

CALIFORNIA FACULTY ASSOCIATION  
Representing the Faculty in the California State University

# The CSU Graduation & Achievement Gap Initiative: Doing Our Part to Educate 1 Million More Graduates by 2025

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The CSU's most important institutional goal, according to the California Master Plan for Higher Education (1960), is to provide broad opportunities for Californians to achieve four-year degrees that contribute to meaningful personal growth, economic productivity and innovation, and sustainable democratic communities. Access, equity, and quality are critical to achieving that end and to the CSU's mission as "The People's University."

## **WHAT WE MUST DO**

*CFA and all other supporters of public higher education must continue to highlight at every opportunity the CSU's most fundamental problem—grossly inadequate funding. The time is long past for tinkering around the edges to salvage the system; the Chancellor's Office must take a stronger, less equivocal role in making that case.*

*Supporters of the CSU (faculty, students, staff, and administrators) must raise the alarm at any proposed actions purportedly introduced to increase graduation rates if those actions threaten access to, equity in, or quality of education.*

Unfortunately, the CSU Chancellor's graduation initiative, recently rolled out to the Board of Trustees and underway on our campuses, has serious flaws that will hinder the CSU's ability to reach this broad goal.

Perhaps most problematic is the administration's failure to acknowledge the context in which this initiative is being introduced. Missing from the administration's upbeat public discussions of the initiative is any mention of the overall decline in the CSU's ability to serve the state as evidenced by even a few stark facts: a 20% cut in state funding since 2007, the termination of more than 2,500 faculty since 2007, and a projected enrollment reduction of 40,000 students.

This failure to warn the public that the CSU's mission and future is profoundly imperiled—even if graduation rates are improved—is troubling. Silence on this bigger issue, while highlighting improvements in graduation percentages alone, risks being misconstrued as "evidence" the system can continue to do more with less. Any initiatives that make better funding appear less urgent and that take elected leaders off the hook to improve it are not good for the CSU or for California's future.

Specific proposals being made by the administration as part of this initiative are also worrisome. As will be detailed below, a number of actions contemplated to increase graduation rates will have serious negative consequences for access, equity, and educational quality in the CSU—all fundamental to our mission and to a strong future for California.

## **NARROW, LIMITED METRICS LEAD TO BAD CONSEQUENCES**

The Chancellor's initiative contains an extremely narrow focus on a single metric, the percentage of enrolled students who actually graduate. While this is simple, it can lead to a misleading picture of our progress in meeting the future needs of the state and to some very serious consequences. Consider two of these:

- 1) **Graduation percentages versus total number of graduates.** We need not only an improved graduation rate but also an increased absolute number of graduates. (In "Closing the Gap: Meeting California's Need for College Graduates," the Public Policy Institute of California projects that by 2025 California will need one million more college graduates than the state is on track to produce.)

By focusing only on the percentage of matriculated students who actually graduate, it is possible to improve our graduation rates while actually producing fewer numbers of graduates.

Without tracking and increasing the absolute numbers of graduates, the system risks creating a false sense of progress toward meeting the state's and country's needs.

- 2) **Graduation rates without access and equity guarantees.** A consequence of the exclusive focus on graduation percentages is that it can mask—and even exacerbate—problems with access for students to the CSU. Even worse, measuring success exclusively in terms of graduation rates opens the door to actions that harm access while improving the percentages. Most obviously, one way to improve graduation rates is to exclude students who face greater challenges to graduating.

## **NATIONAL BASELINE PROJECT ON GRAD RATES, A BIGGER APPROACH TO IMPROVEMENT**

The CSU Graduation Initiative is part of a huge national project involving 24 systems of public higher education representing 378 individual colleges and universities that collectively enroll more than three million students.

The national initiative, called "Access to Success," was sponsored by the Education Trust and the National Association of System Heads. Its founding document, "Charting a Necessary Path: The Baseline Report of Public Higher Education Systems in the Access to Success Initiative," details the failures of earlier approaches to improving higher education and the more complete set of metrics being used to track institutions in the Access to Success initiative.

Given its genesis, it is particularly surprising that the Chancellor's plan focuses solely on the metrics of on graduation rates because this approach is explicitly criticized in the Access to Success founding document.

In "Charting a Necessary Path," Jennifer Engle and Mary Lynch of the Education Trust emphasize that the nation cannot reach President Obama's goal of returning the U.S. to its premier world status in higher education without large increases in both access to college and success in graduating.

In that study, the authors stress the importance of tracking and reporting a more complex set of data that answers questions in three key areas:

- “Access: Does a higher education system’s entering class reflect the socioeconomic and racial/ethnic profile of its state’s high school graduates?”
- Success: How does the success rates of low-income and underrepresented minority students compare with those of other students within the system?
- Access + Success: Do the system’s graduates reflect the diversity of the state’s high school graduates?” (p. 5)

The CSU plan focuses on only one part of that equation. And that is a flaw underscored in “Charting a Necessary Path”:

...the simultaneous focus on both access and success in the Initiative and its metrics is fundamental to achieving increases in the number of college-educated residents in A2S [Access to Success] states. Otherwise, the temptation for participating systems is to take one of the two routes that thus far have proved to be so unproductive: (1) widen access without focusing on graduating more students or (2) become more exclusive, so graduate rates will improve without any effort. Neither course will produce more citizens with degrees, which is what our country needs to accomplish (p. 7).

## IMPLEMENTING THE GRAD INITIATIVE IN THE CSU

A CFA task force has reviewed all of the campus “delivery plans” and related documents and has identified a number of problem areas.

**Threats to Access.** It already appears that the exclusive focus on graduation rates is leading to actions that threaten access for all students, but especially for low-income students and students from underrepresented groups.

For example, there are plans to declare “impaction” on more campuses while raising admission standards to exclude some students who had historically been guaranteed admission. These measures may improve graduation rates but they surely will reduce access, especially for students who come from low-income school districts and who often have had the poorest preparation for college.

Changes in policies on remediation risk similar consequences for those student groups with the biggest access problems and the biggest achievement gaps. Moving remediation to more expensive summer session and requiring students to begin their remedial work before matriculating may improve graduation rates but hurt access for many of the groups—low-income students and students from underrepresented groups—the initiative is supposed to be helping.

These proposed actions, and others, such as requiring freshmen to live in the dorms, pose serious problems for equity and access—even though they may improve graduation rates.

**Threats to equity.** Exclusive focus on graduation percentages and the drive to meet that narrow target may also damage equity. Proposals under public discussion, such as increased fees for “excessive” units, decreased financial aid for units over those required for graduation, and limitations on repeating courses, could actually lower the graduation success of many students, especially low-income students and those whose high school education has not adequately prepared them for college work.

**Threats to quality.** Focusing exclusively on graduation rates can mean insufficient focus on the fundamental purpose that should be driving the initiative—the need for better-educated Californians and for more of them. If this purpose is overlooked, it is all too easy to explore actions that can improve graduation rates but decrease the quality of education we provide our students.

A number of proposals under discussion, many of which involve simply reducing graduation requirements in some way, raise serious concerns about quality. Some of these include:

- Artificially lowering the number of students who need remediation by lowering the cut-off score necessary to bypass remedial classes. This change does not make students more prepared for college work and could mean they miss developing vital skills needed for success in college and beyond.
- Decreasing the number of required writing courses while increasing the number of students in other courses that are writing intensive. This inevitably reduces the total amount of writing done by students during their time in college. This is particularly puzzling since quality writing and critical thinking skills are widely recognized as essential by the public and by employers. (See, for instance, “Raising The Bar: Employer’s Views on College Learning in the Wake of the Economic Downturn.”)
- Decreasing General Education requirements. These are the broad liberal arts component of every CSU graduate’s education. While reducing requirements could obviously make it easier to graduate, we need to ask if the resulting graduates will be prepared for the future economy and society in which they will live.

## **THE BREADTH AND QUALITY OF COLLEGE EDUCATION IS A NATIONAL CONCERN**

The latter point has been elaborated in a statement by the Board of Directors of the Association of American Colleges and Universities titled “The Quality Imperative: Match Ambitious Goals for College Attainment with an Ambitious Vision for Learning.” In the view of this group, improving the quality of education and the breadth of student learning is just as essential as improving graduation rates if we are to reach President Obama’s goals for a highly-educated America.

Both our economy and our democracy need broadly educated citizens rather than the narrowly trained graduates that too many universities produce.<sup>1</sup> Narrowing the scope of our students’ education, even if it were to increase graduation rates, would fail them and our society.

## **GETTING TO ONE MILLION**

Broad access, equity, a quality liberal arts foundation, and ultimate success in achieving degrees are all critical pieces of providing for the needs of our students and of our state and nation. Graduation “success” is only one piece of a complex equation; improving graduation rates at the expense of access, equity, and quality education is not the answer.

A first step toward improving graduation rates and increasing the absolute numbers of graduates needed would be to listen to what students have been saying about the difficulties they encounter in completing their degrees. Reporters have been asking them just this. In virtually every newspaper article on the budget crisis in the CSU, students constantly name two roadblocks they experience in trying to graduate:

- 1) **COST.** Skyrocketing fees and financial pressures that force them to work more (and jeopardize their studies), run up more debt, or leave school altogether (the CSU administration raised student fees 45% in the past two years and 182% since 2002) and;
- 2) **CLASSES.** Inadequate numbers of course offerings make it impossible for them to get the classes they need to graduate (this fall there were 5300 fewer course sections and 2200 more students than in 2007).

Failure to acknowledge, in this initiative or in public comments about it, the consequences of inadequate funding paints a misleading picture of the CSU to the public and to elected leaders.

The facts are plain: grossly inadequate funding for the CSU plays a huge role in making graduation more difficult; and grossly inadequate funding for higher education in this state will prevent California universities from educating the one million-plus extra graduates it needs by 2025.

As the original “Access to Success” document emphasizes,

To reach President Obama’s goal of regaining our position as the most educated workforce in the world, America’s colleges and universities will have to...increase enrollments, narrow their access and success gaps, and improve success rates for ALL of their students (“Charting a Necessary Path,” p. 13).

And making that happen will require better funding for the CSU and for higher education throughout the country. It would be a most unfortunate consequence of this initiative if it masked this stark truth with a false sense of progress.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> As a survey of employers sponsored by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (titled “Raising The Bar: Employer’s Views on College Learning in the Wake of the Economic Downturn”) suggests, employers want graduates who have a broad education rather than narrow training.

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**RAISING THE BAR:** Employers’ Views on College Learning in the Wake of the Economic Downturn. Report from the Board of Directors of the Association of American Colleges and Universities. January 2010. [http://www.aacu.org/press\\_room/press\\_releases/2010/employersurvey.cfm](http://www.aacu.org/press_room/press_releases/2010/employersurvey.cfm)