

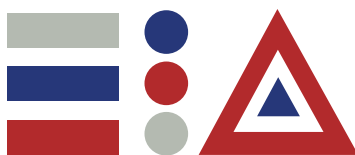


# Expert Spotlight

## Olufemi "Femi" Ogundele

Olufemi "Femi" Ogundele is associate vice chancellor of enrollment and dean of undergraduate admissions at the University of California (UC), Berkeley. A key part of his job is overseeing the Office of Undergraduate Admissions, where his vision and leadership have brought about outreach initiatives successfully targeting LGBTQ+, undocumented, underserved, and first-generation students.

His efforts have resulted in two of the most ethnically and geographically diverse classes of students enrolled at UC Berkeley in three decades. Not content simply to bring increased diversity to his own campus, Ogundele has also had tremendous success building outreach processes and onboarding experiences that have led to greater diversity at other universities, including Stanford and Cornell. He continues to explore how minoritized students, their high school environments, and the college admissions process perpetuate or dismantle racial inequities in higher education.



affirming **EQUITY**  
ensuring **INCLUSION**  
empowering **ACTION**



As part of the [Affirming Equity, Ensuring Inclusion, Empowering Action](#) national initiative, the Campaign for College Opportunity interviewed Ogundele to learn more about how he has accomplished so much in such a short time at UC Berkeley, and what California colleges and universities need to think about as they assess their own admissions policies in light of the ongoing tension around Proposition 209.

The following, in Ogundele's words, are excerpts and highlights from the interview, along with helpful advice for other schools.

1.

## An Improved Admissions Process

### HAVE AN OUTREACH, NOT A RECRUITMENT, MINDSET.

When I got to Berkeley, the first thing I did was change where and how we recruit. I wanted to be more inclusive of all diverse high school experiences across the state, and I wanted where we go to be reflective of the fact that we receive over 100,000 applications annually. **That means that rather than having a recruitment mindset, we can have an outreach mindset.** It's really about us getting into as many different communities as we possibly can to talk about who we are and dispel myths about that.



*That means that rather than having a recruitment mindset, we can have an outreach mindset.*

We added regional representatives in Los Angeles, the Central Valley, the Inland Empire, and San Diego to really be able to better meet students where they are and understand the context in which they are applying to our school. We created the [Berkeley En Español](#) website to allow families of potential first-generation students to be able to learn more about our community in a language that's comfortable to them.

## **BUILD AN INCLUSIVE AND DIVERSE ADMISSIONS OFFICE.**

We then built a diversity team in our admissions office with an associate director of diversity and admissions officers tasked to ensure that we are connecting with communities across the state. I thought it was really important that we actually had a diversity team — not only for figuring out what's happening across the state, but also to educate our staff of the varied lived experiences of our applicant pool.

We then strengthened our bias training sessions for our evaluation and outreach trainings for all of our admissions readers to participate in every single year during our admission cycle. **Cultural competency is not a destination, it's a journey**, and we are all in this, both collectively and individually, so it's important for me that when we hire new people, there's at least a baseline of understanding, and then people can do more from there. By having more robust bias trainings and cultural competency trainings annually, we make sure that we are seeking students and their full potential, that we are building a community of scholars, not just a Rolodex.



*The student experience is made up of who they are, their family members, what high school they go to — all of these things. This needs to come first.*

---

## **LOOK FOR EXCELLENCE, NOT PERFECTION.**

You're going to hear me talk about excellence a lot, and that's because I truly believe that we are looking for excellence and not perfection. Excellence gives weight to the nuanced experiences of the students and to the varying educational experiences and environments that students are coming from. **The student experience is made up of who they are, their family members, what high school they go to — all of these things. This needs to come first.** It's important to me that our readers and evaluators gain an understanding of who our students are before we evaluate what they've accomplished.

## OPTIMIZE THE PROCESS FOR INCLUSION.

When I got to Berkeley, you'd open up an admissions file, and the first thing you'd see was test score information. We moved that stuff [testing information] down, because when you are volume-reading files, your eyes go to the things that you're looking for. So, we changed the order of information in the files.

We also shifted the way we read to a territory model, educating staff to have expertise on a specific region so they can understand the educational context and also be able to evaluate what excellence looks like within that context as we consider admissions.

## PRIORITIZE INCLUSION OVER EXCLUSIVITY.

Then finally, in the yield phase, we really shifted the value proposition away from being “the best school because we are the most exclusive” to being the best school because we are the most inclusive of diverse excellence. Excellence and diversity are not in conflict, and in fact, you cannot have one without the other, so we celebrate the fact that we are able to sharply increase all of our diversity numbers while maintaining our academic standards. This was also something we had done even before getting rid of the SAT and ACT.

We went test-free, knowing it would create a more equitable reading process. We also recognized the lack of access to testing centers during the pandemic. Most importantly, we examined the research done in 2014 by [Hiss and Franks](#) that showed why test-optional was just not enough when trying to create true equity in the admission process. When I first got here to Berkeley, the first class that we brought in was the most diverse class in 30 years, and we did that while we were still considering testing. So, whether you have or don't have testing does not determine whether your process is equitable or not — you can be equitable with testing, you can be inequitable without. It's much more about how you are utilizing the tools when you are evaluating applications and determining merit.



*Excellence and diversity are not in conflict, and in fact, you cannot have one without the other.*

---





## 2.

# A Wider Welcome for Prospective Students

## INVOLVE FACULTY MEMBERS FROM DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS.

Another piece that we did is to engage diverse faculty across the academy. Representation matters, and although we are a predominantly white institution, there are faculty here who look like you, have similar experiences to you, who might have a Ph.D. and a Nobel Prize now, but who started off as first-generation college students. While our faculty are incredibly well-known for scholarship, **we have to humanize our faculty as people who once were also young budding scholars with dreams.**

## HOLD VIRTUAL YIELD ACTIVITIES FOR THOSE AT A DISTANCE.

Since the pandemic, we have continued virtual yield activities because we know that there are a lot of students who cannot physically make it to campus. That's really important, because I think a lot of people did virtual events during the pandemic, but then they were like, "Alright, now that we're back on campus, we want people to come to campus." But there were people who were never able to make it to your campus, right? **Virtual activities allow for us to stay engaged with and to welcome populations that we wouldn't have been engaging with before.**

## COLLABORATE WITH PIPELINE PROGRAMS ON CAMPUS.

The final thing is that the way that you are developing relationships with pipeline programs is important, and so we have developed institutional relationships with our pipeline programs across campus at Berkeley to really learn what's happening on the ground in California high schools and community colleges.

And I know the question is, “So, how did it go?” Since I began in the fall 2019 admissions cycle, we have seen a 17% increase in the proportion of new Black undergraduate students, a 28% increase in the proportion of new undergraduate Latinx students, a 20% increase in the proportion of new undergraduate Native American students, and a 18% increase in new first-generation undergraduate students, as well. **And all of those demographic shifts happened without any compromising of our academic standards. So, yes, you can have excellence and diversity.** And I think that’s what we continue to hopefully prove through doing this work.

# 3.

Photo by Allison Shelley/The Verbatim Agency for EDUimages

## More Steps for Success

### FRAME ADMISSIONS AROUND WHAT IT MEANS FOR YOUR CAMPUS.

The most important thing that people need to understand is that **admissions is not just a transaction. It is an execution of the institution’s values and priorities.** When you frame it like that, then you understand that you really do need to take a look at all parts of what you do and who you are interested in having on your campuses. Too often, folks on campus believe that their applicant pool is indicative of the landscape that’s out there. And that’s not always true.

The folks in admissions, outreach, and enrollment really need to own the expertise on that so they can educate campus partners and then start to ask the questions around demographics and diversity. Diversity work in admissions is based on believing that the diverse populations in applicant pools need to be understood when determining merit, in order for your process to be equitable. On both sides, students don’t choose if they are privileged or disadvantaged, so having a process that is responsive to their resources and lived experiences is critical.

Admissions for us was never a matter of selective addition. There was never a simple rubric—no “this plus this plus this equals admit.” And then you take away incredibly important identifiers, like race, and under Prop 209, we’re also not allowed to consider gender, either. So, when you can’t consider these identifiers in the context by which you are understanding applications, other factors must play greater roles.

And so, what I would tell enrollment leaders and admissions leaders is to huddle up with your campus leaders, your faculty, your university communications teams, and your legal counsel to establish a common language and understanding of what diversity means for your campus, so that everyone is able to embrace the same values and language.

### **BRACE FOR YOUR ADMISSIONS NUMBERS TO DROP.**

There is no way, there is no proxy, that allows for you to have the same type of admissions outcome that you would if you were able to consider race. The University of California tried that. We submitted an amicus brief to the Supreme Court showing how we spent millions of dollars, and countless hours of manpower—people power, if you will—over 25 years, and we failed to rebound to the numbers that we had before California passed Proposition 209 in 1996, which banned the consideration of race and gender in public decision-making. So, given that, I think that everybody across the board should absolutely prepare to see their numbers drop.

### **TRAIN STAFF TO UNDERSTAND APPLICANT POPULATIONS.**

Those who have been investing in understanding the diverse populations and their lived experiences in relation to education, and have trained their staffs to evaluate and understand excellence within that, will be less affected. This is because equity in your evaluation allows the very experiences that your people are reading about to be taken in and understood; it allows people to understand what excellence within those contexts looks like. So, those schools that are currently doing that will be less affected than the schools that are not. Those schools are going to have to train people to lean into things in ways that they have never done before.



*Admissions is not just a transaction. It is an execution of the institution's values and priorities.*

---

## KEEP THE EXPECTED FAMILY FINANCIAL CONTRIBUTION COMPETITIVE.

Financial aid also plays an important role in creating a diverse class. One thing that we did that was really important for us was to lower self-help, which is the California state version of “expected family contribution.” In 2019, among UC sibling campuses, we had one of the highest self-help expectations. **We have been really fighting hard to lower our self-help and for it to be more competitive. Under the leadership of Cruz Grimaldo, our assistant vice chancellor and director of financial aid and scholarships, we have been able to bring our self-help down to the second lowest in the UC system.** That contributes to increases in our applicants with fee waivers, our first-gen students, and our Pell Grant recipients.



## Understanding the Prop. 209 Shift

From the implementation of Prop. 209, Berkeley and UCLA, in particular, saw a 50% decrease in Black and Latinx students almost immediately. Both institutions have been working to bring those numbers up, and yet we have not. We still have not fully recovered. But I can tell you about the ways that I know we’ve corrected some things.

After some greater consultation, **the entire University of California system leaned into all that they could while still remaining compliant within Prop. 209.** And so, to me, the question shifted. It shifted from, “What are the things we are not allowed to do?” to “What are the things that we can do?” There was a lot of effort put into that, and some of that was taking a look at the public data to help us understand, again, where other opportunities are to level the playing field.



When it comes to doing diversity recruitment for equity, that's required because the K-12 experience is not standard. So, I know that the University of California needed everything from outreach to yield activities, including that we now work annually with the HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) on college fairs that happen all across the state. We have better partnerships and alumni relations cultivation across the UCs, as well — even the marketing, the messaging, the advertising, all of that.

What's interesting is that when I came to Berkeley and started bringing in the classes that I brought in, if you look at the aggregate of our admissions decisions, we started admitting many students from all across the spectrum, which meant that there were some communities that saw decreases in their admit rates. **We started to get calls from some of those communities who believed that we were using racial proxies, or things like that, against them.** So, we had to get them to understand that, 1) that was racist, and we would never do that, and 2) that Prop. 209 is very specific about how we can go about our work.

Now, for new folks coming into the UC, there is a much better understanding of Prop 209, but I will also say that, unfortunately, a majority of people across the country are no longer in favor of affirmative action. In this state, [Prop. 16](#) was on the ballot to reverse Prop. 209 and bring affirmative action back to the state, and it failed miserably. It is clear that it is not a red or blue issue. It's not a liberal versus conservative issue. And I think that is interesting for how it intersects with a majority of the incoming students, who are only vaguely familiar with what affirmative action even is.



*The entire University of California system leaned into all that they could while still remaining compliant within Prop. 209. And so, to me, the question shifted. It shifted from, “What are the things we are not allowed to do?” to “What are the things that we can do?”*

---



# 5.

## Important Conversations about Equitable Admissions

### TRAIN ADMISSIONS OFFICERS TO UNDERSTAND CONTEXT.

To admissions folks, I would say that having equitable college admissions requires an understanding of the broader context of student applications: everything from the applicants' neighborhoods, their schools, their courses available, who has access to those courses, and the situations at home. Those things vary greatly in K-12 and impact how students show up in our reading processes. **So, we have to make sure that we are training our admissions officers to better understand that.** And again, I am talking about looking for excellence, and not perfection, in your reading and selection process.

### KEEP LEADERSHIP INFORMED ABOUT PROGRESS.

It is important for admissions folks to be consistent with their commitment to equity by constantly asking what they can do, rather than focusing on what they can't. And I would also say it is important for them to speak to their leadership and their partners about the work that they're doing and the progress that they're making. I think that is critical, more critical now than ever, and I know that could invite undue scrutiny, but it is really important because you need people to be aligned.

## **INCLUDING FACULTY IN THE ADMISSIONS CONVERSATION**

To both admissions and faculty, I would say that we really have to take a look at admissions requirements versus academic opportunity, particularly for some of our most sought-after majors and programs. And we have to ask ourselves what it means when a student gets a pat on the back for graduating from high school just to learn they are underprepared for their college aspirations. That's a problem.

So, specifically, I want to focus on the entry-level curriculum. What are the requirements? Does everybody have access to those requirements? If not, how are they shifting the first-year curriculum to allow students to catch up, knowing any gaps have nothing to do with their intellectual capacity and everything to do with their academic exposure? That's a conversation that admissions folks need to have with faculty, where admissions can kind of say what's missing. And faculty are the ones who would really know how to make up for that gap. That's a collaborative conversation that needs to be had.

## **TALK ABOUT TRACKING WITH HIGH SCHOOL COLLEGE COUNSELORS.**

To our college counseling friends — in particular, those at high schools that have strong curriculums, I would say: stop pretending like tracking is not a thing. Tracking is something that really limits a student's ability to either become competitive in some of our applicant pools or not. So, for example, understand the makeup of some of the AP courses that you might have. Who's taking those courses, and who's not taking those courses? Which courses might be capped, and where do you cap your enrollment?

Having a better understanding of not just what's offered in a high school, but who can access what's offered, in aggregate, would be incredibly helpful to understanding applications from students coming out of certain high schools. This is particularly important because we know the research has proven that Black and Latinx students are tracked out of college prep courses as other students are tracked into them at disproportionate rates.





# 6.

## COVID-19's Lasting Effects on Education

Lastly, we cannot forget about the impact of COVID. It's going to linger for years to come.

### **COVID AFFECTED SOME STUDENTS MORE THAN OTHERS.**

It's important to remember that the pandemic had a disproportionate impact on low-income people and communities of color. And those same students returned from the pandemic to under-resourced high schools that saw a large mass of teachers leave.

So, when those students approach our application pools four, five, six years down the road, where do we expect them to be in their math readiness, and what will we do about it? How do we take these events into context, and how do we make sure that those students are being considered? It's always important to stay in touch with those who are really supporting and dealing with the educational pipeline.

## About Olufemi “Femi” Ogundele (he/him/his)

In his capacity as UC Berkeley’s associate vice chancellor of admissions & enrollment, Femi Ogundele provides vision, strategy and leadership in the recruitment and evaluation of California’s public flagship. For the last decade, Ogundele has been a vocal thought leader in the college access and college admission industry. He is a member of the Chancellor’s Cabinet and oversees the Office of Undergraduate Admission, the financial aid office, the university registrar, the visitor’s center, and the Center for Educational Partnerships which provides college access support in high schools and community colleges across the State of California. His vision and leadership in undergraduate admissions outreach to the state’s underrepresented, undocumented, underserved and first-generation students have resulted in four consecutive years of the most ethnically and geographically diverse classes of students to Berkeley in three decades.

Prior to Berkeley, Ogundele has been successful at building outreach and evaluation processes that have resulted in greater diversity at Stanford University, Cornell University, University of Delaware, and Ithaca College. He sits on national college access boards and has done work to establish higher education pipelines for students, educators and refugees throughout sub-Saharan Africa. In his role as associate vice chancellor of enrollment, Ogundele has been committed to lowering the cost of higher education and closing the graduation gap among diverse communities. With degrees from Mansfield University of Pennsylvania and Ithaca College, Ogundele remains committed to the scholarship of equity in education as he is also currently pursuing a doctoral degree at UC Berkeley’s Graduate School of Education.

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.





## Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the funders who are supporting this series of briefs, including The College Futures Foundation, The Lumina Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, The W.K. Kellogg Foundation, The Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund, The Stuart Foundation, GPSN, and Eileen and Harold Brown.



*Please visit our website for more resources to affirm equity, ensure inclusion, and empower action.*  
**[www.collegecampaign.org](http://www.collegecampaign.org)**



facebook.com/**collegecampaign**



@**CollegeOpp**

### LOS ANGELES OFFICE

1149 S. Hill Street, Ste. 925  
Los Angeles, CA 90015  
Tel: (213) 744-9434  
Fax: (877) 207-3560

### SACRAMENTO OFFICE

1512 14th Street  
Sacramento, CA 95814  
Tel: (916) 443-1681  
Fax: (916) 443-1682

### WASHINGTON, D.C. OFFICE

1016 16th Street NW, Suite 100  
Washington, D.C. 20036  
Tel: (202) 293-2828

### BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Edward C. Bush, Chair  
Brooke Armour, Vice Chair  
Maria Anguiano, Treasurer  
J. Luke Wood, Secretary

Thomas A. Saenz  
Estela Mara Bensimon  
Lena Carew  
Mellissa E. Gallegos  
Paul Granillo  
Juan Sánchez Muñoz

Maria Ott  
Julie Peller  
Reshma Shamasunder  
Joseph Villela  
Andy Wong