



# Expert Spotlight

## Carlos Rodriguez

Carlos Rodriguez is a second-year transfer student at University of California, Los Angeles, pursuing a bachelor's degree in Economics and Sociology. He is the proud product of Mexican immigrants and grew up in the Central Valley. Prior to transferring to the #1 public university in the nation, Carlos was the first in his family to graduate high school and is a first-generation graduate of Porterville College, where he served as the Associated Student Government President.

In this spotlight, Carlos discusses the imperative of improving faculty and leadership diversity to support students like him to succeed in elite academic institutions. Learn more in our related publication, [\*How Universities Can Build and Sustain Welcoming and Equitable Campus Environments\*](#).



## From Porterville to Washington, DC

I'd like to begin by saying that I am many things: I am the first in my family to graduate high school; I am a proud product of the California Community Colleges; I am the son of Mexican immigrants; and I am a system-impacted second-year transfer student studying Economics and Sociology at one of California's most selective institutions, University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).

As a first-generation college student, I am grateful to have taken part in UCLA's Washington D.C. program last school year, interning with my hometown Congressman David Valadao, and to have the opportunity to speak about the important issue of building welcoming campus environments through faculty and leadership diversity.



## Humanizing the College Experience: A Journey of Advocacy and Leadership

My call to higher education and student leadership has always been to humanize the college experience, to make it feel less like a machine so that California fully supports the students it's intended to serve. My goal has always been to help students like me, who didn't have early support, see college as a legitimate option for them. Five years ago, I was a freshman in high school, and I believed college was out of reach for me because I didn't have anybody who came from a similar background advising me. I was almost left out of higher education.





## Enhancing Support Networks

I've made it this far thanks to a strong support network that will live in my heart forever. While I was attending my local community college, Porterville College, it was my custodial colleagues who never ceased to cheer me on and who advised me professionally and personally, even though it wasn't in their job description. It was my community college calculus professor, Miguel Ruelas, a UCLA alumnus, who walked me through the transfer process and made me feel welcome at Porterville. He had the reputation of being invested in his students, and I experienced that firsthand. He's a first-generation college graduate from a working-class family, coming from a background very much like mine, with the same challenges related to money and experience navigating the college maze.

He went above and beyond what was expected, and I would spend at least 10 hours a week with him in class and during office hours to make transfer possible for me. He helped me envision what my life at UCLA and beyond would be like, which wasn't something anyone in my family could do, no matter how much they loved and supported me. And today, it's my transfer peer advisors that are guiding my UCLA experience.

# Diversity in the University of California System

I'm not alone in this experience. Students of all walks of life make up the University of California (UC) system: in 2021, over 60% of the UC student body were of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Twenty-five percent of students were Latinx, 4% Black, and 35% Asian American and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (NHPI).

But when we look at Latinx leadership throughout the UC system, we see a sore lack of representation in every leadership body except the Board of Regents—the UC's governing body. The share of Latinx leaders has decreased in all but faculty positions from 2017-2021. Only 8% of tenured faculty and 7% of non-tenured faculty are Latinx at the UC.

Black students fortunately see strong representation in the Board of Regents and campus senior leadership. But this is tempered by stagnation in progress toward representation among faculty and the academic senate—which hasn't improved at all in this five-year period.

Asian American and NHPI students, who make up the largest share of the UC's student body, account for 15% of California's population. We have seen improvements in their representation on the Board of Regents and in campus senior leadership but decreases in the academic senate.

Meanwhile, white people are significantly overrepresented in UC leadership. Five years after the Campaign for College Opportunity published its [first report](#) examining diversity in California higher education leadership, every category of leadership—tenured and non-tenured faculty, statewide academic senate, and campus senior leadership—remains at least 50% white. The UC Board of Regents is by far the most racially and ethnically diverse leadership body within the UC, where half of the Regents are either Latinx, Black, Asian American, or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander.





## Navigating Elite Academic Spaces

I've been a UC student for one academic year now, and I still have many questions and challenges as a first-generation transfer student trying to navigate elite academic spaces and build community. My experience at UCLA has been a large departure from my time as a community college student at Porterville College, but my vision for students like me is to have a seamless experience where we can see ourselves reflected on our campuses.

It feels like I have far more in common with my former coworkers, the custodians I worked alongside at Porterville, than I do with the professors I've had at UCLA so far. Classes are so big, I hardly connect with my professors at a one-on-one level, and the culture shock I faced at the beginning of my time here was rough to adjust to when I was so used to the rich diversity of my community.

Without the onboarding experience I had with the Transfer Summer Program, I probably would not have had any clue of how to navigate campus, find tutoring for my classes, or make the small circle of friends I now possess. Once the regular school year began, I was shocked at the differences in the racial makeup of my new school compared to my old one. I came from a system where 47% of students are Latinx to a system where only 25% of students are Latinx, and even less at more selective UC campuses. This disparate representation is in leadership, as well.



# A Call to Action: Diversity in UC Leadership

What does this mean for students navigating the UC system today? It means that we have fewer opportunities to connect with campus leaders and professors who look like us, to build mentorships with them that support us to succeed, and that our courses are more likely to be shaped without our experiences in mind. It also means that critical exchanges that push us forward aren't happening at the rates they should be.

With diverse leaders, students are more likely to find someone who can answer their financial aid questions, guide them through selecting classes, and ensure students are on the road to timely graduation, all without judgment because they have trudged the path before. Education becomes more accessible to those with diverse backgrounds when people from those same backgrounds are assisting the newer generations.

After finishing my first year at UCLA, I recognize the immense value and benefits that diversity brings to our general student bodies, but also, importantly, to our faculty and leadership positions. More students can benefit from a coordinated systemwide effort to diversify UC leadership, especially when it comes to promoting equitable student success and closing racial equity gaps in higher education.







## Reflecting California's Rich Diversity: Closing the Gap in Higher Education

The UC system has yet to reflect California's rich diversity in either its student body makeup or its leadership and faculty. UCLA prides itself on the legendary people of color they helped develop, like Jackie Robinson or Nobel laureate Ralph Bunche. How will we produce the next generation of diverse history makers, who will go on to produce wonders, if students, faculty, and leaders of color continue facing exclusion in our higher education system?

I urge the UC system and campus leaders to do everything they can to ensure that opportunities for diverse faculty and leadership are a standard, not an exception. There are so many students who come from backgrounds like mine that deserve a seat at the UC and to have someone who looks like them reflected in our classrooms.

One year after the Supreme Court announced its devastating decision to restrict the consideration of race in college and university admissions nationwide, we need action now more than ever to ensure that the doors to opportunity are not closed to the Latinx, Black, Asian American and NHPI, and AIAN students who will power this country forward. I implore higher education leaders, advocates, and policymakers to equip themselves with data and implement the best practices to foster an affirming student experience on every campus.



## About Carlos Rodriguez

Carlos Rodriguez is a second-year transfer student at UCLA pursuing a bachelor's degree in Economics and Sociology. He is the proud product of Mexican immigrants and grew up in the Central Valley. Prior to transferring to the #1 public university in the nation, Carlos was the first in his family to graduate high school and is a first-generation graduate of Porterville College, where he served as the Associated Student Government President. He worked alongside his college President, Dr. Claudia Habib, and students across his campus and the state to advocate for increased financial aid, funding for basic needs, and addressing the shortage in mental health services. He attributes his remarkable educational journey to the members of Porterville College's Maintenance and Operations Department and distinguished faculty who helped him develop as a student, leader, and advocate.

Carlos participated in the 2023 General Assembly hosted by the Student Senate for California Community Colleges (SSCCC) as a delegate for his campus. He is also an alumnus of the Student Leadership Institute at the Campaign for College Opportunity, where he navigated higher education policy advocacy and reform in the pursuit of closing racial equity gaps across California. After being exposed to legislation via the University of California's Washington D.C. program in the 23-24 school year, he hopes to continue to expand his knowledge and skill-sets in the realm of economic justice, public policy, and influencing decision-making to better serve our most marginalized communities. He is currently teaching classes at the Ventura County Juvenile Detention Center through the Prison Education Project and plans on applying to a Masters in Public Policy once he graduates from UCLA.

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The Campaign for College Opportunity is a California non-profit bipartisan policy and research organization focused on a single mission: to ensure all Californians have an equal opportunity to attend and succeed in college in order to build a vibrant workforce, economy and democracy. In June 2023, the U.S. Supreme Court announced a decision to curtail the use of race in college and university admissions, a powerful tool that has been used to address the legacy of racial injustice and advance the inclusion and integration of Latinx, Black, Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (NHPI), and American Indian/Alaska Native (AIAN) students. In response, the Campaign for College Opportunity has launched a national initiative, [Affirming Equity, Ensuring Inclusion, Empowering Action](#), promoting evidence-based solutions through practice briefs and toolkits that advance more equitable strategies in college preparation, admission, affordability, and success to ensure those who have been historically excluded and underserved by our colleges and universities have a real opportunity to go to college and succeed.