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New Grant Aids Underrepresented Students With Undeclared Majors

A \$1 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education will fund support services for second-year students from low-income families, who are most at risk of dropping out.

Quick Facts • UC Merced received a \$1 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education. • The grant, distributed over five years, will fund support services specifically targeted to undeclared undergraduates who are first-generation students or come from low-income families. • The Strengthening Talents and Exploring Pathways (STEP) program will be functional by the end of the fall semester.

MERCED, Calif. — A new grant from the U.S. Department of Education will help the University of California, Merced, establish important support services for first-generation and low-income students who have yet to declare a major.

The grant, totaling \$1.09 million over five years, will launch the Strengthening Talents and Exploring Pathways (STEP) program. STEP will be part of the [Calvin E. Bright Success Center's](#) existing [Fiat Lux](#) program, which serves underrepresented students at UC Merced.

Bright Success Center Director Elizabeth Boretz said the funding will be used to address the needs of second-year students, because the transition from the first year to the second is critical. Nationwide, two-thirds of students who drop out do so in their sophomore year, and 75 percent of those who drop out in their second year never complete their degrees.

“The idea of student support services is creating programs that help promote degree completion, student persistence and timeliness of degree completion among low-income, first-generation students,” Boretz said. “It is a way of taking what we are already doing and building another arm out from there just for the undeclared.”

The goals for the STEP program include increasing the retention rate by 5 percent and increasing the four-year graduation rate from 37.6 percent to 50 percent among students eligible for the program, while ensuring each STEP scholar has declared a major by his or her junior year.

After analyzing institutional data, Boretz determined there is a significant need for the campus to further support undeclared, first-generation students who come from low-income, households. Campus data show that undeclared students face academic dismissal at two to three times the rate of peers who have declared a major.

While some elements for the program will be in place at the start of the academic year, the program should be in full swing by the end of the fall semester, when a STEP coordinator and a counselor have been hired.

Boretz said the campus's underrepresented students already get special attention through the Fiat Lux Scholars program, which focuses mainly on first-year students. However, the new STEP program will create an even stronger community for undeclared second-year students.

"I think they will know how much we believe in them and that we are noticing that they are special and that they merit the extra attention," she said. "The more programs you have, the more ways students can find help to get what they need."

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UC Merced opened Sept. 5, 2005, as the newest campus in the University of California system and the first American research university of the 21st century. Situated near Yosemite National Park, the campus significantly expands access to the UC system for students throughout the state, with a special mission to increase college-going rates among students in the San Joaquin Valley. It also serves as a major base of advanced research, a model of sustainable design and construction, and a stimulus to economic growth and diversification throughout the region.