

You Never Get a Second Chance to Make a First Impression

The Importance of the First Year Experience to Student Success

At California State University, Northridge, our goal is to graduate at least 66% of our first-time freshmen (FTF) in 6 years by 2025.

In order to meet this goal, we would have had to graduate 2,672 of the Fall 2009 freshmen by 2015. However, we lost too many of the students by the fourth year (only 2,510 were still enrolled) to make this goal. **In fact, only 75% of the students in this cohort returned for their second year.**

If we are to make our 66% target, we need to retain closer to 93% of students from year to year. The good news is that if we can retain students into their second year, the likelihood that they'll continue on and graduate from CSUN is over 90%.

4,049 students

#FTF Enrolled in Fall 2009

3,035

1st year persistence: **75%**

2,742

2nd year persistence: **90%**

2,510

3rd year persistence: **92%**

2,451

4th year persistence: **98%**

2,339

5th year persistence: **95%**

2,042

6-year graduation rate: **50%**

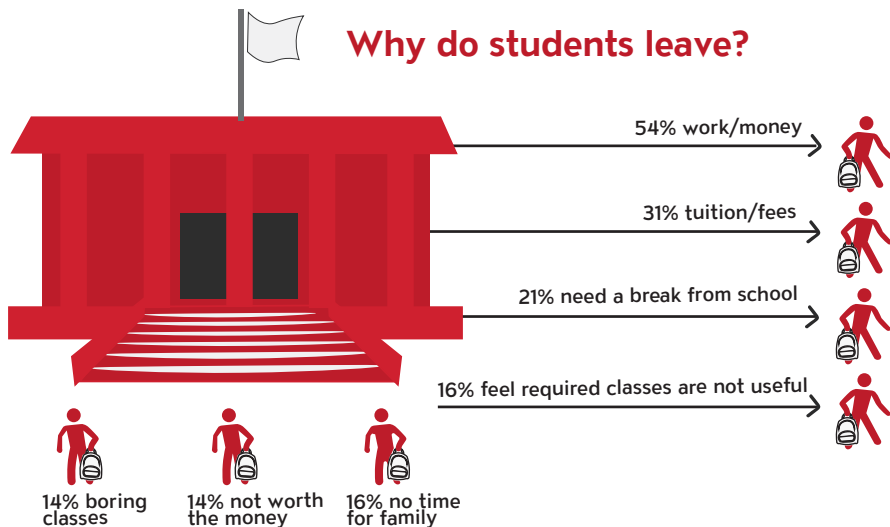
What happened to the 25%?

At CSUN students must complete developmental coursework by the end of their first year or they will be stopped out. For the Fall 2009 FTF cohort, 12.5% were stopped out for not fulfilling this requirement. These students were advised to go to a community college to complete their developmental coursework in order to return to CSUN. However, only 13.7% of the students who were stopped out in this cohort ever returned to CSUN. Of those who did return, only about a third actually went on to complete their degrees.

However, 12.5% is only half of the 25% who left, leaving us with only half an explanation. In fact, of the students who did not continue on, about a third left the university in good academic standing. Knowing this, we have been conducting some research to examine other reasons students might have left CSUN, but we can also look to literature on this topic.



Insights from National Studies of First-Year Retention



What do students think will help?

- 73%** study habit help
- 78%** course scheduling
- 76%** provide daycare for students with kids
- 69%** provide applied learning opportunities
- 68%** advice about college programs
- 67%** make classes more interesting and relevant

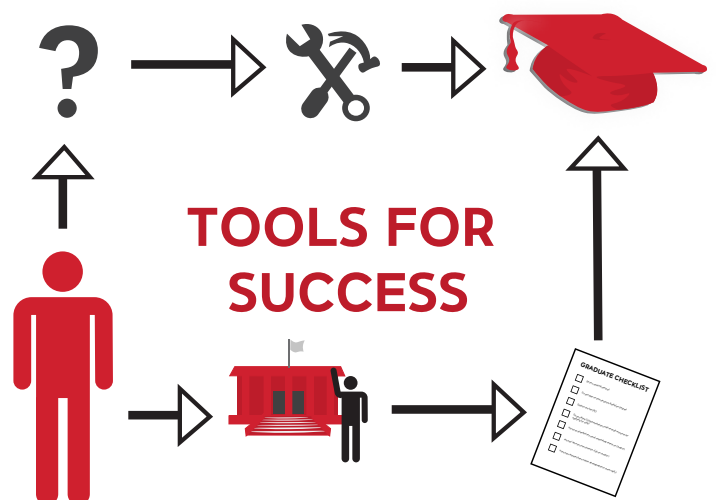
2009 Public Agenda report for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation: *With Their Whole Lives Ahead of Them: Myths and Realities About Why So Many Students Fail to Finish College.* <https://www.publicagenda.org/pages/with-their-whole-lives-ahead-of-them>

Practices for Cultivating Student Learning and Persistence

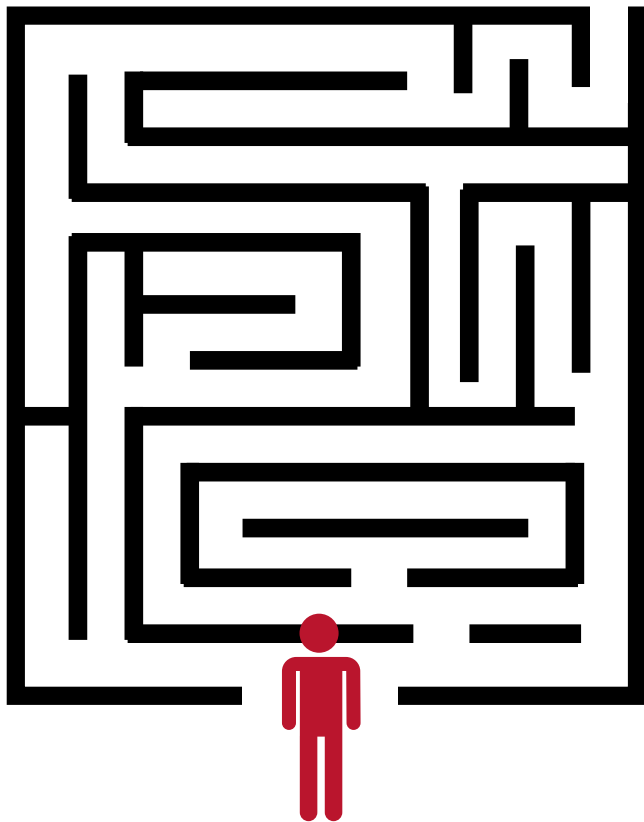
In the book *Educating a Diverse Nation: Lessons from Minority-Serving Institutions* (Harvard University Press, 2015), Clifton Conrad and Marybeth Gasman identify six practices for empowering traditionally underserved students. Making use of these practices at CSUN will require the re-imagining of our institutional culture.

1. Walk each student into college

This involves establishing educational pathways into college and meeting students where they are. The MSIs the authors studied welcome students to campus and teach them college-going skills even before they begin their college education. Helping students learn how to apply for aid, register for classes, manage their schedules, read college-level texts through orientations, Summer Bridge programs, college strategies courses, and structured interactions with peers, mentors, and counselors provide them with the tools to navigate the campus and access faculty, staff, and peer support and resources. In addition, faculty and staff communicate to students the belief and expectation that each student will succeed (pages 257-259).



FUTURE



2. Guide individual students through college and chart a pathway to their futures

“To help students learn how to navigate college, how to be resilient in the face of challenges, and how to succeed academically, the MSIs in the study have reconfigured how they staff the first years of a college education” (page 260). A team of trusted and caring “guides” (coaches, counselors, mentors, or advisers) work with each student to guide them to the right courses, help them feel that they belong in college, and chart an educational pathway with the student to her future. The latter is important because many students are unclear about why college matters to their lives beyond getting a degree (pages 260-61).

3. Provide diverse learning opportunities outside of the traditional classroom

“Anchored in their recognition of the diverse and often formidable challenges that students are facing, the MSIs in the study proceed with the shared assumption that the diverse needs of students can be met only if students have multiple opportunities to learn that go far beyond the traditional classroom” (page 261). Students are involved in learning communities, cohort groups, internships, community service learning, study groups, and professional networks. Traditional courses are supplemented with additional instructors and peers that allow students to revisit course content and their own study habits (pages 261-62).

4. Infuse culturally relevant learning opportunities into the college experience.

“To prepare students not only to flourish in the workplace and their personal lives but to contribute to the economic social, and cultural well-being of communities, the MSIs in our study infuse the history and experience of underrepresented students into traditional curricula” (page 263). Curriculum has been restructured to allow students to reflect on how their futures are linked to their past, and to see themselves in college. Students are also provided with formal opportunities to practice real-world problem solving in collaborative and meaningful ways. Project based learning and research often leads to contributions to their communities and to student publications (pages 263-65).

5. Immerse students in collaboration.

“In educating students to be collaborative, MSIs are teaching them to learn with and from others and to embrace personal responsibility to contribute to their communities and the lives of others in college and beyond”(page 265).

6. Gather and use information on the learning and progress of students.

MSIs begin with the data that the institution needs for accountability purposes—enrollments, retention rates, graduation rates, etc. But they go beyond that to measure student progress and learning during the semester and semester to semester. Grades are tracked during the semester, as are their interactions with staff, hours logged in learning systems, attendance at workshops and classes, and survey and focus group data. These data guide interventions and program design and implementation. Faculty and staff are invited to “use existing data and to do research in order to represent accurately the challenges their students face and to invent and test educational activities that empower students to overcome those challenges” (pages 267-69).

Matadors Rising

Dropped Student Survey

To better understand our students' unique needs, an external research consultant firm has surveyed former CSUN students who left the university before completing their degree.

In addition to academic factors, students also cited personal factors such as physical and/or mental health problems, financial concerns, and lack of contact with faculty.

For a copy of the report, please contact janetoh@csun.edu.

College Transition Collaborative

CSUN was one of the first universities to join the Stanford-based College Transition Collaborative (<http://collegetransitioncollaborative.org>). Since summer 2015, we have participated in their Social Belonging project.

Early results indicate that there is a 3 to 5% boost in retention for students who participate in the social belonging activity, and that the effect is strongest for first-generation college students (a 6 to 8% boost).

Graduation Initiative 2025

One-time funding from the state has supported a number of additional efforts launched in 2016-17, some of which we have dedicated recurring funds. Some of the efforts targeted specifically at freshman retention include:

Mapworks (<http://skyfactor.com/student-retention-why-it-works/>): this platform helps to identify students who may not continue at the university during their first year, through both institutional data and a survey of students addressing concerns related to expectations, financial means, socioemotional issues, behaviors, and activities.

Peer Mentors: the Office of Student Involvement and Development is working with Academic Affairs to expand the mentorship role of New Student Orientation (NSO) leaders by providing targeted mentor training and explicit mentorship responsibilities for targeted mentees during their first three semesters.

Graduation and Retention Specialists: A team of primarily college-based Student Service Professionals (level 3) was created to help more students graduate in 2 (transfers) and 4 (freshmen) years, as well as to work with students who have not completed 30 units in their first year.

**Social
Belonging
project
participation
led to a 3 to
5% increase in
retention**

**CSUN's student
success efforts
are collectively
known as
Matadors
Rising**

Matador Momentum: A project spearheaded by the Academic First Year Experiences program to "reimagine the first year experience" at CSUN. Among a number of efforts they've designed is a student success campaign which will feature multiple messages and link students to resources to help move them toward graduation. Look for "Fifteen to Finish," "Think Thirty," and "We Can Do It!" banners soon.

These are just a couple of our current efforts. Want to learn more?

Undergraduate Studies:

<http://www.csun.edu/undergraduate-studies>

Office of Student Success Innovations:

<http://www.csun.edu/undergraduate-studies/office-student-success-innovations>

Developmental Mathematics:

<http://www.csun.edu/undergraduate-studies/developmental-mathematics>

Faculty Development:

<http://www.csun.edu/faculty-development>

Office of Student Involvement and Development:

<http://www.csun.edu/osid>

Office of Institutional Research:

<http://www.csun.edu/institutional-research>

CSUN Counts:

<https://www.csun.edu/counts/>

Academic First Year Experiences:

<http://www.csun.edu/undergraduate-studies/academic-first-year-experiences>

This report was a collaboration between:

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