

California Legislature

STATE CAPITOL
SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA



February 16, 2011

Kati Haycock
President
The Education Trust
1250 H Street, N.W., Suite 700
Washington, D.C. 20005

Janis Somerville
Staff Director
National Association of System Heads
1250 H St. NW - Suite 700
Washington, DC 20005

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Dear President Haycock and Ms. Somerville:

We are writing to express our concern about aspects of the California State University's implementation of the "Access to Success" graduation initiative sponsored by The Education Trust and the National Association of System Heads. Specifically, we are deeply concerned that the CSU initiative includes provisions that threaten to have a disparate, negative impact on both the access and success of low-income students and students of color.

This consequence appears to us to be in sharp contrast to the goals your organizations established when launching your initiative. In "Charting a Necessary Path: The Baseline Report of Public Higher Education Systems in the Access to Success Initiative," your concern that an institutional push to increase graduation rates not have these unintended negative consequences is clear. To guard against this, your report specifically cautions that universities must simultaneously address student access issues by tracking student access measures to avoid the trap of improving graduation rates by simply becoming more exclusive.

Unfortunately, several proposed actions to improve graduation rates and close the student achievement gap in the California State University system appear to disregard the crucial point of your initiative that student access measures must be incorporated to ensure access for at-risk students is not compromised.

For instance, changes in remediation policies in the CSU may, we fear, negatively impact students with the biggest access problems and the largest achievement gaps. Under the new policy, otherwise CSU-eligible students needing remediation will be required to begin their remediation work during the summer immediately prior to their freshman year – replacing the existing practice whereby these classes are taken during the academic school year. Since many CSU summer classes are no longer state-supported, this change could force students needing remediation to pay higher fees during the summer when these students must work to afford future tuition and textbook costs and to help with family finances. Furthermore, classes funded through the CSU's for-profit and non-state supported Extended Education program would be ineligible under our state's Cal Grant financial aid program. Many believe this new remediation policy will establish yet another exclusionary barrier for students who need these classes.

Other proposed actions by the CSU – limiting the enrollment of students from low-income regions who have historically lower graduation rates and requiring students to pay higher fees, to name just a few – similarly are being considered without regard for their potential negative effect on low-income students, who are disproportionately students of color.

An additional concern we have is the issue of improving graduation “rates” as compared to increasing the actual number of graduates, since the CSU’s graduation rate can be increased simply by restricting the numbers – and types – of students that are enrolled. In short, we believe focusing on graduation rates exclusively can create – and even mask – problems of student access and equity.

We believe student criteria encompassing ethnicity, gender and socio-economic status are critical in identifying what student populations are impacted by these initiatives, and to ensure outcome measures are comprehensive and student access is not impaired. Are there additional student access criteria that you believe should be incorporated to identify what populations of students are affected by the CSU’s new policies? Will the Education Trust or NASH be providing any oversight on the specific graduation initiatives the NASH segments are developing to ensure that student access, equity, and graduation success rates all receive proper attention with results that do not harm other factors?

For a system as large as the CSU, which offers the only hope of a four-year degree for a broad swath of an increasingly diverse state population, it is crucial that the laudable goal of increasing graduation rates not be achieved by sacrificing student access and equity.

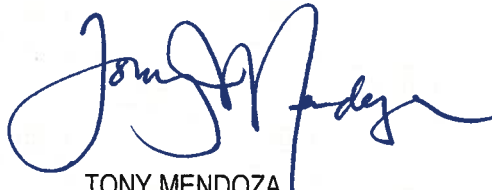
We recognize the CSU’s efforts to improve student outcomes, however, we are troubled by the limited scope of factors that are being used to assess and achieve these goals. We also question the manner in which these goals may be achieved; especially if access and educational opportunities for underrepresented, at-risk and low-income students will be impaired.

Thank you for sponsoring this initiative, and thank you for your attention to the critical issues we have raised. We look forward to your follow-up and replies.

Sincerely,



CURREN PRICE
Senator, 26th District
Chair, Legislative Black Caucus



TONY MENDOZA
Assembly Member, 56th District
Chair, Latino Legislative Caucus



PAUL FONG
Assembly Member, 22nd District
Member, Asian Pacific Islander
Legislative Caucus & Assembly
Higher Education Committee

cc: Charles B. Reed, Chancellor, California State University
Members, Board of Trustees, California State University

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