



LANDMARK GRANTS FUND NEXT-LEVEL STUDENT SUCCESS

Saint Peter's University was recently awarded \$6.8 million in federal funds to enhance student well-being and establish centers that will support Peacocks from college readiness to graduation and career.

When Maria Torres Menes '24 first started applying to colleges, she knew little about how the application process—or college for that matter—worked. “As the oldest in my family, and the first to think about college, I had no idea what the logistics were. I was limited in what I could do because of my background,” she said.

With two recently awarded landmark grants, Saint Peter's University hopes to change this experience for students like Maria, who will graduate with a major in chemistry and minor in sociology. “[Grants] like this are important because they help current and potential students feel less isolated,” she added. “It's something that could help many deserving students achieve higher education.”

Awarded in Saint Peter's milestone 25th year as a Hispanic Serving Institution, both federal grants are designed to enhance student well-being and retention and increase support services. The \$3 million Title V Developing Hispanic-Serving Institutions Program grant from the U.S. Department of Education was awarded based on a five-year project titled *Bienestar* (“well-being”) *For All*. The second grant is a \$3.8 million Postsecondary Student Success Grant from the U.S. Department of Education, awarded for a four-year project titled *Peacock Success by Optimizing Data and Support* (PODS).

Frederick Bonato, Ph.D., executive vice president and provost, and administrator of the grants, expresses hope that these grants will aid the University in what it does already, but increase impact and help even more students.

“There is a lot of good that can be done with \$7 million,” he said. “This allows us to hire the right people—like a diversity, equity, inclusion and justice executive director for our new Center for Inclusive Excellence—and our commitment as an institution is to retain those positions. We want all our students to succeed. Once they are accepted to Saint Peter's, it's about helping them find the career they want, as well. We want to take them all the way.”

“Both grants support strategic goals for the University,” explained Special Assistant to the President for Institutional Planning Virginia Bender, Ph.D. '78, who led the teams that developed the successful grant applications. “They directly support the central priority of the current strategic plan—*Vitality, Value and Viability*—to strengthen student achievement and learning outcomes through contemporary *cura personalis* and transformative experiences that prepare students for their professions and purposeful lives.” The *Bienestar* (“well-being”) *For All* grant rose out of the need to address students' academic, emotional, social and mental health needs and from the desire to help people in a more holistic way. The Office for Academic Affairs wants to ensure students are equipped with the right skills. So many environmental factors affect academic support—from food and housing to transportation and interview outfits—and these grants aim to tackle these issues by increasing community and belonging for the University's first generation and underrepresented students.

The grant also aligns with the University's Jesuit commitment to serving a student body where 55 percent of undergraduates will be the first in their families to graduate from college, and its 21st century vision for *cura personalis*. As outlined in the proposal, *Bienestar* will establish the Center for Inclusive Excellence, support

core curriculum and faculty development, increase student success through the First (first-generation) Strut Center and create a mentoring program to nurture college readiness.

The Center for Inclusive Excellence will be a DEIJ center located in the Mac Mahon Student Center so that it is visible and centrally located. Devin Heyward, Ph.D., director of the Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and associate professor of sociology, urban studies and anthropology, said, “The *Bienestar* grant has the potential to help us to retain current students and to reach students who left campus, for whatever reason, and bring them back into the fold. It's exciting to think about creating a space where students can be seen, find each other, build community and get the support they need.”

Additionally, the First Strut Center will include a range of support, including financial education, interview assistance and even a closet for students to find professional clothing for job interviews. According to Torres Menes, who has assisted professors in the planning and launch of *Bienestar*, “The programs and events coming out of this grant don't just help us get into college, but allow us to celebrate our culture in many different forms—and embrace the diversity on campus.”

PODS Grant Driven by Community and Mentorship

The PODS grant will similarly aim to support students in a universal way. Dr. Bonato said the grant, one of only nine proposals funded nationally and the only chosen in New Jersey, represents what motivates Saint Peter's: community and mentorship. The project incorporates three strategies to bolster student success, the first of which is a faculty-based advising model that includes a professional adviser, faculty mentor and financial coach who will work collaboratively to fully support students. PODS will also provide resources to increase training for faculty and staff and an expansion of the University's retention-data platform. It will also be used to establish a Male Resource Center designed to increase academic, social and cultural support for male students.

Addressing a national issue of decreased retention and graduation rates for male students, the MRC will bolster students' affinity with the University, as well as boost academic performance and reengage male students in a way that supports their entire academic and personal journey.

“There is a disappearing male population—specifically Black and Hispanic men,” Dr. Heyward said. “The MRC is a chance to help those students come back into the University more fully. We want them to be able to see themselves represented more fully in all areas of campus, and our hope is that this reinvigorates the population.”

Both grants are long-term projects that will have lasting effects for future generations of students. The fact that Saint Peter's was awarded the highly competitive grants, based on proposals that were years in the making, represents an exciting time of growth for the University.

“I love Saint Peter's because we take on these challenges,” Dr. Bonato said. “At many schools, you either make it on your own or you don't, but we want to give all of our students all the help we can so that they succeed.” 