

Graduation Initiative 2025 Advisory Committee

Recommendations and Reflections — July 2021





As the global public health crisis upended our world and tipped us all into a new, virtual frontier, more than 500,000 California State University students, faculty and staff entered, navigated and persevered through this unfamiliar landscape with characteristic drive, determination and ingenuity. Shining bright and constant as our north star, the CSU's Graduation Initiative 2025 led us through the pandemic, as we collectively worked to uphold record-high graduation and retention rates for students from all backgrounds.

But even as we celebrate our victories, we are reminded that there is much more work before us.

The pandemic revealed our many strengths, but it also trained our hearts and minds on the painful inequities that still exist across our country, including here at the CSU. And it intensified our resolve to ensure that all students, regardless of background, economic circumstance, race or ethnicity, have the equal opportunity to earn the security, prosperity and purpose that come with a CSU degree.

As one of my first actions as the CSU's chancellor, I formed the Graduation Initiative 2025 Advisory Committee – a diverse, talented and singularly dedicated team of stakeholders, including students, faculty and staff. The committee's charge was to explore bold and creative ways to not only maintain but accelerate our progress toward GI 2025's goals – with a special focus on eliminating equity gaps.

This report represents the committee's recommendations, and I have every confidence they will help propel the CSU to new levels of transparency, accountability, innovation and action. I offer my deepest gratitude and appreciation to our expert committee members for their vital and consequential work – and to all who join us in this mighty final push to close equity gaps.

It is the calling of our time. And we will answer – together.

Joseph I. Castro, Ph.D., M.P.P.
Chancellor

Executive Summary

“My dad is an immigrant who came here from El Salvador on political asylum from the civil war. Because of that, he never had any type of education. It was his number-one wish for me to be able to go to school and do whatever I wanted with my life. He’d say, ‘Go to school. It doesn’t matter what for, but go and get an education because you can.’ ”

Maria Angelica Garcia

Humboldt State University, Class of 2020

As it passes its midway point, Graduation Initiative 2025 is well on its way to meeting many of its bold graduation rate goals systemwide. Yet, the California State University system is committed to doing more which means ensuring that all students, regardless of background, have the opportunity to receive a high-quality education and earn a CSU degree.

In January 2021, Chancellor Joseph Castro convened a new advisory committee for Graduation Initiative 2025 with an expressed goal to identify new and creative ways to address disparities in graduation rates and eliminate equity gaps. Comprised of CSU trustees, presidents and provosts, faculty and student members of the Academic Senate CSU and the California State Student Association, and other key stakeholders, the advisory committee drew upon a breadth and depth of expertise.

The committee met over four months, reviewing data and research and ultimately synthesizing their recommendations into five main areas. Given the time urgency of the Initiative’s 2025 deadline, the committee focused on immediate and actionable recommendations for eliminating equity gaps. The recommendations – while beneficial for all students – aim to foster disproportionately positive outcomes for students of color, Pell recipients, and those who are the first in their family to attend college. In summary, the committee suggests the following recommendations:

- Target courses with high rates of non-passing grades (D, F or Withdrawal) for strategic interventions focused on equity;
- Ensure more robust and directed academic advising for all students;
- Expand data sharing and campus-level data transparency with an equity lens across the CSU;
- Prioritize course availability and expand opportunities for students to enroll in the courses they need, when they need them; and
- Support students’ basic needs by establishing and implementing a baseline level of support and resources across all 23 CSU campuses.

This report summarizes the committee’s recommendations for redoubling the system’s student success efforts with a more intentional focus on eliminating equity gaps.

Advisory Committee Recommendations

Building on the existing [six operational priorities](#) of Graduation Initiative 2025 the advisory committee outlined five recommendations intended to intensify the focus on equity and to consider the benefit of greater collective action across campuses. These recommendations are submitted to Chancellor Castro with the goal to accelerate existing Graduation Initiative 2025 efforts, to potentially scale programs that have demonstrated success and to consider an accountability framework to help ensure progress. Each recommendation highlights potential strategies and interventions as well as suggested next steps and measures for tracking progress.



1. Targeting DFW Courses with Focus on Equity

While earning a non-passing grade in a course can present a challenge for all students, the interruption and possible impact on time to graduation for students of color is often disproportionately negative. In fact, for students of color earning a non-passing grade or failing a course in their first year increases the chance that they will not return for their second year of college. By better supporting students at this moment of risk in their academic journey, it is possible to bring about more equitable outcomes in the classroom. To be clear, the goal is not to compromise the academic rigor of courses established by CSU faculty, rather, more effectively support students and faculty in successfully meeting course outcomes.

Strategies and interventions include:

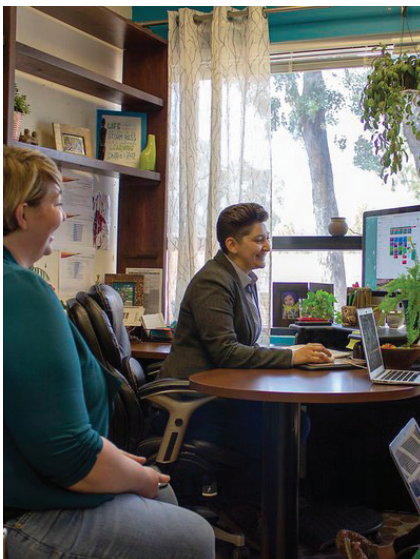
- Fostering a greater equity-minded engagement with faculty, staff and students.
- Supporting faculty and providing professional development opportunities to continuously develop culturally responsive pedagogy and instructional methods.
- Broadly distributing findings and information from existing models of course redesigns and instructional models to share high impact practices.
- Encouraging the use of early alert systems and implementing a more responsive academic advising ecosystem.
- Developing multiple data-based strategies that address such areas as: resource allocation; student preparedness; and home/family environment, particularly for first-generation students.
- Planning for scalability with a focus on courses that have the greatest impact on first- generation students, African Americans, Latinx, Pell-recipients and others.
- Promoting the critical importance of faculty diversity with respect to the success of diverse learners.

➔ Next Steps

- Share existing evidence.
- Catalog strategies and interventions.
- Utilize existing centers of expertise including the Academic Senate, faculty development centers and campus advisors.
- Create a plan for sustaining momentum by leveraging equity scorecards and establishing models of continuous improvement.

☰ Tracking Progress

- Track DFW courses and disaggregate by target student groups.
- Track participation in faculty development and include assessments of attitudinal dispositions.
- Encourage development of better assessments.



2. Ensuring Robust and Directed Academic Advising for All Students

Research shows that providing students with a clear pathway to meeting their educational goals contributes to improved retention and graduation. A number of CSU campuses have incorporated technology to support and complement academic advisement, including leveraging robust digital degree planners. It is the committee's recommendation to make such practices systemwide to ensure that all students receive equitable support. Although technology alone cannot address all advising challenges that may arise along a student's academic journey, the appropriate combination of technology and human engagement can help forge a new culture and structure of academic support. This transition from the

transactional to the transformational requires a collaborative effort among students, staff, faculty and alumni.

Strategies and interventions include:

- Providing all students with digital academic planning tools, including a degree planner – from day one – empowering them to chart their path to graduation.
- Enhancing and expanding alert systems that notify students when they are at risk of deviating from their degree path and provide actionable suggestions for getting back on track.
- Supporting best practices for more manageable caseloads for proactive advisement, including assessing major-to-advisor ratios.
- Exploring the role of mentors – peer, faculty and alumni – to complement digital planning tools.
- Presenting a systemwide study on credit accumulation with disaggregated data identifying

inequities in unit completion patterns.

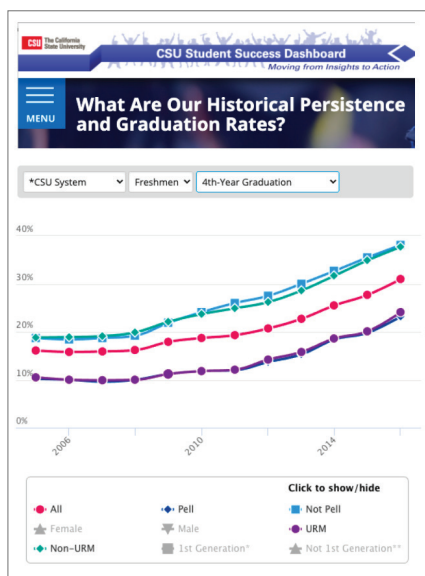
- Distinguishing between part-time and full-time status, and creating strategies for adapting when a student’s enrollment status changes.
- Sharing degree planners with high school counselors so they can advise students for the transition to college.

➔ Next Steps

- Consult with students, faculty and advisors to validate recommendations.
- Provide robust professional development for students, staff and faculty.
- Leverage predictive analytics at scale to enhance the efficacy of academic planning and advisement.
- Facilitate the sharing of successful strategies among CSU campuses.

☰ Tracking Progress

- Closely monitor students who are categorized as “underrepresented minority,” and disaggregate the data to create a matrix of metrics for tracking progress.
- Mindfully focus campus advisement efforts on closing equity gaps.
- Evaluate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student choices.



3. Expanding Data Sharing and Campus-level Data Transparency through an Equity Lens

A key strength of the CSU is the diversity of its 23 campuses. The committee recommends tapping into the collective knowledge of the system to leverage data that can help to further address educational equity gaps. By focusing on root causes, rather than just symptoms, the data can provide an opportunity to better identify those differential factors that can help narrow – and even eliminate – gaps as well as to evaluate how best practices can be adopted by other campuses. Data-informed solutions, using an equity lens, should be more present and accessible on all CSU campuses.

Strategies and interventions include:

- Developing a central “what works/best practices” repository informed by campus assessment and research findings maintained by the Office of the Chancellor.
- Engaging campuses to share success stories and critiques of equity lensed campus programs that serve significant numbers of students.
- Identifying and leveraging campus models for PK-12/CCC student pipeline alignment feedback and improvement work.

- Fostering intercampus communications to share what works on an ongoing quarterly basis.
- Establishing a minimum threshold of campus equity data awareness among administrators, faculty, staff and students.

➔ Next Steps

- Engage campus leadership to better understand nuances of informed decision making.
- Share effective programs through convenings, meetings and periodic communications supplemented with best practices and supporting data/information.
- Allow campuses to have a smoother path to an informed choice of what is working and input on enhancements.

☰ Tracking Progress

- Establish metrics that prioritize equity-minded action rather than reflection.
- Measure how well CSU systems and structures work together.
- Hold convenings with middle, secondary and community college colleagues to look at paths and outcomes and identify opportunities for better alignment.
- Budget in ways that form core funds and then one-time monies that are accountability based.



4. Prioritizing Course Availability

Ensuring course availability is an important contributor to academic success and eliminating equity gaps – but simply offering courses will not solve the problem. The CSU must make data-driven decisions, be intentional about the courses offered and prioritize funding for such courses. Course availability must be strategically prioritized by looking at the data and identifying and addressing barriers to student success.

Strategies and interventions include:

- Leveraging technology to build an infrastructure that informs student needs and course demand.
- Developing systemwide guidance stipulating that funding course offerings should be a high priority on all campuses if the need is present and/or if aligned with campus equity gap needs.
- Investigating root causes for students struggling in the first few semesters of college to ensure they continue with their academic journey.
- Aligning curriculum with course offerings and developing multi-year plans to ensure that courses are available.
- Leveraging the CSU's vast digital platform to offer high demand courses for students systemwide

through a virtual modality to ensure accessibility for all CSU students.

- Expanding course offerings in the summer and during intersessions.

➔ Next Steps

- Improve the ability to predict future course demand and need using available technology.
- Ensure that the CSU is collecting data on all 23 campuses and sharing that data through an online dashboard about course needs/demands.
- Examine course offerings and identify critical information toward improving student success in high enrollment, high DFW courses.
- Provide training and professional development for curricular and course alignment as well as multi-year plan development.

☰ Tracking Progress

- Establish timeframe for campus implementation and use of degree planners as one way to view, assess and predict future course need and demand.
- Report the percentage of campus budgets dedicated to instruction against appropriate corresponding metrics that provide reasonable indications of course availability.
- Monitor increases in cross-campus enrollment in “bottleneck courses” utilizing online course offerings where appropriate.
- Maintain a list of high enrollment, high DFW courses (by campus) and track course outcomes by semester, by various student populations. Outcomes should be shared systemwide and considered against course demand and the number of attempts in particular courses.



5. Supporting Student Basic Needs

CSU students face many challenges outside of their academic commitments, including food and housing insecurity, a lack of access to mental health services and limited access to technology. These challenges are often most acute for students of color, those who are the first in their families to attend college and Pell grant recipients.

More than 41% of students across the CSU system have reported being food insecure and nearly 11% reported experiencing homelessness. However students who identified as both first-generation and African-American experienced higher rates of these basic needs insecurities, with nearly 66% of this population reporting food insecurity and 18% reporting homelessness.

Ensuring that resources are available to help meet the basic needs of all CSU students is integral to

eliminating equity gaps and promoting timely graduation. To promote academic success, their holistic well-being must be addressed as well.

Strategies and interventions include:

- Creating a systemwide definition for what services are considered a basic need. While campuses should have the autonomy to expand on the system definition, at minimum food, housing, mental health services and technology access should be addressed.
- Creating a systemwide standard for basic needs resources thereby creating a minimum threshold for what a CSU student can expect. This standard will allow for ongoing state investment.
- Allowing any enrolled CSU student to utilize basic needs from any campus, making the reciprocity of basic needs services (including food and technology resources) permanent.
- Ensuring that each campus has adequate mental health professionals to meet the International Association of Counseling Services' (IACS) recommendation of one full-time equivalent mental health professional for every 1,000 to 1,500 students.
- Advocating with appropriate governmental agencies for the expansion of college student exemptions in the CalFresh program, making it easier to apply for and qualify for benefits that were initiated in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

 **Next Steps:**

- Conduct systemwide surveys, disaggregated by campus and student background, to determine the demand for basic need resources.
- Create systemwide guidance for campuses to efficiently and effectively connect students to resources.
- Create a systemwide Basic Needs Differential Funding Model with equity at the forefront so that the level of student need on each campus is taken into consideration for funding allocations.
- Direct mental health services funding to campuses with the highest student to mental health professional ratios.

 **Tracking Progress:**

- Conduct biannual systemwide research to determine progress on fulfilling students' basic needs and to find ways to improve the delivery of basic needs to students in need.
- Continuously monitor data and review the progress of students of color and Pell grant recipients toward fulfilling their basic needs and completing their degree requirements.

Strategic Imperatives

Leading systemwide change to meet the ambitious goal of eliminating student educational equity gaps by 2025 requires a holistic view of the many factors that contribute to student success. It is with that perspective that the committee has identified an additional set of strategic imperatives which intersect and overlay its five key recommendations. While there is not an articulated set of actions assigned to these imperatives, the committee's intention is to raise awareness and elevate their importance in relation to advancing the goals of GI 2025 and closing equity gaps.

The three strategic imperatives are to:

- Leverage summer school and intersessions as a means of providing underserved students with additional opportunities to complete requisite coursework. Course offerings should be grounded in culturally relevant and inclusive pedagogies.
- Implement systemwide campus climate surveys to gain a better understanding of student and faculty needs; develop action and implementation plans for eliminating identified institutional barriers to equity and root causes of exclusion on the basis of race, income and other historically marginalized identities; and make adequate investments to support and sustain needed change.
- Explore strategic approaches to differentially fund campuses in ways that recognize the imperative to dedicate more resources to guide the academic success of students who arrive on campus with the greatest need.

Collective Impact: Enhancing Accountability

"We should be asking ourselves, 'Where is the greatest gap?' Then put our focus there and put the right teams together to address it."

GI 2025 Advisory Committee member

In addition to soliciting recommendations to close equity gaps, Chancellor Castro requested that the committee provide a framework for enhancing accountability for meeting GI 2025 goals. The purpose of developing the accountability framework is not to be punitive, but rather to better position the CSU to:

- Steward the precious resources allocated by the state and foundation partners to effectively close equity gaps;
- Ensure more robust cross-campus learning related to effective programming, interventions or campus policies; and
- Guide the strategic investments of resources in the future.

The committee recommends four guiding principles to ensure stronger accountability for achieving GI 2025 goals. They are:

Unify and Amplify Practices and Policies

There are a number of known and effective practices and policies to support student success that are supported by empirical evidence and various CSU campus demonstrations. These practices must be adopted at scale, with sufficient fidelity, to benefit a greater number of students.

Implement Differential Funding

Given the significant work still associated with closing equity gaps, there is an urgency to more strategically deploy CSU resources. Differential funding, for example, could be tied to specific time-bound programmatic activity across campuses. Funds could also be disproportionately delivered to campuses relative to their contribution to achieving systemwide goals.

Increase Transparency and Sharing Requirements

There is a need for greater campus-level data sharing and active transparency. An important aspect of accountability is greater communal awareness regarding the statistical and qualitative successes and struggles associated with key student success metrics.

Establish and Implement Equity-Focused Support Teams

An improved accountability framework requires CSU leaders to be clear-eyed and responsive when campus progress on various student success metrics is unsatisfactory or clearly lagging. Supportive interventions that involve campus visits are recommended. These visits could involve Chancellor's Office staff, together with other campus experts, to collaboratively troubleshoot, to provide technical assistance or implementation support.

Looking Ahead

These recommendations have been compiled for Chancellor Castro's review and consideration in setting a bold course of action for the CSU system in eliminating equity gaps. Highlighted recommendations were presented to the Board of Trustees at its July 2021 board meeting as well. To meet these goals, and to ensure a transformative, life-changing CSU degree is within reach for all students, will require a renewed commitment from every CSU stakeholder across the system.

Graduation Initiative 2025 Advisory Committee



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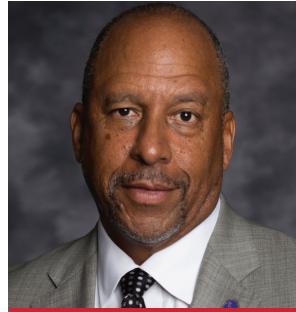
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