# USC BAA BAC Program Brief:

 The "Legacy Through  Leadership Mentoring Program"
(or:  "How the USC BAA Maintains a 100%  Graduation  Rate")

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# M E M O R A N D U M

## Executive Summary

Given our legacy, mission and commitment to an improved environment for USC African American students, this memo demonstrates why our single sourced institutional mentoring program closes achievement gaps, improves the quality of educational experiences and increases the diversity of future workforce pipelines. Five-year USC data and important trending research informs that these issues are tangential for solutions that would provide transformative results to competitively realign the balance of excellence for all students at USC.

The USC Black Alumni Association's "Legacy Through Leadership Mentoring Program" (LTLMP), is an integral component of the USC BAA Scholarship program that has sustained a 100% graduation rate of its scholarship recipients since 2008. This program, unique to USC, *has created specific outcomes that have strengthened African American student opportunities for equitable success.* LTLMP can be institutionalized with additional investment and collaborative campus partnerships, to include the USC Schools.

LTLMP has provided an improved USC experience for both mentors and mentees. Alumni who mentor have a better experience with USC, are more highly engaged with the brand, and in the future are more easily converted to become donors given their deepened institutional relationships. Student mentees have a deeper connection to USC due to an enhanced educational experience, are more likely to graduate, and have a higher conversion rate for employment. Current capacity of LTLMP is 140 student mentees and 120 alumni mentors, with a bandwidth of over ten percent of the total African American student population at USC. A goal of increased investment is to expand the universe of students to one hundred percent of USC African American students, widely facilitating the benefits and advantages of a high value USC experience.

**Program Brief**

**The Opportunity:  Strengthening African American Student Opportunities for Equitable Success**
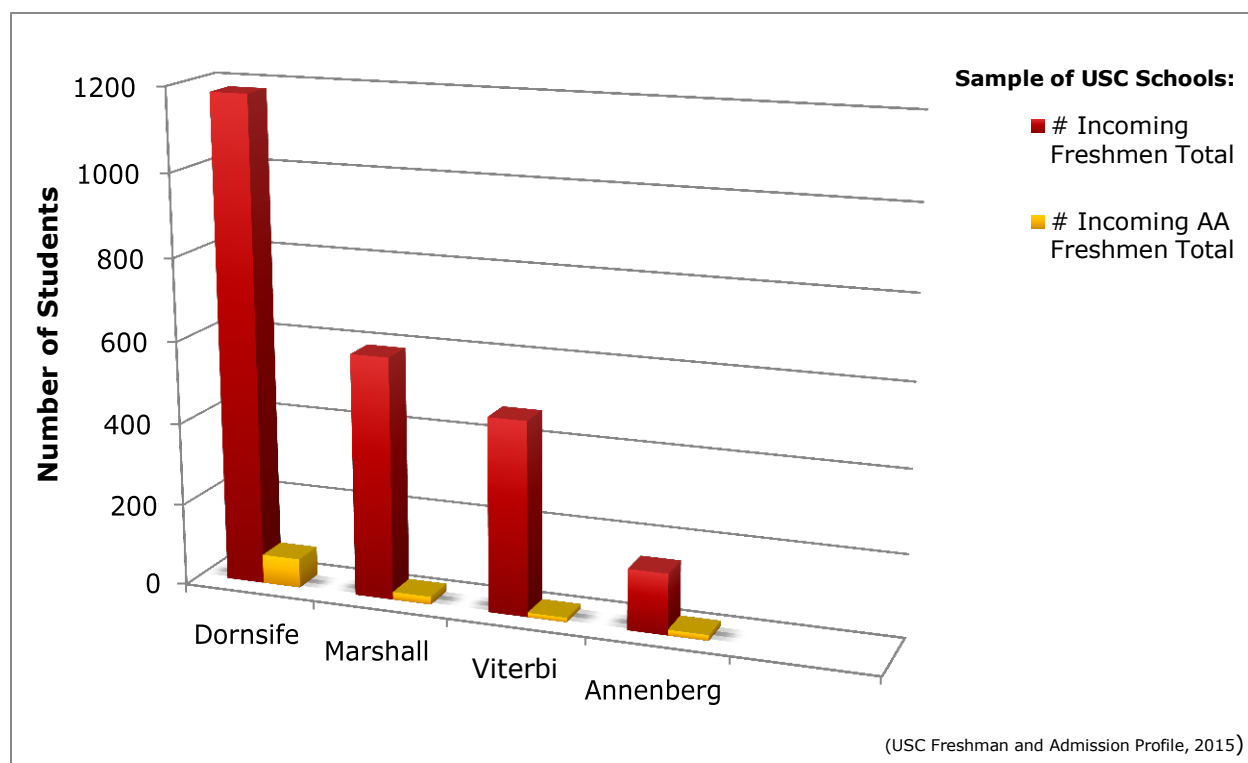
**Environment:** Issues surrounding long standing achievement gaps and disproportionate enrollment continue to deteriorate the environment for USC African American student success, and seriously threaten the sustainability of a desirable multicultural future workforce pipeline. Whereas the image of the campus community is highly diverse, facets of historical educational inequities are highly nuanced, but apparent.

**Achievement Gaps:** "USC African American students have the largest disparity of all cohorts."



(USC IPEDS, 2016)
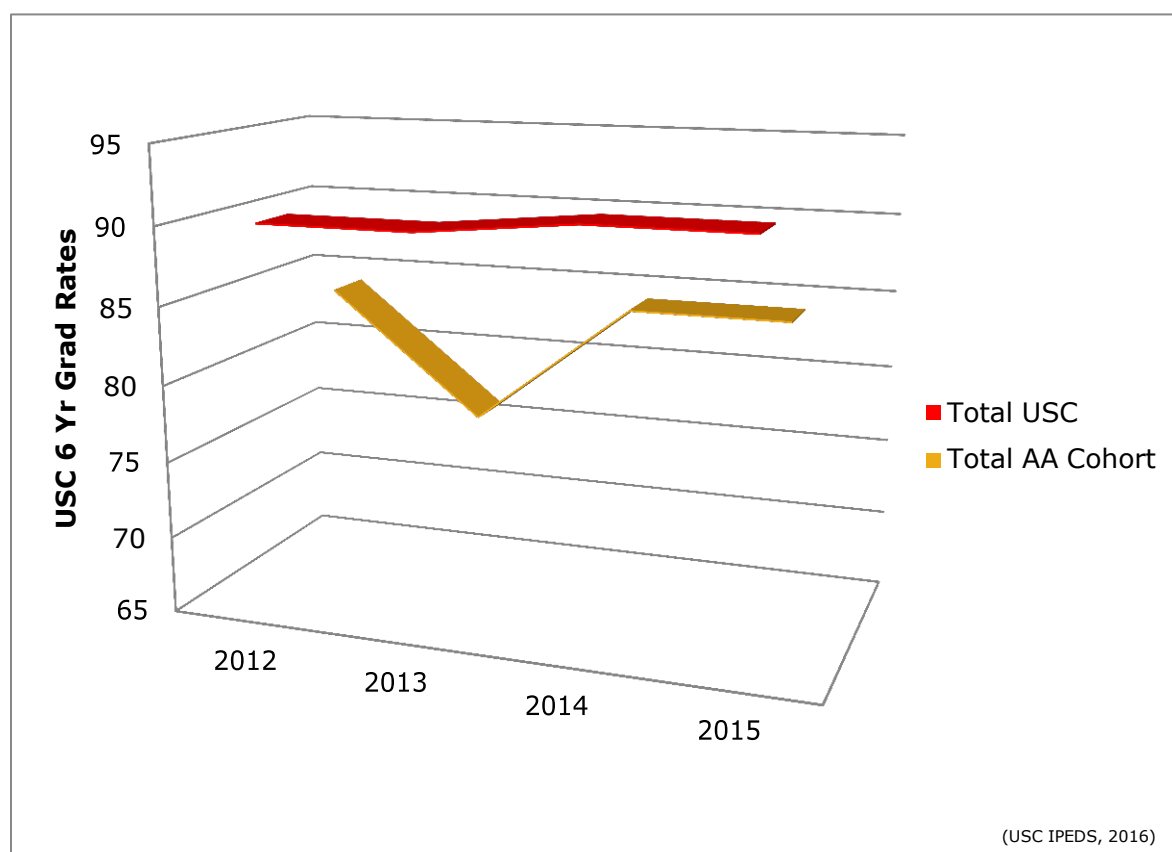
While all other racially identified cohorts are at minimum closely aligned with the average graduation rate, some exceeding the average, USC African American student cohorts have remained significantly under the average rate for even 150% of time to completion for over the last five years.  A program that could produce significant improvement in this metric would optimize the institutional profile significantly, aligning it competitively among the top elite universities whose African American cohorts graduate within the range of their reported average, at/or above eight-five percent to include Harvard, Stanford, Yale and Princeton  (JBHE, 2014).

**Freshman Enrollment:** "The AA experience in the classroom is often as one of few, if others."



Sample of USC Schools:
- # Incoming Freshmen Total
- # Incoming AA Freshmen Total

(USC Freshman and Admission Profile, 2015)

This is not to say that success is not achievable by USC African American students, but that the motivation to persist is jeopardized. A program that provides for successful alumni to become "champions," empowers individual students, improves matriculation and improves the quality and equity of their educational experience. These experiences ultimately reinforce workforce alignment and optimize job conversion, primarily due to a student's ability to forecast their future with confidence in addition to capability.

**Highlights of the "Legacy Through Leadership Mentoring Program"**

**LTLMP Program:** Turning to a focus upon the African American student cohort that does exist at USC, there is a compelling need for actionable institutional programming that nurtures aspirations, and systemically manages progression to that of equitable outcomes. In attempts to augment the current setting, the USC Black Alumni Association (USC BAA) has proactively developed its own mentoring program, and has achieved remarkable student outcomes for its scholarship recipients. In addition to financial assistance, each scholarship recipient awarded also receives an alumni mentor and participates in the USC BAA's "Legacy Through Leadership Mentoring Program." Since 2008, USC BAA scholarship recipients have graduated at the rate of 100%.

The USC BAA's "Legacy Through Leadership Mentoring Program" is a proven tool to improve graduation outcomes and diversity pipelines at USC, yet requires substantial partnership and collaboration to be expanded campus-wide.

**Institutional Programming:** While USC has many discrete programs for underrepresented minority students in general, these programs have not been able to create improved outcomes of consequence for African American students. This circumstance is also consistent with prevailing research, where despite recommendations for faculty-student mentoring, campus initiatives, summits and institutes over the period of 1997-2012, national enrollments, academic performance, and rates of baccalaureate degree attainment remain just as troublesome now as they were 15 years ago for African Americans, most significantly for African American males (Harper, 2014).

In large part, this is because programs typically do not consider the existence of racist norms as commonly systemic within postsecondary environments, which continue to marginalize the chances for success of African American students (Harper, 2012). Prevailing institutional philosophies employ the hypothesis that students can "catch up" if presented with "catch up opportunities" or "opportunities to be included" within important traditional networks and spheres. This same assumption is the basis for logic behind affirmative action in education or employment--and has proven ineffective and non-sustainable over time (Reskin, 2012).

In contrast, according to a systems-based perspective, racial disparities are robust because emergent discrimination constrains the paths through which African Americans can overcome accrued disadvantages (Delgado, 2001). Further, a systems approach better accounts for the persistence of racial disparities despite the periodic implementation and enforcement of policies ostensibly designed to reduce them (Reskin, 2012; Harper et al., 2009). Thus, LTLMP is informed by research to intentionally address systemic barriers throughout its mentoring processes. As a result, the USC BAA has succeeded with an intentionally distinctive approach.

**LTLMP Approach:** LTLMP utilizes African American alumni as the determinant factor, and over the last eight years of development, practice and assessment has seen success that has typically eluded other projects. The LTLMP approach is implemented with an exacting protocol for mentor-mentee outreach, involvement and incentives that set the tone for student persistence and success on the one hand, while building pathways for career advising and sponsorship on the other. LTLMP is also the only alumni mentoring program of its kind among USC's peer institutions, and is fully administratively staffed and managed.

The ability to expose students to the workplace along with opportunities to build lasting relationships is the delta factor that cannot easily be manifested within the current constraints of faculty/staff programming. Characteristically, African American students face greater pressures for immediate job placement upon graduation due to higher tuition debt loads, racial wealth/economic gaps and generational aspirations within their demographic (US News, 2015). Importantly, alumni mentorship provides early acclimation throughout real-world professional networks that substantially increase industry knowledge. Added to this dynamic is the aspect of cultural affinity that deepens student self-esteem development and modeling within ethnic value systems.

LTMP has often been the primary reason successful USC African American alumni have engaged institutionally.  They have a passionate interest to assist students, but have not had an outlet.  LTMP allows alumni who need to say, "Let me help you navigate," become advocates for students.  Once engaged at this level, they are highly likely to become involved in other initiatives-- yet the converse is also true that without this engagement, many have had no reason to become institutionally involved at all.

Although it currently exists as a standalone program, LTLMP has emerged as a significant organizational endeavor that it is certainly an exemplar of specific standards for African American student outcomes campus-wide (Harper, Kuykendall, 2012).  LTLMP has been an " added value" constant at USC for eight years because of its demonstrated success.
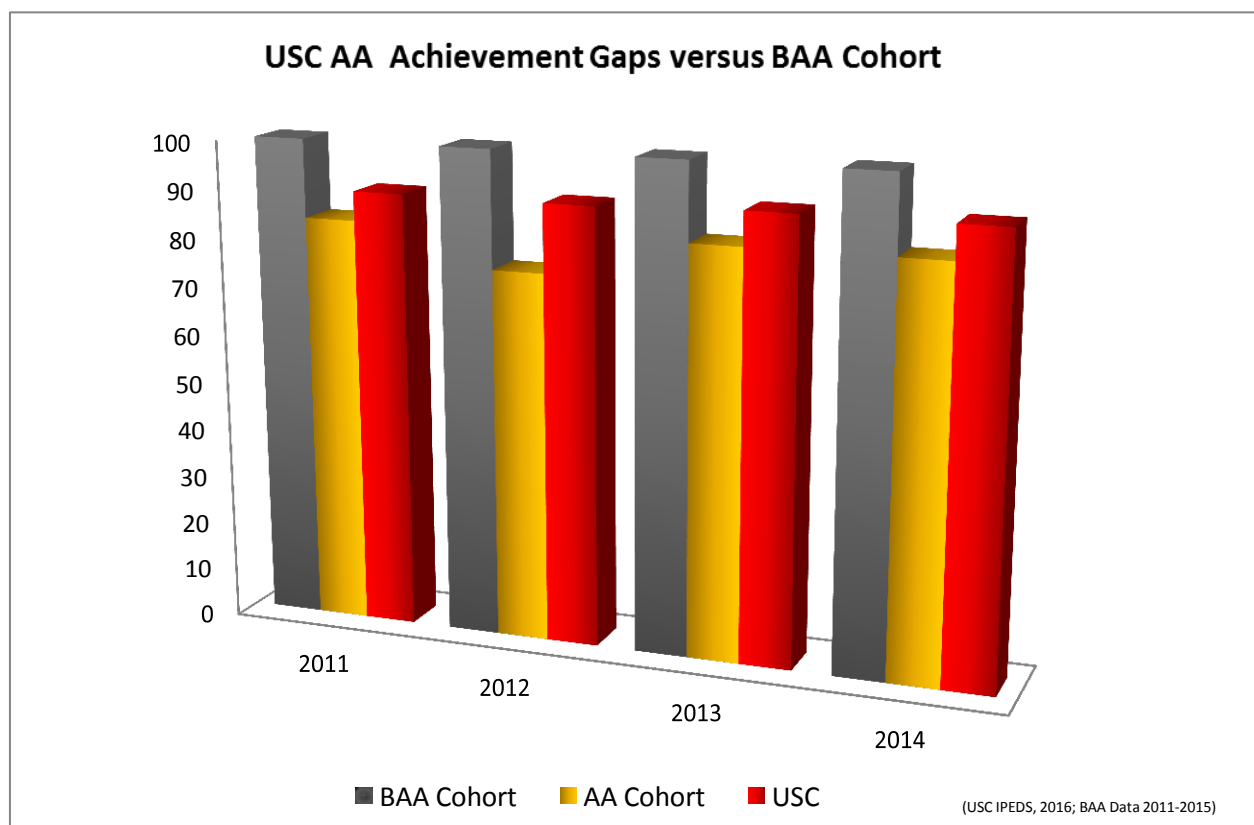


A great advantage of LTLMP is that the model is solid, actionable, and can easily be implemented in partnership with USC Schools, allowing them to leverage their own diversity pipeline improvement and goal setting accordingly.  Expansion of the LTLMP program campus-wide would enable a thoughtful solution to improve African American student outcomes with high-quality experiences, working within the current decentralized structure of USC.

**Conclusion**

*Affirming specific diversity and inclusion outcomes for African American students through strategic programming and initiatives should be considered as integral threads in the fabric of USC's 21st century narratives. While the success of African American students might be inferred within the strategic planning of the university as a whole--a clear articulation that the needs of this group are in fact urgent and different from the needs of others is required in order to show improvements of consequence.*

*USC data and research literature informs that rigorous programming for improved outcomes should be boldly implemented systemically to create change. It is foolhardy to believe that substantive outcomes for African American students can be achieved with fluctuating marginal admissions or enrollment representation, or by non-targeted programming, since in no case has causal improvement been evidenced. The success of the USC Black Alumni Association's "Legacy Through Leadership Mentoring Program" could be considered as an actionable framework for institutional deployment, as a strategic solution.  LTLMP benefits all USC stakeholders because it seeks to break cycles, and appropriately imprint the future nationally and globally. Program expansion may be realized campus-wide with collaboration and partnership investment to meet the needs of the institution and our future society.  We, the USC BAA, will continue to take the lead to do what is necessary to engage our partners, thus fulfilling our legacy, and remain true to our mission.*

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