



Metro’s San Francisco as a Living Laboratory How to Reclaim a City: Civic Learning and Engagement for Student Success

When Metro students at San Francisco State University leave their homes each morning, many step into a social crisis: They see grandmothers picking through garbage bins to fish out bottles and cans to sell for a few cents at the recycling center; they pass tent cities of homeless people sleeping in the shadows of new condo towers; and some commute long distances, shuttling between the university and the new “servant’s quarters” in the outer suburbs of Hercules and Antioch, populated by long-time SF residents displaced by unaffordable rents in the city. The SF Learning Lab is a new two-semester course that allows students to deeply reflect on the realities of their own communities, while also building a sophisticated analysis of the political economy of the Bay Area. Through dialogues with community organizers and academics, students take a front row seat in strategy discussions now under way on how engaged communities can bend the arc towards a more just and equitable Bay Area. Participation in the Lab allows Metro students to understand themselves as local and global citizens and as professional workers for the social good—strongly motivated to persist to graduation and beyond. The specific goal of the Living Lab is to support continuing Metro students in their fifth and sixth semesters to hit a six-year graduation rate of 70%, the university’s goal for its Graduation Initiative 2025.¹

The SF Living Lab is part of the award-winning Metro College Success Program at San Francisco State University.² Metro targets academic and wrap-around support to historically underserved ([Redefining Historically Underserved Students in the CSU](#)) first and second year students. Ninety-six percent of Metro students are low-income, first-generation, and/or ethnically underrepresented. As described below, the program has been able to zero out the gap in graduation rates for Metro’s historically underrepresented students versus a matched comparison group as well as their more advantaged peers.

Now fully institutionalized, Metro has succeeded in going to scale while maintaining its strong outcomes. The program serves 45% of underrepresented students enrolled in lower division and

¹ While private universities use the benchmark of four-year graduation, public urban and commuter universities like SF State use a benchmark of six-year graduation, given that many students are working their way through college and often have significant family responsibilities.

² The program has received multiple recognitions including a CA Governor’s Award for Innovation in Higher Education, a federal Strengthening Institutions Program grant, and California State University Wang Award for Innovation in Student Success, among others.

31% of lower division students overall. Close to 2,000 students in their first four semesters at University are enrolled, with 1018 in their first year and 872 in their second year. An additional 1380 students are followed supportively once they move beyond Metro into the upper division and their majors.

San Francisco has an image of being a tech capital and playground for the rich. Yet the data reveals a sobering reality of polarized wealth and poverty existing side by side:

- Using the Gini coefficient to measure income inequality, San Francisco is slightly more unequal than Rwanda—yes, Rwanda.
- The SF Bay Area has the nation’s #1 highest concentration of millionaires and billionaires per capita.
- According to the Public Policy Institute of California and the Stanford Center on Poverty, almost a quarter of San Francisco’s population is living in poverty, while one out of seven Bay Area children lives in poverty. Out of 70 counties in California, San Francisco had the fifth highest poverty rate.
- Just six percent of San Francisco residents are African American, yet 44 percent of jail inmates are Black.

Metro’s Program Design

Metro organizes students into academies of up to 140 students. Metro's distinguishing feature is that students participate in a long-duration cohort throughout the lower division, creating a personalized educational home with peers, faculty and a counselor who know them well. Each cohort has a coordinator who follows students closely over time, proactively intervening if anyone starts to falter. Coordinators build a community-oriented culture of mutual aid among students. Each semester a core class that meets general education requirements serves as a “home base,” with student services tied to this class (e.g., tutoring, advising and financial aid reminders).

The classroom is the instructional core of students’ college experience. To impact the classroom itself, Metro provides a 45-hour faculty learning community focused on the use of engaging and culturally relevant pedagogies. Students move through a sequenced curriculum that meets degree requirements while providing repeated practice in difficult but essential skills such as academic writing, math, and critical thinking.

Metro is headquartered in the College of Ethnic Studies at SF State University.³ Incoming freshman are assigned to one of thirteen broadly career-themed academies, each hosted by one of the university’s Colleges: Students meet their general education requirements while also pursuing questions and public issues directly related to their likely major field.

³ San Francisco State has the only full-on College of Ethnic Studies in the US, the outcome of the 1967-68 student strike, which fifty years later is still the longest student strike in US history. Although there are as yet no randomized controlled trials for the most robust evidence, a number of studies suggest that participation in Ethnic Studies courses may contribute to student success.

Thirteen Metro Academies by College

College of Business Academies I & II
College of Education Academy
College of Ethnic Studies Academy
College of Liberal and Creative Arts Academies I & II
Health and Social Science Academies I, II & III
STEM Academies I & II & III & IV

A sequenced pathway centering on social justice

In their first semester, Metro students deconstruct the common experience among low-income students who often suffer from imposter syndrome, believing that they are “just not college material.” Students look at education policy, studying the unequal investment in education in different communities, which leads to a wide variety of unequal learning conditions ranging from larger class sizes to worse student/counselor ratios. Students learn that achievement gaps which they may experience as personal deficiencies are in reality opportunity gaps created by policy and budget decisions. They come to an understanding that they belong at the university and have agency to change these conditions for students coming after them. In later course work, students go on to study the social determinants of health, getting a solid introduction to questions of history, policy and governance, and how these play out in community health and health inequities.

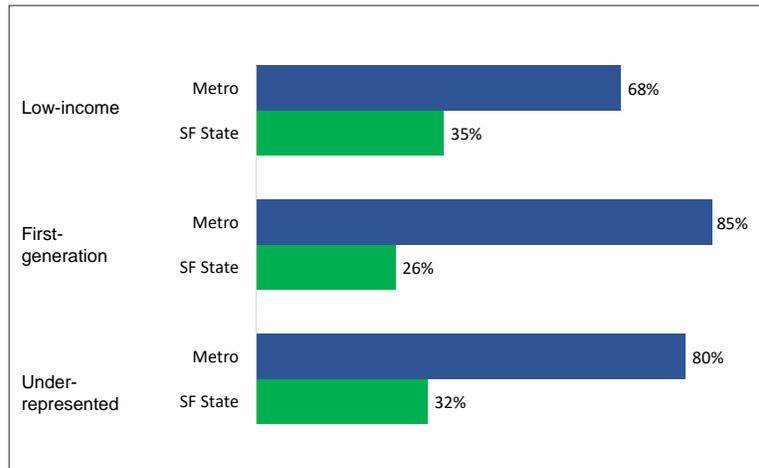
During the Living Lab, students examine policy questions, strategic thinking and community organizing campaigns in five areas: Housing, labor, criminal justice, education equity, and immigration. Leaders in each field speak with students directly, in discussions that draw out not only content, but also a sense of what it is like to work professionally in the field being discussed. Each student has an opportunity to do an informational interview with someone in a field of work that they are interested in pursuing. A central aim of the Living Lab is to appeal to the aspirations of youth—especially youth from low-income backgrounds--to contribute to creating a more just society. Students not only interact with leaders of community organizations, government agencies and non-profits working on social issues, but have a chance to put themselves in the picture by learning about what it is like to work in these areas.

Building on Metro, the SF Living Lab gives students the chance to develop themselves as new men and women prepared to take on the complex problems of their communities and their world.

Outcomes: Zeroing out the equity gap in college graduation

A sophisticated data system undergirds all aspects of Metro’s work, providing timely data to guide program improvements and to flag students who need early intervention. To measure impact, Metro carefully matches historically underserved students to a non-Metro comparison group on the following six factors: admit term, ethnicity, income, English/Math pathway, first-generation, and by majors grouping calculus or statistics math requirement. The graph below shows who Metro students are in comparison to other students at SF State. They are more likely to be low income, first generation and fall into the definition of underrepresented minorities.

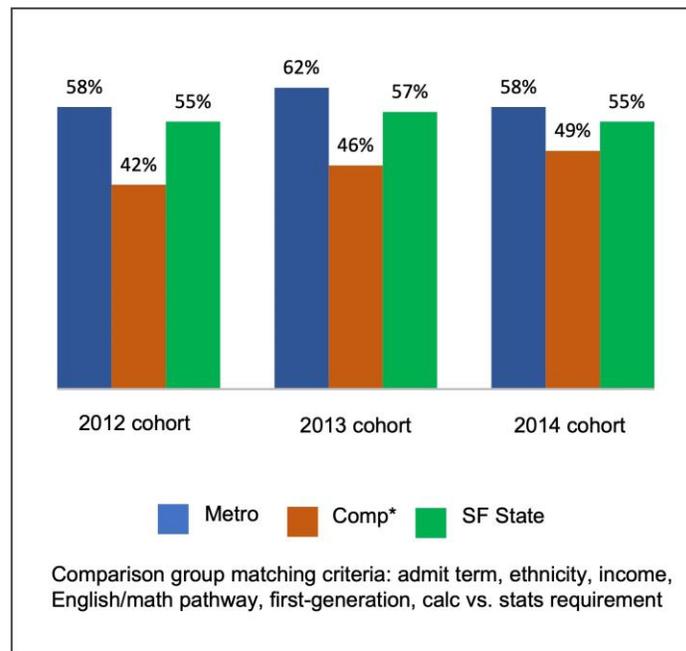
Graph 1. Demographics of Metro Students vs SF State students



Metro consistently guides students to a higher six-year graduation rate than a matched comparison, as depicted below. Metro students graduated 16% higher in 2018 and 2019 and 9% higher in 2020 compared to similar, historically underserved students not in Metro.

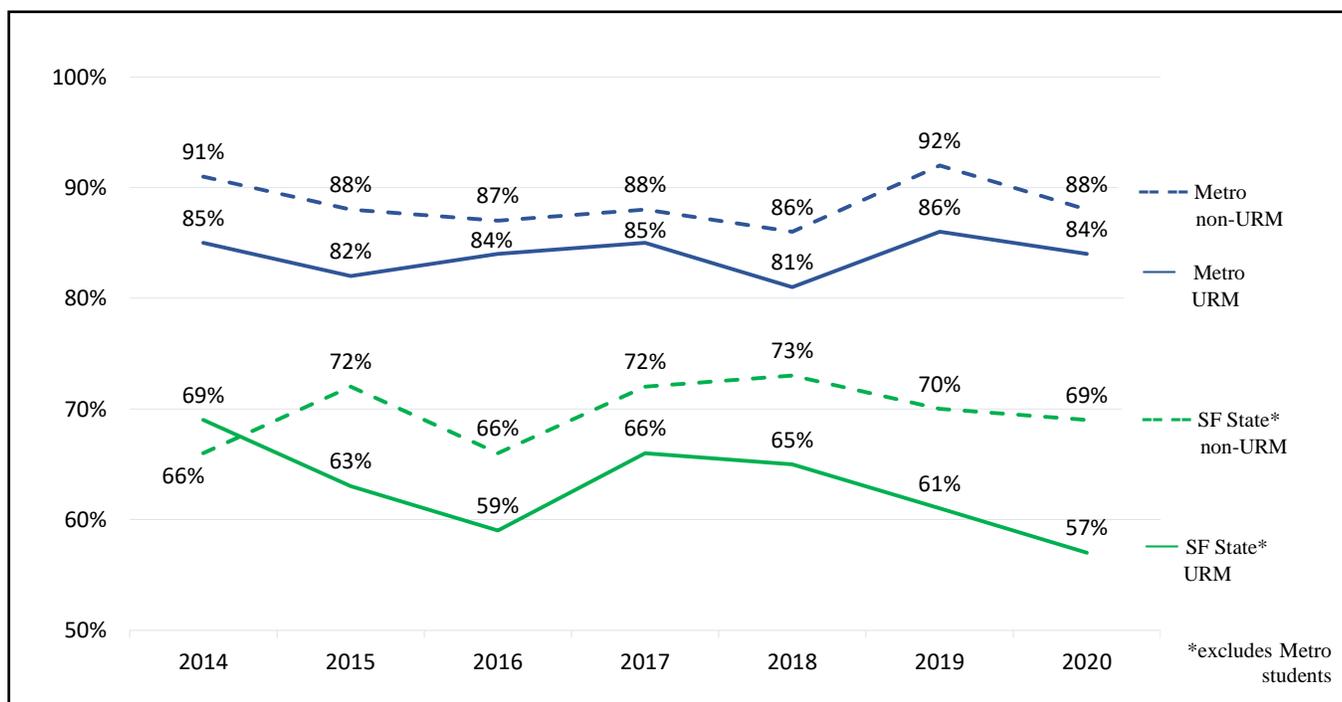
Further, also shown in the graph below, Metro students consistently graduate at a higher rate than the more privileged SF State students.

Graph 2. Spring 2018-2020 6-Year Graduation Rates



Highly personalized interventions (including telephone calls, texts and email, and convenient drop-in advising) for Metro students who had received more than two failing grades in their first year, failed to register in a timely fashion, or who were on academic probation, resulted in a high percentage of them re-enrolling for their sophomore year. In addition, Metro, unlike the broader university, responded to COVID by requiring all online instruction to be offered live over Zoom. Despite COVID, Metro had significantly higher retention rates into the sophomore year, as reflected in the chart below, both for Metro’s Under Represented Minority students (URM--Latinx, Black and Native American) and Metro’s non-URM students (Asians, White) when compared to their similarly designated classmates in the general student population. Of the 2020 first time freshman URM students in Metro, 84% re-enrolled in Fall 2021, compared to a 57% retention rate for first time freshman, non-Metro URM students.

Graph 3: Closing the Equity Gap in 1-Year Retention of Freshmen at SF State 2014-2020



Some of the strongest outcomes in the college completion research literature are randomized controlled trials of the program Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) a community college associate degree program. A comparison of ASAP and Metro can be found by following this link to Metro’s recently published article [Achieving Equity: An Evaluation of a Multicomponent Lower-Division Student Success Program](#)

Cost considerations

Given tight budgets in higher education, a program such as Metro needs to be financially sustainable in order to be institutionalized. Metro collaborated with Dr. Robert Johnstone of the National Center for Inquiry and Improvement to complete a cost efficiency study of the costs of the program versus usual practice. Metro requires an additional investment of \$920 per student per year for two years—a 6.3% increase—yet ultimately **reduces overall costs per graduate by**

13.2%, or \$14,010, leveraging each dollar of investment almost eight times. Very briefly, this is because with better completion and more consistent advising, Metro reduces the cost of unfinished degrees and “excess units” from students taking courses off path.

Graph 4. Cost per Graduate at SF State: Metro vs Comparison Group



The Next Frontier in Bringing Student Success and Equity Together

Metro illuminates what should be the next frontier in the nation's efforts to increase student success and advance equity in higher education and US democracy. We know that both sequenced pathways and wraparound services help move the needle on underrepresented students' likelihood of completing their degrees. Metro incorporates these evidence-based completion practices and many others, like mentoring and just-in-time outreach to students who are faltering.

But Metro also focuses on helping students develop the transferable skills—like communication and complex problem-solving--that all employers expect in college graduates. And, critically, by engaging students directly in work on public challenges that U.S. democracy urgently needs to solve, Metro educates graduates who are prepared and even determined to help create a more equitable and inclusive society.

The public problems Metro students work on are directly related to their lives in San Francisco and their own career and community interests, which the program helps them bring together. But Metro's student success strategy—which combines quality learning, strong supports, guided pathways, students’ mindsets, and complex problem solving on real-world issues—can be adapted for a broad range of very different institutional environments and societal contexts.

We who know the documented completion impact of the Metro student success strategy hope to see this learning-centered approach to student success widely adapted—flexibly and creatively, with students' own needs always at the center—across the U.S.