The opportunity gap refers to the disparity in rates of success in higher education between groups of students from different demographic backgrounds that result from the inequitable distribution of opportunities. The California State University system, including CSUN, has committed to closing the gaps between students from traditionally underserved communities and those from better served communities, and between low-income students and their higher-income peers. Closing gaps among our students will, among other things, allow us to increase our overall graduation rates.

What is the Opportunity Gap?

In addition to serving more students from traditionally underserved and low-income backgrounds, we are also serving more first-generation college students. According to the federal definition, a first-generation college student is one whose parents did not obtain a degree from a 4-year institution. In 2006, 48% of our students were first-generation college students, compared with 64% in 2016. Among our first-generation students, 41% hail from families in which the parents have a high school degree or less. Navigating the complexities of higher education can present a challenge for those whose parents do not have experience completing a 4-year degree, and the challenge can be even greater for students whose parents do not have any experience with postsecondary education.

In 2006, 39.4% of our undergraduates were from traditionally underserved communities. This includes students identifying as Latina/o, African American, Pacific Islander, Native Hawaiian, American Indian, or Alaskan Native. In the past 10 years, the proportion of undergraduates from underserved communities has increased by 36%. As of Fall 2016, more than half of our undergraduate student population come from traditionally underserved communities. The increase in students from underserved backgrounds is largely a result of our growing Latina/o student population. Today, nearly half of our undergraduates—49%—are Latina/o, compared to 30% in 2006.

We are serving more low-income students than we were ten years ago.

In 2016, 53.1% of our students qualified for and received Federal Pell Grants, an increase of 48% since 2006.

In addition to serving more students from traditionally underserved and low-income backgrounds, we are also serving more first-generation college students.
As we serve an increasing number of students from traditionally underserved and low-income backgrounds, there are disparities in retention and graduation rates among our students.

Among first-time freshmen who entered in Fall 2014, 78% continued into their second year. In other words, 22% of the Fall 2014 freshmen did not return to CSUN in Fall 2015.

The retention rate varies among our students from traditionally underserved communities. One-year continuation rates among White and Asian American students are above the university average, while those for their Latina/o and African American/Black peers are below the average. Moreover, students from low-income backgrounds also persist at lower rates compared with their peers from higher-income backgrounds.

Who We’re Losing: First-Time Freshmen Who Began in 2014 but Did Not Return in 2015

The retention rate gap between students with and without Pell Grant support is 4 percentage points.

CSUN’s one-year continuation rate among transfer students is higher than the rate for first-time freshmen. In 2015, 78% of first-time freshmen returned, whereas 84% of transfers returned.

There is less variation among racial and ethnic groups in the retention rates of transfers compared with first-time freshmen. 87% of White transfers returned in their second year, 84% of Asian American transfers returned, 83% of Latina/o transfers returned, and 80% of African American transfers returned. There is only one percentage point difference between the retention rates of first-time transfers who are Pell Grant recipients and those who are not (84% versus 83%).
Among the first-time freshmen who entered CSUN in Fall 2009, 13% graduated in 4 years and 50% graduated in 6 years. Both the 4-year and 6-year graduation rates vary dramatically by race and ethnicity. Overall, the gap in 6-year graduation rates between traditionally underserved and better served students is 11 percentage points, with 55% of better served students graduating in 6 years or 44% of traditionally underserved students graduating in that time.

There are also notable differences among racial and ethnic groups when it comes to the 4-year graduation rate: 21% of White first-time freshmen graduated in 4 years, compared with 15% of Asian American freshmen, 9% of Latina/o freshmen, and 7% of African American freshmen.

Graduation Rates

The 4- and 6-year graduation rate gaps between students who receive Pell grant support and those who do not are similar. There is a gap of 9 percentage points in 4-year graduation rates among Pell and non-Pell recipients, and an 8-point gap in 6-year graduation rates for those groups. 7% of the Pell grant recipients who started in 2011 graduated four years later, compared with 16% of those who did not receive Pell grants.

Moving Forward

CSUN is committed to improving graduation rates for all students and to eliminating inequities in those rates. Our goals are certainly ambitious, but making progress toward them will allow us to better serve all of our students. This will involve, first and foremost, finding ways to better serve our students in their first year so that they continue at equal rates into their second year. We have the opportunity to work collectively and collaboratively to find innovative ways to improve retention and graduation rates and close gaps between students from many backgrounds, including racial, ethnic, and income groups.
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Sources: CSUN Counts and the CSU Student Success Dashboard