

COMMITTEE ON EDUCATIONAL POLICY

Graduation Initiative Update

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Summary

At the beginning of 2010 the Board of Trustees committed the California State University to dramatic improvements in student success. Together we pledged to raise six-year graduation rates eight percentage points, from 46% to 54%, and to cut in half the gap in graduation between students of color and other students.

During the past year, the CSU Executive Vice Chancellor and Chief Academic Officer and staff visited each CSU campus to check on progress, identify challenges and look for opportunities for systemwide collaboration to improve student success. During the visits, the team identified several promising practices worth sharing with trustees.

A group of CSU leaders recently gathered to discuss desired activities and outcomes for the next fiscal year. In the year ahead, the CSU Graduation Initiative will focus on strategies to reduce achievement gaps and sustain recent momentum to raise overall graduation rates.

Background

As part of the national *Access to Success* campaign, the CSU has committed to raising its graduation rate by eight percentage points and halving its achievement gaps by 2015. In October 2009, each campus president and provost agreed to institutional targets that, if met, will bring the

system to its goal. Two months later each university submitted an action plan, and since then staff from the Office of the Chancellor have monitored and guided progress.

One and a half years into the initiative a few trends are emerging. Recent data suggest that the CSU system is on track to exceed its graduation rate goal of 54% by 2015. Graduation and retention rates for underrepresented minorities (URMs) and non-URMs have both increased in recent years, however non-URM graduation rates are rising more precipitously than their URM counterparts. As a result, the achievement gap is widening rather than shrinking. The initiative's leadership team is looking for ways to consolidate and build on recent gains, and to address the persistent achievement gap.

Four Keys to Improving Student Success

Our students are as unique as our universities, and drop-out for a variety of reasons. However, within the context of our state and mission a few themes stand out:

1. Academic preparation. Students leave when they are not ready for college-level work, or the path to degree appears longer than they can last. The CSU Early Assessment and Early Start programs allow opportunities for high school students to make better use of testing to not only learn whether they are ready for college-level math and English, but also to do something about it before arriving at the CSU.

2. Engagement with campus intellectual life. Students who feel personally connected with the social and academic climate of the CSU are likelier to persist. The Graduation Initiative team saw many innovative ways campuses bring this about, some of them quite inexpensive: for example, offering student-led supplemental instruction, learning communities, peer mentoring, and prioritized advising. Key to this work is its intellectual component: research shows that highly engaging practices in curriculum and teaching benefit all students, and in particular the historically underserved. When traditionally co-curricular strategies are embraced by academic affairs and faculty, graduation rates rise and gaps shrink. In support of this work, the Graduation Initiative is bringing teams from nine campuses to the AAC&U Summer Institute on High-Impact Practices and Student Success.

3. Strategic, data-driven decision making. Support programs that target particular majors, age, ethnic groups or regions abound on every campus of the CSU. Often they are funded by separate private foundations or state or federal agencies. Less pervasive is the insight and collaboration required to coordinate work across these disparate offices. The Graduation Initiative team found that those making the most progress were highly involved in strategic planning. By coincidence several had concluded that the ideal structure was bi-weekly meetings of around 20 people, drawn from faculty, staff and administrators across the institution. These groups had different

methods of working together, but all used data to guide strategic decisions and shared an unwavering commitment to advance the graduation agenda.

4. Presidential leadership. The campuses with strong records of improvement are often those with a stable and respected senior leadership. Improving student success is very hard work, requiring sustained, focus year in and year out. Successful campuses can point to particular moments when their culture changed, when the entire community began pulling in the same direction. Several CSU campuses have created a campus culture of graduation, whereby faculty, staff, students, and administrators are all driven toward fulfilling this mission.