Highly Valued Degrees at California State University, Long Beach
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In Short

- California State University, Long Beach (CSULB) received the 2014 national award from the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) for Excellence and Innovation in Student Success and Completion, recognizing record high graduation rates, significantly above comparable institutions.
- To achieve gains, CSULB implemented a full range of institution-changing strategies, not just a few student success measures. Gains occurred with cohorts that entered during major budget cuts, benefitted all ethnic and gender groups, and low-income students, and occurred with cohorts that were far more diverse and far more low-income compared to earlier cohorts.
- With a national conversation asking why sizable student success gains are elusive, especially for underrepresented students, the CSULB experience suggests a key reason: improvement requires changing many aspects of the institution, not just a few, and this can be difficult.

Data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) show that in the mid-1990s, the U.S. was in a close tie for first place in the world in baccalaureate completion rates but two decades later has fallen to 17th place. The U.S. is one of the only developed nations in which the younger generation is not better educated than the older generation (e.g., OECD, 2014). A new report from the National Clearinghouse (Shapiro, et al., 2015) indicates that the overall college completion rate for the U.S. fell 2% between 2014 and 2015. The Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce estimates that by 2020 U.S. will be short by 5 million workers with college or postgraduate degrees (Carnevale, et al. 2013).

In 2014, California State University, Long Beach (CSULB) received the national award from The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) for Excellence and Innovation in Student Success and Completion, recognizing record high graduation rates with a diverse student population, significantly above comparable institutions. Moreover, these high rates were obtained for cohorts who entered the university during the Great Recession, which triggered major higher education budget cuts.
In the early 1990s, CSULB also endured severe budget cuts. Students who entered at that time later graduated at the lowest rates in university history, far below comparable institutions. CSULB handled the 1990s budget crisis without much attention to degree completion. The schedule of classes was severely curtailed. A standing joke was that graduating seniors had priority for freshman English – except this was not a joke. A few years later, the campus self-study for regional accreditation did not even mention the all-time-low 6-year graduation rate (26%) – and neither did the regional accreditor’s report.

Fast forward to 2014; CSULB’s rate reached 65%, well above the national average for large public master’s institutions. The record high was attained with students who were more diverse, more low-income, and not academically better prepared than the 1990s. Gains lifted all student gender and ethnic groups.

Two instances of severe budget cuts followed by very different outcomes for students provoke a question: what was the difference?

When the Education Trust launched *College Results Online* (CRO) in the early 2000s, placing data online about low graduation rates and achievement gaps, it debunked the conventional wisdom that nothing affects degree completion other than student preparation. This launched a renewed national conversation about completion. In 2005, AASCU partnered with Education Trust and the National Association of System Heads to sponsor the seminal “Graduation Rates Study” (AASCU, 2005) identifying why some colleges are far more successful with underrepresented students than others.

In 2005, a senior academic leader from CSULB participated in the Education Trust/AASCU Graduation Rates Study, led a team to Elizabeth City State College in North Carolina (a historically black institution), and returned with an enlarged perspective on how a campus can promote the success of students, especially underrepresented students. Coincidentally, not long after, a second senior leader was hired who had also participated in the 2005 study. CSULB launched an institution-wide effort to boost completion branded as the “Highly Valued Degree Initiative” (HVDI), with the name intended to reflect the university’s commitment to maintain degree quality while improving retention and completion overall and for all student ethnic, gender, income, and major subgroups.
HVDI: An All-University Approach to Success

CSULB is a large, urban, public master’s university with about 37,500 students. Latinos are the largest ethnic group, followed by Caucasians and Asians with smaller African American, Native American, and international student numbers. More than half of students are Pell-eligible and two-thirds receive some financial aid. Entering SAT scores have remained nearly flat for many years. During the Great Recession and following years (2008-11), the campus suffered massive budget reductions in state appropriation and student fees rose—and yet HVDI’s efforts continued to produce progress.

Large public master’s universities are one of the most important U.S. higher education sectors, enrolling nearly 1.5 million undergraduates. According to CRO, the 6-year graduation rate for this sector is up only 4% over 10 years (to 47%) and for underrepresented students, up only 5% (to 38%). More than a decade after the national college completion discussion began, many are asking why gains remain elusive, especially with underrepresented students.

HVDI utilized a broad set of strategies to accomplish gains. Some were typical: learning communities, advising, tutoring. Others were less commonly discussed in connection with student success: strategic planning, budget planning and enrollment management. The keys were a collaborative, all-institution approach; a sustained, unwavering focus; and strong and committed leadership.

Planning: HVDI utilized the existing annual strategic planning process to establish campus goals for degree completion. Discussions created a venue within which efforts of Academic Affairs could link with Student Affairs and with Administration and Finance (which housed Enrollment Services). Student success eventually became a super-ordinate goal for all divisions, which was a useful way to resolve differences between vice presidents about resource allocation.

Communication: Prior to 2005, student success was rarely a topic of conversation among CSULB leaders. As student success became a super-ordinate goal, success language began to make frequent appearances in campus communications from presidents, provosts, and other campus leaders. Three successive presidents used signature slogans (“I have three priorities: students, students, students;” “Graduation Begins Today;” “We know our mission; it is student success”) that helped maintain focus.

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Organization: An institution-wide HVDI Steering Committee was formed with representatives from each academic college and from five task forces on Advising, Student Support, Faculty Development, Curriculum, and Research. The Steering Committee met and continues to meet every other week in order to sustain focus. Over time, the sophistication of analysis and discussion rose dramatically.

Data: Use of data was an HVDI hallmark. A dashboard was developed to break out data by departments, ethnic groups, gender groups, and academic preparation. A “native junior” metric associated continuing students with respective academic colleges at the end of the third cohort year after choice of majors was sorted out. Six-year graduation rate goals were assigned to each academic college for underrepresented native juniors, other native juniors, underrepresented transfer students and other transfer students. Progress was tracked closely and frequently discussed with deans. Data contrasting underrepresented and non-underrepresented students revealed almost no achievement gap for transfer students but significant gaps for native students.

Budget: In the early 2000s, significant tensions existed between academic and administrative divisional vice presidents over funding instruction. Eventually the matter was resolved with a practice of fully funding the schedule of classes first in the budget every year. This made it possible for the academic division to tell deans that any class with adequate student demand would be funded, a sea change from the campus attitude of the 1990s. This made a huge difference in eliminating budget-based course bottlenecks that delayed progress to the degree, especially during the Great Recession.

Innovation: In 2006, the academic division carved out funding to support efforts to innovate for student success, with the amount eventually reaching $1 million. Funds were distributed annually based on proposals from colleges and task forces. With the Great Recession, this entire budget was lost, but a portion was replaced by a new Student Excellence Fee, and the campus continues supporting innovation efforts.

Advising: Decentralized and neglected prior to 2005, the academic division launched efforts to coordinate practices across the many units that provided advising services. Mandatory orientations and advising milestones were instituted. Colleges developed advising plans to reach each major, and college advising centers were created. The campus shifted from mainly faculty to mainly staff advising as it became clear that curricular complexities required professional advisors. During the Great Recession, a majority of the Student Excellence Fee was prioritized to protect and even add advising positions despite the severe budget challenges. The campus embraced technology in advising with advisor-facing and student-facing self-service degree audits and degree planners. More recently, the campus rolled out predictive analytics.
with the view that e-advising does not reduce the need for human advisors, but makes face-to-face advising more productive.

**Support services:** Student services formed another key element in HVDI. The research literature suggests that best practice requires a solid array of services for all students plus an array of programs for specific needs (Schuh, et al., 2010). The campus moved key advising and learning assistance programs from an obscure location to one adjacent to the flow of pedestrian student traffic and usage dramatically increased. The campus increased investments in supplemental instruction, learning assistance, and tutoring. Academic and Student Affairs partnered to develop learning communities aimed at freshmen who arrived with college preparatory needs. The campus strengthened investments in services for disabled students. Academic and Student Affairs partnered to launch a “Men’s Success Initiative” initially aimed at African American men and later expanded to include Latino males. The campus has long supported centers for several student ethnic groups and for LGBTQ. Most recently the campus has launched a center to support undocumented students.

**Enrollment management:** In a large, comprehensive university, the task of providing all classes needed by students to make progress to degree is challenging. The academic division partnered with Administration and Finance (which housed Enrollment Services) and Student Affairs (which housed student recruitment) to develop proactive enrollment management from pre-entry to graduation, with key responsibilities assigned to college associate deans. Coupled with the budget commitments, proactive enrollment management helped tremendously with student progress to degree.

**Curriculum:** At CSULB prior to HVDI, average time to degree and average units to degree were well beyond national standards of four years and 120 semester units. General Education (GE) is famously a battleground in many institutions as departments perceive that maintaining enrollments thorough GE requirements brings resources. Rethinking these issues sometimes led to curriculum battles. At one point, it became clear that a second and atypical GE lab-life-science requirement was standing in the way of graduation for non-science majors and simply could not be delivered due to the lack of labs and instructors--but not because of funding, which was guaranteed. This led to a spirited disagreement and eventually to a Senate action to change the requirement. Similarly, some major requirements had arisen by accretion over years without much consideration of timely student progress, and some majors contained “hidden” prerequisites. Efforts to streamline curricula were undertaken and almost all majors were reduced to 120 nominal semester units (including electives and GE), including the College of Engineering.

**Pedagogy:** The campus expanded support for high impact practices such as internships, study abroad, and undergraduate research. An online learning community for STEM faculty was created to share pedagogical ideas. Faculty teams came together to redesign low completion rate courses, informed by research demonstrating the superiority of active learning. One dedicated professor made strenuous efforts to improve outcomes for an Anatomy and Physiology course; over several years, she experimented with digital and face-to-face innovations and eventually produced dramatic improvements. The Physics and Chemistry
departments invested similar effort with positive results, and a few other teams achieved improvements. However, dramatic gains with pedagogy were not always easily attained. Some results were flat and some teams could not work together. Recently, CSULB decided to invest in flipped and hybrid courses, partly because of evidence that these modes can lead to greater learning but also because the technology can engage faculty in course redesign efforts.

Tenure-track hiring: After the Great Recession, tenure track hiring increased. To become intentional about linking hiring with student success, the campus revised practices. Every dean now meets with every convening hiring committee to discuss how faculty will be selected who will be well-prepared to teach CSULB students. Each candidate must provide a “Student Success Statement” describing how he or she is prepared to teach diverse students. Committee hiring recommendations must be justified in part by success statements. These changes have sent a message about faculty hiring priorities.

Long Beach College Promise Partnership: The city of Long Beach is one of the most diverse in the U.S. CSULB had long been part of a partnership with the local community college and the public school system, centered on a local admission guarantee. As a high-demand campus, it would have been easy for CSULB to become selective; however, because of the partnership, local access was protected, and CSULB has become even more diverse, enrolling even more Pell students while entering SAT scores remain nearly flat. Gains in completion made by CSULB have little to do with selectivity. In 2015, the Long Beach College Promise Partnership won a $5 million California Governor’s Innovation award in part because of success in completion rates recognized by the AASCU award.

Results

For several cohorts entering CSULB prior to 2005, the year of the AASCU/Education Trust/NASH study and the beginning of the HVrDI student success improvement efforts, graduation rates were flat at about 53%. To measure gains for purposes of the AASCU award, the campus used rates of the cohort that entered in 2005 and completed six years in 2011 as a baseline. This baseline was compared to subsequent cohorts.

After the baseline period, freshman rates showed steady improvements averaging 4% per year through 2014, reaching 65% (and higher now, see below). All student subgroups benefited. Females gained a bit more than males. African American, Latino, and Native American students all made gains in the 11-13% range. Rates for Pell grant recipients rose 13%, reaching over 60%, not far below the campus average. Gains have raised completion rates
for students with the “remedial” label to 60%, only 5% below the overall rate.

Four-year transfer graduation rates rose 11% to 79% over five years. Gains for transfer Pell grant recipients were slightly larger, as were gains for Latino and for African American students. The percentage gain for Native Americans was dramatic but numbers are small. Gains benefitted all student ethnic and gender groups.

What about numbers of students affected by HVDI? As of Fall 2014, about 3,500 students graduated or were still enrolled who would have left school at baseline rates. About two-thirds of these began as first-time freshmen and about one-third as transfers. About two-thirds had already graduated and others were retained at rates exceeding baseline retention rates. About one-third identified as an underrepresented ethnic group and about one-third entered as Pell students, low income by federal guidelines.

It might be asked if these gains are due to moving students more quickly to graduation within measured periods or whether HVDI increased the total number of students who ever graduate. Both outcomes are important. Improvement in time to degree creates access for other students, reduces student loan debt, saves money for students and families, and frees up state and federal financial aid resources to be offered to other students. Improvements in total numbers graduating are even more important, creating opportunities for more students to have a career, a middle-class life, a healthier lifestyle, and to actively participate in civic and cultural society. Analyses indicate that the large majority of the increase is associated with students who otherwise would never have graduated.

Retention rates for cohorts who have not yet graduated indicate that further improvements are likely. For example, overall first year retention has risen over 3% (to nearly 90%) and for underrepresented groups, over 7%. The third year retention rate, a strong predictor of 6-year graduation rates, is up over 3% and for underrepresented students, up about 4.5%.

The prediction of further gains has recently been supported by fresh data showing the overall freshman graduation rate for the most recent cohort that completed six years in 2015 rose an additional 2%. The rate for underrepresented students rose an additional 5%. Six-year graduation rates for underrepresented freshmen have now increased 12% over two years and 16% over four years. The achievement gap (difference between underrepresented students and
others) for freshmen at six years now has been reduced to about 8% while there is no gap for transfer students overall. Achievement gaps will remain a focus of particular attention.

**Lessons Learned**

With a national conversation asking why sizable student success gains, especially for underrepresented students, are elusive on most campuses, the CSULB experience suggests a key reason: improvement requires changing many aspects of the institution, not just a few. This can be difficult, but there are several lessons that can be drawn from the HVDI at CSULB.

**Whole institution:** The 2005 Education Trust study, subtitled “A Matter of Culture and Leadership,” suggested a litmus test for campuses that are successful with underrepresented students: Have a visitor walk around and ask, “Whose job is student success on this campus?” If replies are, “The vice president,” or “Advisors,” then the visitor has not found a campus focused on student success. If the replies are “Everyone’s,” the visitor has found a campus focused on student success (AASCU, 2005). Today, visitors to CSULB often remark that student success is a theme they hear from many representatives of the campus. “Our student success mission” became an overarching principle embraced by leaders, provosts, deans, associate deans, advisors, student support staff, enrollment services staff, most faculty, and many others. For some, this purpose gave meaning to daily work that might otherwise be unfulfilling.

**No Magic Bullets:** A corollary to the above is that there is no magic bullet. No single intervention will create significant gains in a large institution. A student’s path through a large university is complex with many potential roadblocks. Isolated interventions may not be effective because other roadblocks may arise and/or because innovations do not combine to foster a supportive campus culture. After spending millions supporting community college reform, the Gates Foundation has arrived at the same conclusion (Bailey, et al. 2015).

**Less Obvious Strategies:** Student success conferences are likely to include discussions among professionals about learning communities, tutoring, mentoring, and perhaps course redesign. These all are important, but some other important strategies are not usually on the agendas: leadership, budgetary commitment, enrollment management, curricular streamlining, tenure track hiring, and data capabilities. Leaving these out makes it likely that student success efforts will only be marginally effective.

**Data:** Without data, it is nearly impossible to have productive conversations about student success. With data, it becomes harder to deny that problems exist. Data demonstrating achievement gaps will often lead to consensus more quickly because most faculty members support equity. Developing the institutional capabilities to analyze and use data is a challenge for many institutions. The combination of skills needed includes a deep understanding of principles of student success; strong quantitative data skills; strong facility with large-scale institutional data; deep knowledge of national comparative data such as IPEDS and College...
Results Online; good data presentation skills; and fluency in campus politics. This is a rare combination.

**Nuts and bolts:** A large university has many moving parts; a complex system of class schedules, budgets, advising, and so on must work smoothly to support student progress. Managing this complexity is unglamorous but essential and requires substantial professionalization of institutional leadership and management. Recently Nassirian observed, “The most important paradigm shift...may at first glance be the proverbial no-brainer...the seemingly uncontroversial assertion that the college or university is there to serve students...” (Nassirian, 2015). He perceptively points out that the professionalization of enrollment management, innocuous as it seems, shifts institutions away from the ancient view of a university as a “self-governing body of scholars.” Student success also requires professionalization. Managing a large university to optimize success requires a skilled, collaborative, responsive leadership and managerial team.

**Leadership & Key Roles:** At CSULB, presidents and provosts played key roles in articulating the commitment to student success and sustaining the focus on it. Deans played key roles within their academic colleges. Vice provosts played key roles coordinating activities across campus. Associate deans did much of the heavy lifting for enrollment management, while Enrollment Services did a great deal of work developing data to manage enrollment. Institutional Research took on the task of summarizing large amounts of data to track progress and set goals (CSULB Institutional Research, 2015). The campus wide steering committee was an essential center of gravity.

The faculty is at the heart of any university. Most at CSULB were very supportive of student success, and some made heroic efforts to improve outcomes. The language of student success now informs almost all conversations about pedagogy and curriculum and even scheduling. A theme of a recent Education Advisory Board (EAB, 2015) convening for provosts was phrased as “many provosts tell us they know what to do to promote student success – but can’t get the campus on board.” Happily CSULB was able to engage many of the faculty in student success but the EAB theme suggests there are still challenges. For some faculty, approaches such as active learning are new ideas. All are familiar with respective departments but less aware of complex student pathways through a whole institution. A few may resist the necessary quantification, perhaps not appreciating that freshman graduation percentage points denote real individual students. A few may regard efforts toward student success as inferior to “scholarship of discovery” (Boyer, 1990). Faculty are at the heart of any university but sometimes have perspectives limited by respective disciplines and so university-wide leadership is often necessary to move a campus toward student success.

**Collaboration & Orchestration:** Academic and student affairs units can collaborate on activities such as advising, learning communities, men’s success. Academic and administrative units can collaborate on enrollment planning and management, data, facilities. A particularly useful collaboration at CSULB was the Beach Learning Community, involving Academic and Student Affairs that has boosted retention and graduation for the most academically challenged
(‘remedial’) entering first year students. Breaking out of the-too many and too-familiar silos is needed to move forward.

In Sum: None of the strategies employed at CSULB were especially innovative in isolation. What was relatively distinctive was the orchestration of strategies sustained over a decade with an unwavering focus. Make no mistake: it was and is difficult to keep the focus of an entire institution for a decade. Staying the course requires strong and committed leadership.

Further innovations are planned. A student success center will open. E-adviseing and predictive analytics will become pervasive as well as deeper uses of data. Digital learning and high impact practices will be expanded. First-year experiences will be changed and improved while graduate programs will be reinvigorated.

Time will tell whether the campus will attain this vision but the stakes are high. President Obama established national completion goals because the future economic position of the nation depends upon a well-educated workforce (The White House, 2015). Public master’s are actually the most important type of four year higher education institution for President Obama’s goal because they enroll the largest number of students who display the demographics of the future: diverse, first generation, low-income, and originating from underfunded K-12 schools.

If public master’s institutions cannot successfully raise completion rates while maintaining quality, then the President’s strategy for national economic competitiveness is in jeopardy. The impacts of failure might not be apparent for a decade or two but future historians might offer theories on why early 21st century U.S. allowed educational attainment to fall, leading to a decline in relative standard of living. Conversely, public master’s institutions that successfully raise completion rates while maintaining quality become very important models for public higher education. CSULB has begun to demonstrate this possibility and will continue this grand experiment.
Resources


College Results Online, http://www.collegeresults.org/


Education Advisory Board (2015) Academic Affairs Forum, Dana Point, CA, October


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