WHAT LEADERS ARE SAYING

A Rising Tide in Graduation Rates at the California State University (CSU), a Persistent Divide in Racial Equity:
A Progress Report on the Graduation Initiative 2025

STATE LEADERS

Assemblymember Kevin McCarty, Chair of the Assembly Budget Subcommittee No. 2 on Education Finance

"CSU, the nation’s largest public university system, plays a vital role in providing access to historically underserved students, with over two-thirds of first-time and transfer students being students of color," said Assemblymember Kevin McCarty. “Progress has been made in supporting four-year graduation rates at CSU campuses, but closing equity gaps remains a priority, as shown in the Campaign for College Opportunity’s report. As chair of the Assembly Budget Subcommittee on Education Finance, I recognize that investing in our students leads to thriving communities, a strong workforce, and a thriving economy."

Senator Steve Glazer, Chair of the Senate Select Committee on Student Success

"As a former Trustee of the California State University and proud CSU graduate, I know how vital it is that the next generation of California students are given the chance to reach their highest potential. The CSU is to be commended for almost doubling the 4-year graduation rate in the past seven years, but unfortunately racial and ethnic equity gaps persist. Together, with our educational partners, we are working to streamline educational pathways that will ensure the success of every student."

Senator John Laird, Chair of Senate Budget Subcommittee #1 on Education

"The California State University system (CSU) has been a catalyst of transformative experiences for countless students throughout California, as underscored by the findings of this report. As Chair of the Senate Budget Subcommittee on Education, I am unwavering in my dedication to collaborating with the CSU’s in the implementation of Graduation Initiative 2025, aimed at enhancing our students' graduation rates and addressing the racial equity gap."
PARTNERS

Angela Bugayong, Chief Program Officer, Students Rising Above

"This report emphasizes the importance of collaboration between higher education institutions, specifically CSUs, and community-based organizations to boost graduation rates. Students Rising Above (SRA) is a Bay-Area organization dedicated to empowering students facing systemic barriers in education, career, and life. Currently, SRA has students at 19 CSU campuses and has graduates from all 23 CSU campuses. Recognizing the challenges students endure in their college journey, SRA extends support services, addressing basic needs alongside academic well-being. With the increasing complexities of the world, collective efforts are essential to ensure our students' success."

Pamela Burdman, Executive Director, Just Equations

"This report rightly commends the CSU system for its years-long commitment to increasing graduation rates overall while reducing gaps across racial and ethnic groups. I join the Campaign for College opportunity in celebrating this commitment as well as the progress to date. At the same time, the report spotlights the urgent need for CSU leaders to redouble those efforts, especially with respect to the wide equity gaps across racial groups and across campuses within the system. It also points to the imperative for campuses to conduct research to critically assess and adjust their strategies for promoting student success. California students deserve no less."

Meredith Curry Nuñez, Executive Director, Northern California College Promise

"Disaggregated data has the power to magnify persistent racial inequities in higher education and highlight opportunities for our institutions to continue impactful work to support students in reaching their college goals. This report emphasizes how vital it is to look intentionally at the progress of the CSU Graduation Initiative 2025 with an eye toward how well we support Black, Latinx, Asian American, NHPI, and AIAN Californians in achieving their goals. As the Northern California College Promise Coalition works with our local CSU's to reach the goals of GI 2025, we look forward to using these campus-by-campus breakdowns to implement evidence-based best practices to see through to the promise of a college education for all. We also applaud and echo the Campaign's recommendations, including making campus and GI 2025 goals publicly available through a dashboard, the disaggregation of intersectional data, and scaling successful best practices for greater unity across the system in how students are supported."
Su Jin Gatlin Jez, Chief Executive Officer, California Competes

"The Campaign's report on the Graduation Initiative 2025 is a critical step forward in understanding the progress made in improving graduation rates across the CSU system. While we celebrate the notable increases in graduation rates, particularly for first-time and transfer students, we must acknowledge the persistent racial equity gaps that demand further action. The report serves as a valuable roadmap for CSU leaders, policymakers, and advocates to ensure all students, especially Latinx, AIAN, and Black students, are fully supported to succeed in reaching their college goals."

Phillip Kim, Chief Executive Officer, Michelson 20MM Foundation

"We commend the California State University system for being a steadfast, national leader in the fight to eliminate long-standing racial equity gaps. Despite great strides, completion rates for the CSU system’s Black, AIAN, and Latinx students still trail more than 10 percentage points behind success rates of peers from majority populations. We believe we have an opportunity to do better. The Michelson 20MM Foundation enthusiastically affirms and supports the Campaign for College Opportunity’s vision and recommendations towards closing the gap for California’s students."

Kim Mazzuca, President & CEO, 10,000 Degrees

"We applaud the Campaign for College Opportunity for illuminating the important work that must happen to reach the promise of the CSU Graduation Initiative 2025 (GI 2025) and to support all CSU students in reaching their college goals. 10,000 Degrees has long been committed to intentionally increasing educational equity, that is why the disproportionate and slow incremental progress of the CSU GI 2025 is disappointing to see, especially as we consider the negative impact the pandemic has had on enrollment and persistence for low-income students and students of color.

The interests and needs of our underrepresented students remain just that—underrepresented and unaddressed, and so sadly it is no surprise to us that our progress toward closing gaps in educational attainment and degree completion is slowing or stagnant. What we need now is action. The CSU GI report should be a rallying cry for all of us — our CSU and Community College leaders, state policymakers, and college success organizations like 10,000 Degrees—to work collectively with a laser focus on closing the racial equity gap. It is imperative that we do this work now, together, for the good of our students, our state, and our nation. We stand with the Campaign for College Opportunity and the courageous leaders, teachers and educators who are working tirelessly for educational equity and justice for all."
Kristin McGuire, Executive Director, Young Invincibles

"As a California State University Dominguez Hills alumna, I can attest first-hand that the system is an absolutely critical part of our state's higher education infrastructure. If we want to do right by California students, we must work for a strong CSU system that supports students all the way to graduation day. This report is showing good progress toward better graduation rates, but we know there is work to be done, especially for students of color. Young Invincibles will continue working with the Campaign for College Opportunity and fighting to create a CSU where all students can thrive and succeed."

Dr. Christopher Nellum, Executive Director, the Education Trust–West

"The California State University’s Graduation Initiative 2025 has been a notable and important goal post for higher education equity efforts. Yet as this new report points out, reaching this goal post will not be automatic. While the marked improvement in graduation rates is laudable, the persistence, and in some cases widening, of racial equity gaps is troubling and deserves serious attention. We’re encouraged to see that the Campaign for College Opportunity has identified gap-closing campuses to look to as examples of how to most effectively smooth students’ paths to graduation. Such examples outline a clear action step for the institution as a whole - the need to identify and scale the best practices so all campuses can respond to this data with clear, race-conscious actions and targeted policies that support Black, Latinx, and American Indian/Alaska Native (AIAN), and Asian"/Pacific Islander students to complete their CSU degree and thrive."

Jaclyn Piñero, CEO, uAspire

"uAspire applauds the CSU’s progress towards the Graduation Initiative 2025 goals. This report clearly shows the progress that has been made and the distance left to go to ensure that CSU is an effective means of economic mobility. The CSU has great potential to fulfill the aspirations of, and build student-ready institutions designed for, Black, AIAN, and Latinx to thrive and graduate. uAspire looks forward to collaborating with postsecondary leaders, policymakers, and college access partners to advance the Campaign for College Opportunity’s recommendations to close racial equity gaps."
Manny Rodriguez, Policy Director, The Institute for College Access & Success (TICAS)

"TICAS applauds the CSU's commitment to making progress towards reaching its bold north-star goals established in the Graduation Initiative 2025 – a model for public universities across the nation. However, work remains to close equity gaps in college attainment for our Black, AIAN, and Latinx students, many of whom are low income and continue to face the challenge of affording a college degree. We look forward to continuing to partner with the CSU and all of California's higher education systems to address time-to-degree and completion gaps by strengthening financial aid policies that comprehensively address total college costs for low-income students and by disaggregating more data by race and ethnicity to identify and target supports tailored to the students’ needs."

Peter Taylor, Former President, ECMC Foundation

"It is heartening to see a large institution like the CSU System make a major cultural shift in such a short period of time, from mainly being concerned with admission and enrollment, to an equally high priority on completion and graduation. Anyone who says large organizations can’t change need only look at the progress made by the CSU to improve the number of students who get BA degrees. That being the case, the report also illustrates that there is much work to be done, especially in the area of reducing gaps among underrepresented students on many of the campuses. With continued funding assistance from the Governor and Legislature, the goals of GI 2025 can be met, which will enable CSU to meet California's need for an educated and highly trained workforce."

Ahmad Thomas, Chief Executive Officer, Silicon Valley Leadership Group

"SVLG applauds the gains our CSU partners have made to expand graduation rates for the university’s majority-minority student base, nearly doubling four-year rates for first-time, first-year students from 19 to 35 percent in seven years. We remain committed to working with leading innovation economy businesses and our partners in academia to expand educational access and build bridges to career opportunities for BIPOC students as we seek to foster greater inclusivity and equity for Silicon Valley and beyond. At a time of increasing global competitiveness and societal upheaval, it’s more urgent than ever that California’s educational institutions deepen their strategies to eliminate remaining equity gaps and work closely with the business community to accelerate efforts to ensure all California students receive equitable access and training for 21st century jobs."
Debra Watkins, Founder & Executive Director, A Black Education Network

"As an organization committed to ensuring Black students reach their fullest potential, this report is a pivotal example of the ongoing work ahead of us, as well as a reflection on how far we have come. While the CSU has made tremendous strides in reaching the goals of the Graduation Initiative 2025, equity gaps for Black students not only persist, but they become even more detrimental to student success as time goes on. We must continue our commitment to disseminating evidence-based research and even further, empower Black minds in the process. Disproportionate accessibility and retention within higher education should be at the forefront of CSU policy issues. As the report mentions, at this rate, we will fall short of the promise of a 45% 4-year graduation rate by 2025. This should not be taken lightly, and I urge campuses to bring this issue to the forefront of priorities. The recommendations in this report will be instrumental in ensuring a more promising future for a community constantly challenged by systemic racism."

CSU STUDENT LEADERS

Dominic Quan Treseler, Cal State Student Association President 2023-24, Student at San Jose State

"The Cal State Student Association (CSSA) finds encouragement in the doubling of 4-year graduation rates since 2015 and the commendable rise in transfer graduation rates. However, our joy is tempered by the knowledge that true progress lies not only in the numbers but in the empowerment of our students. Closing the gaps amongst Black and Latinx students remains a crucial mission that demands our unwavering dedication and collaborative efforts. Only in our determined and a relentless pursuit of equity can we truly celebrate the genuine success of all our students."

Maria Linares, CSU Student Trustee Emerita 2021-23, CSU Fullerton Alumna

"After witnessing firsthand as a Student Trustee the work being done towards meeting the goals set forth by the Board and implemented by the Presidents and Chancellor's Office, I applaud the CSU's incredible progress on the Graduation Initiative 2025. However, in order to increase graduation rates and truly eliminate equity gaps, campuses need critical financial support for so many underfunded student services. Through continued and unfailing investments from the state, alongside the stable leadership of a new Chancellor and inclusive collaboration with students, staff, faculty, policymakers and the other segments, I am confident that the CSU is up for the task of this report's powerful recommendations to target Black student success, streamline campus goals as a collective, use best practices at top-performing campuses, and more."
Isaac Alferos, Cal State Student Association President-Emeritus 2021-22, CSU Fullerton Alum

"Graduation Initiative 2025 represents the duality that is at the heart of California's higher education system; the same initiatives that sponsor success for some of California's largest communities also leave some of our most vulnerable behind. Now is the time for state leaders, systemwide trustees, and community advocates to meet our Indigenous and Black students with courageous policy that ensures the dream of a high quality, liberative education for them is no longer a dream deferred."

Krystal Raynes, CSU Student Trustee Emerita 2020-22, CSU Bakersfield Alumna

"In the pursuit of higher education accessibility and equity, California should celebrate the strides made in increasing graduation rates in the nation’s largest public university system. However, the true measure of success lies in eliminating racial equity gaps. The Campaign for College Opportunity Progress Report on the California State University Graduation Initiative 2025 gives a candid snapshot of the CSU’s progress and challenges. Using recommendations from the report and a unified commitment from state policymakers, the Board of Trustees, and campus leaders, we can empower every student to succeed and build a brighter future for all Californians."

Zahra Khuraibet, Cal State Student Association President-Emerita 2020-21, CSU Northridge Alumna

"Though it's exciting to see the progress of the Graduation Initiative 2025, there is still more to be made. California needs to double down on its commitment to equity and ensure the CSU is affordable and accessible to the students of color who call the system home."

Maryana Khames, CSU Student Trustee Emerita 2019-2021, San Diego State Alumna

"The CSU has made major strides in improving graduation rates and creating initiatives to close racial equity gaps. This report highlights the continued need to support Black, Latinx, and brown students across the CSU. As recommended by this report, it is imperative to disaggregate student graduation success data while making it accessible to the public. This will allow policymakers, community leaders, and partners of the CSU to continue supporting underrepresented students across California."