



# Sam Bersola

New Assistant Vice Chancellor of Graduate Studies

**A**TTENDING A CONFERENCE on graduate education at UCLA last year, Sam Bersola heard “what was a really compelling argument” about graduate students: “They are the most academically prepared and the most rigorously selected students—and also the most likely to drop out,” he says. “There’s something wrong with that.”

As the new Assistant Vice Chancellor of UCLA’s Graduate Division, Dr. Bersola will have a chance to influence that outcome by contributing to the Graduate Division’s focused attention on recruiting, retaining and graduating students. “We know that the holistic learning environment that we build for undergraduates, which includes learning communities and other networks of support, helps to further their retention,” he says. Now “what’s needed is a way to translate that” to the graduate level.

Their faculty advisers and academic departments take most of the responsibility for providing various kinds of support for graduate students, but “some types of information are best disseminated centrally,”

Dr. Bersola explains. The Graduate Division is already implementing programs to help fill that gap, from research mentorship fellowships and travel grants to workshops on subjects such as writing skills that are useful across disciplinary boundaries. As a result, UCLA has a good reputation within the UC system for this kind of effort, and Dr. Bersola plans to build on that record. In particular, he plans to bring more structure to the financial and accountability systems that support students, staff, and departments.

Accomplishing his task will require building bridges to UCLA’s many departments with graduate-level programs. Dr. Bersola has some metaphorical experience in this area, having a degree in civil engineering from UC Berkeley. Two summer internships changed his career plans. At a civil engineering firm, he “found myself capable and well-prepared but not passionate about the field.” Teaching and coaching at a boarding school in western Massachusetts, he “fell in love with the thought of being an educator.”

Besides passion, Dr. Bersola brings plenty of experience to his new job. After

earning a master’s degree in education from Harvard University, he moved to Los Angeles and became an admissions counselor at USC and then moved to Northern California to become the founding director of the Minority Engineering Program at the California Maritime Academy (CMA) in the years just before it became part of the CSU system. When he started, there were only four African American students on the campus; by the time he left, the African American student population at CMA had quadrupled and these students were filling key roles as student leaders.

Dr. Bersola then spent a year as college counselor at a high school in Marin County where 97% of the graduates went on to four-year colleges. “I wanted to know how the best high schools helped prepare students for college,” he says. Then, he went to the other end of the pipeline as Assistant Dean and Director of Minority Recruitment at Amherst College, where he learned “what it was like to say no more often than yes.” With an entering class of only 400, Amherst rejects students who have offers from Harvard and Yale.

While he was working on a PhD in educational policy at Stanford University, he served as Dean of Student Support Services and later Vice President of Student Services for Mission College, part of the state’s community college system. In 2005, he joined the UC system at the Santa Cruz campus, where he was Chief Operations Officer and Executive Director of residential life. He was in that position when he attended the UCLA/UC Irvine conference that focused his attention on graduate education.

Several of Dr. Bersola’s jobs have involved promoting racial, ethnic, and gender diversity at colleges and universities, while at the same time those positions provided “a great diversity of experiences.” To his new job with the Graduate Division, he brings the ability “to see my work through the many lenses I acquired along the way,” he says. “I don’t build physical bridges now, but I like to think that the work I’ve done in higher education has built bridges to educational opportunities.”