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California Faculty Association  
Assembly Joint Oversight Hearing  
Higher Education and Budget Subcommittee No. 2 on Education Finance  
*Issue: Higher Education Student Enrollment and Student Success*  
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Before I begin my comments, I would like to thank the committee for this opportunity to speak today. We appreciate the Assembly Speaker's focus to provide increased legislative oversight, and we are honored to participate in this hearing.

My name is Teri Yamada and I am a professor of Asian and Asian American Studies at California State University Long Beach. I also chair a CFA task force analyzing issues affecting student access, student success and student graduation rates.

My presentation will focus on our concerns with the CSU's "Graduation and Achievement Gap Initiative," in particular its potentially adverse impact on Latino, African-American students, and students with lower socio-economic backgrounds. The initiative's narrow goals and limited accountability are the basis for our concerns, and we will provide recommendations we believe will help to avoid any negative consequences.

The CSU's initiative has a very narrow focus on graduation rates, which can give a misleading picture of how well the CSU is serving our state's students. For example, focusing solely on graduation rates tells us nothing about whether the CSU is increasing the absolute numbers of graduates. This limited goal to measure just graduation rates will give us a false sense of progress because the graduation rate can go up even as the absolute numbers of graduates goes down. This fact is illustrated in CSU Fullerton's plan.

Furthermore, by simply restricting student access by declaring a campus impacted— a scenario that is already occurring — the CSU can achieve a higher graduation rate with virtually the same, or lower, number of graduates. Conversely, by selectively enrolling students from well-funded K-12 districts, at the expense of students from poorer districts, a higher graduation rate will be achieved as scores of eligible students are prohibited from seeking a CSU education.

In short, focusing on graduation rates exclusively can create – and even mask – problems of student access and equity.

CFA is also concerned that, if we fail to track statistics on access, the public will not know whether actions to improve graduation rates are having an adverse impact on student access. Already, concerns are being raised about a number of CSU policies being proposed, or already approved.

Most CSU campuses have already considered, or are considering, changing admissions policies in ways that will negatively affect low-income and students of color. The starkest example is at San Diego State University where the campus President unilaterally changed a decade long policy that CSU Chancellor Charles Reed once called "the most important decision [the CSU] will make in the next five to 10 years."

The policy abandoned by San Diego State was enacted by the CSU Board of Trustees in May 2000 and guaranteed admissions to eligible students in each campus's local area. The San Diego State president is no longer allowing all local eligible students to enroll, citing their historically low graduation rates. Instead, those seats will be given to students from outside the area, whom he believes have a greater chance of improving the campus statistics.

In essence, what will result at San Diego State will be higher graduation rates and a closing of the student achievement gap, but at what expense? At the expense of CSU-eligible students from poorer K-12 districts who will be barred from the only four-year public university that they would have access to. CFA appreciates Assemblymember Block's efforts to address this inequity.

I would now like to share with you our concerns regarding the initiative's intent to close the student achievement gap. Though CFA is very supportive of this goal, we are concerned about how it is being achieved.

As you know, a large number of our students – predominantly Latino, African-American and some Southeast Asian – need remediation courses in English or Math. To help close the achievement gap, the CSU administration implemented a new policy – the Early Start program – requiring these students to enroll in short-term remediation classes the summer before their freshman year. In May 2009, the Academic Senate of the California State University passed a resolution opposing the Early Start Program's implementation citing its negative consequences for students. This program is especially problematic for a number of reasons:

For example, summer sessions at the CSU are no longer state-supported, so these students – a majority of whom can least afford it – will be paying essentially private college fees for these mandated courses. Many of these students must work during the summer to afford tuition for their freshman year, to save for expensive textbooks, and to help with their family's finances.

While the CSU administration has suggested that financial aid will address this problem, staff who actually work with financial aid students have raised a number of questions and concerns, including whether these students taking summer courses would even be eligible for aid.

The CSU English Council, consisting of faculty who teach English remediation, passed a resolution opposing the Early Start Program, which would deny CSU access to otherwise eligible students “by setting up yet another exclusionary barrier” for students who need such classes.

So even before the CSU Graduation and Achievement Gap Initiative has been fully implemented, we are already witnessing serious threats to student access and equity. Changes in both CSU admissions and remediation policies may improve graduation rates and close the achievement gap but will result in the horrible unintended consequence of damaging student access, especially for Latino, African-American and low-income students.

It is especially puzzling that the CSU initiative does not call for simultaneously tracking and reporting of student access data, since the plan proposed by the National Association of System Heads (NASH) – which is the basis for the CSU initiative – explicitly warns against the approach being pursued by CSU. The NASH initiative is not only supported by the CSU, but also 23 other systems of higher education, and CSU Chancellor Charles Reed is the president of NASH’s executive committee.

NASH’s initiative – “Access to Success” – calls for tracking a much more complete set of metrics that include access and graduation to determine an institution’s effectiveness. This national model concluded that tracking a broad range of factors is necessary to avoid the kind of outcomes we believe will occur under the CSU’s limited initiative.

In conclusion, CFA recommends the following changes to the CSU’s current plan:

1) The CSU administration should suspend its top-down implementation of the Graduation and Achievement Gap Initiative until closer consultation occurs with CSU faculty, staff, and students – after all, they have the most direct, daily experience with barriers to graduation;

2) A dialogue also needs to commence with CPEC and state policy makers whose expertise on public higher education issues will help develop a framework that genuinely improves graduation rates, closes the student achievement gap, and ensures student access is not sacrificed in attaining these goals  
Taking advantage of this experience and expertise will take some time, admittedly; but it will prevent mistakes that can be identified by those who work closely with students every day,

3) The CSU administration should expand the public reporting that is done as part of its initiative beyond the measures of improving the graduation rate and closing the achievement gap. This would help to determine early on whether steps we are taking to increase graduation rates are having any negative consequences on student access and student equity;

For instance, reporting the data called for by the NASH “Access to Success” national graduation initiative – as supported by the CSU – would tell us if changes in admissions and remediation policies are changing the demographics of the CSU student population or damaging student access.

Much of this data is already captured by the CSU, so there would not be a huge cost for this information. In short, reporting the data called for by the national initiative would give a fuller picture of how well the CSU is fulfilling its mission.

While supporting the goals the CSU initiative strives to meet, CFA is troubled by the limited scope of factors that are being assessed to reach these goals. We are not opposed to improving student outcomes, but we question the manner in which such goals are achieved.

Especially if access for underrepresented and lower income students will be impaired. Unfortunately this initiative is already being implemented on our campuses. The CSU is being fundamentally restructured without adequate oversight and accountability.

We know this issue will not be resolved as a result of today's hearing. However, it is CFA's hope that we will begin a more open dialogue with the state policy makers and the public – a dialogue CFA believes should have begun prior to the CSU pursuing its initiative. We welcome our role as collaborative consultants in any proposals that support genuine student access and student success at the CSU.

I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

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