.

In fall 2021, Rockford launched their Regents First program, a hands-on program specifically aimed at retaining first-generation students and ensuring degree completion in four years. Open to incoming students, Regents First takes what can be a challenging experience for anyone—enrolling in a four-year university—and boosts support for students who are working to become the first in their families to earn a bachelor's degree. The program pairs each student with a college life skills coach and a financial aid coach, who assist the students throughout their four years on campus and meet with them regularly. Additionally, Regents First students are paired with another first-generation student, who has already successfully completed the first year of college and will serve as a motivating force and help to build resilience during the first year of school through weekly check-ins and study group sessions. Regents First is institutionally funded but has also been awarded local grant funding totaling \$80,000 since its launch.

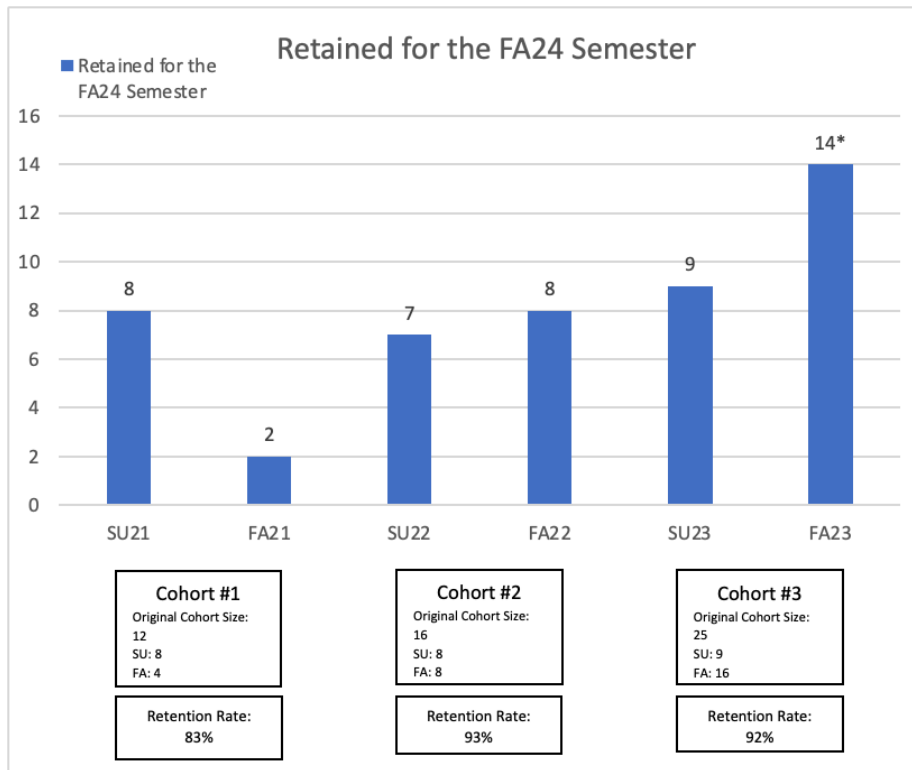
Students who apply and are selected to participate in Regents First must commit to attending either a week-long residential summer retreat or a one-day fall retreat. Both retreat experiences are designed to familiarize participants with campus resources, faculty, and staff and provide opportunities to bond with other first-generation students and peer mentors.

Many first-generation and low-income students are part of supportive families who want to see their students accomplish the goal of college graduation. During the Regents First summer retreat families have a chance to interact and engage with the program administrators. Creating an environment where parents can ask questions and develop an understanding of the college journey ultimately contributes to strengthening a student's resilience and commitment to degree completion.

Walker said, "It isn't just tutoring—it's college life skills coaching, working one-on-one with an adult professional to help set goals and create a success plan, and having a peer mentor who's also a first-generation college student and who has successfully navigated their first year. It's also receiving financial assistance to help with purchasing course materials or a digital device in

your first year and having a financial aid coach who can help you when you get an email that indicates your tuition is past due.”

Retention and persistence rates for Regents First program participants continue to make impressive gains and exceed the overall campus retention rate for first-year students. The most current retention rates for first-year students have been 66% for fall 2020, 64% for fall 2021, and 69% for fall 2022. As the 2024–25 academic year begins, Regents First will welcome its fourth cohort of 25 students, bringing the program participant total to 73 students. Currently 83% of the inaugural cohort members are on track to graduate in May 2025.



*One student will be on Medical LOA for Fall 2024, but is expected to return for the Spring 2025 semester. The other student will be on a LOA, to work full-time and afford tuition costs, but plans to return in Fall 2025.

The Regents First program serves as a model for successful and cost-effective ways to improve retention among first-generation and low-income students. It provides an opportunity for institutions to improve student outcomes and represents an attractive selling point for new students as well as for potential grantors. For more information, please contact Dr. Karen Walker, Dean of Student Support Programming, at kwalker@rockford.edu.

Submissions for Future Issues

YWMC members are encouraged to submit examples of policies, practices and/or resources that you have found to be effective in promoting student success and that you would like to share with your YWMC colleagues. We are particularly interested in examples of how members are addressing issues of social and racial justice. Send ideas for the newsletter to Barbara Kirby, Operations Manager, barbarakirby@yeswemustcoalition.org.