

"Mind the Gap": Addressing Persistent Equity Gaps Along the Educational Journeys of CLA Students

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CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY LONG BEACH

Introduction

In a bold movement to address systemic disparities in student success, the CSU Chancellor's Office launched *A Year of Engagement* in August 2024—an initiative that builds on the *Graduation Initiative 2025* with a renewed focus on closing persistent educational and equity gaps “to pave the path to fulfilling first careers and graduate school” (Graduation Initiative 2025: Year of Engagement, 2024). Despite incremental gains, longstanding disparities continue to impact American Indian, Black, and Latinx students across the CSU system. These are not simply gaps in preparation but reflections of structural and cultural barriers in higher education, including limited representation, the absence of or limited culturally relevant pedagogy, and underinvestment in community-based partnerships.

At the same time, equity efforts are facing intensified political pushback: DEI programs are under attack, affirmative action is being dismantled, and universities are being pressured to depoliticize their curricula. Even in California, where Proposition 209 has long prohibited race-conscious admissions, higher education institutions must take intentional steps to advance equity-centered work. Within our current political climate and institutional landscape, this study offered a timely and necessary examination of persistent equity gaps—gaps that must be understood and addressed to ensure that CSU's commitments to access, success, and equity are fully realized.

Research Questions

As the largest college at CSULB, the College of Liberal Arts (CLA) has a responsibility to address systemic and institutional barriers students face in higher education. This led to our questions about persistent equity gaps among CLA students:

1. WHICH STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS ARE ASSOCIATED WITH PERSISTENT EQUITY GAPS AMONG STUDENTS IN THE COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS?
2. WHICH STUDENT-SUCCESS MEASURES SHOULD BE EMPHASIZED WHEN DESCRIBING PERSISTENT EQUITY GAPS?
3. WHICH STUDENTS ARE MORE AT RISK?

Methods

Our study used a quantitative analysis of institutional data from the CSULB Office of Institutional Research and Analytics (IR&A). We used Student Success Dashboard 2.0 to retrieve undergraduate student data from cohorts 2016–2022 (n=63,717).

We examined 4.5-year graduation rates, and persistence rates at years one, two, and three for first-time, first-year (FTFY) students, and 2.5-year graduation rates and one-year persistence for transfer students in the College of Liberal Arts (CLA).

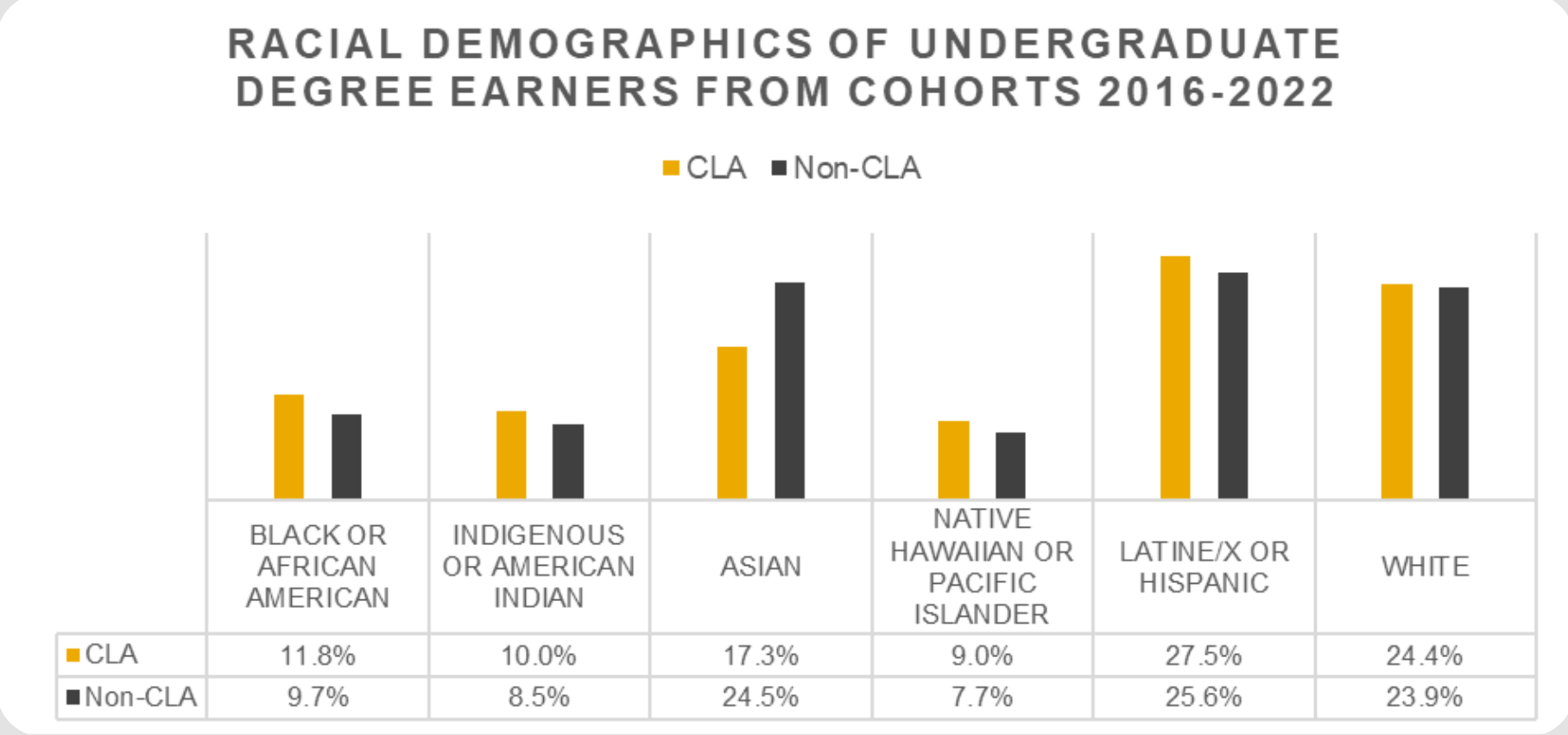
Key variables included race/ethnicity, Pell eligibility, first-generation status, high school GPA, transfer GPA, and local educational background (LBUSD, LBCC). Underrepresented minority status was calculated by student racial subcategories. Nominal variables were converted to binary variables to indicate presence or absence.

Linear regression analyses were conducted through SPSS to identify student characteristics significantly associated with timely graduation and persistence. We also compared CLA outcomes to non-CLA and CSULB-wide metrics to assess how disparities within CLA both reflect and magnify broader institutional and statewide equity gaps. This approach allowed us to identify patterns that mirror system-level inequities and national trends while highlighting the unique disparities experienced by students in the College of Liberal Arts.

Results

WHO ARE OUR STUDENTS?

When determining where to focus our efforts within our research, we found that the College of Liberal Arts (CLA) granted a more significant percentage of degrees earned by American Indian, Black, and Latinx students at CSULB for Cohorts 2016-2022. Compared to non-CLA majors, we graduate more students of color university-wide. While graduation is only one aspect of student success, it is an important one that students are excited to experience during their time at the Beach.

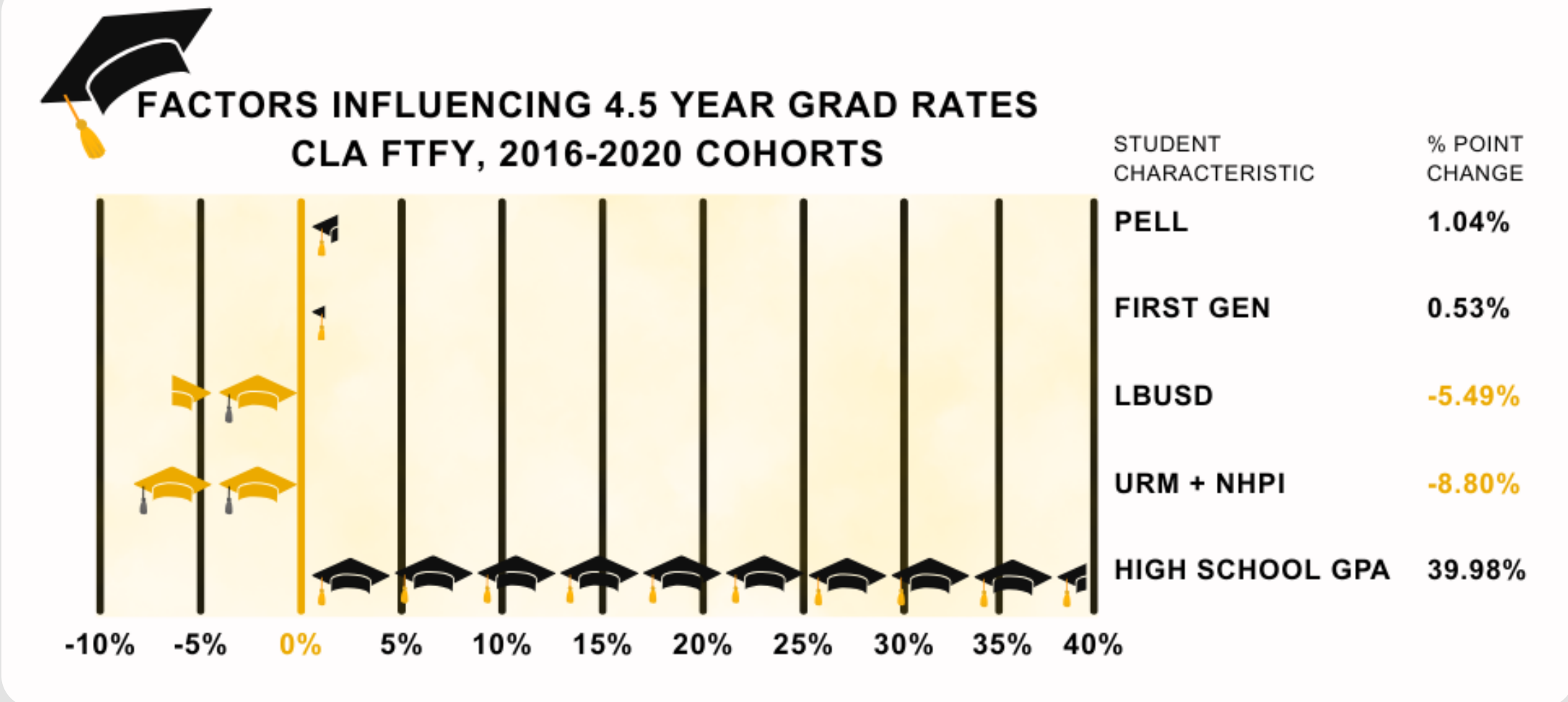


CHARACTERISTICS WE EXPLORED

- Pell Eligible
- First Generation*
- Graduated From A Long Beach Unified (LBUSD) School District
- Underrepresented Minority (URM)
- High School GPA
- Transfer GPA

*No Parent Attended College


FIRST-TIME, FIRST-YEARS (FTFY)



The data shows two categories that negatively impact CLA First-Time, First-Year (FTFY) students, from the 2016-2020 cohorts, ability to graduate within 4.5 years: **Underrepresented Minority (URM)** and the **LBUSD Flag**.

- CLA FTFY students who are URM are **8.8** percentage points **less likely** to graduate in 4.5 years than non-URM CLA students.
- CLA FTFY students who graduated from Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD) are **5.5** percentage points **less likely** to graduate in 4.5 years than non-LBUSD students.

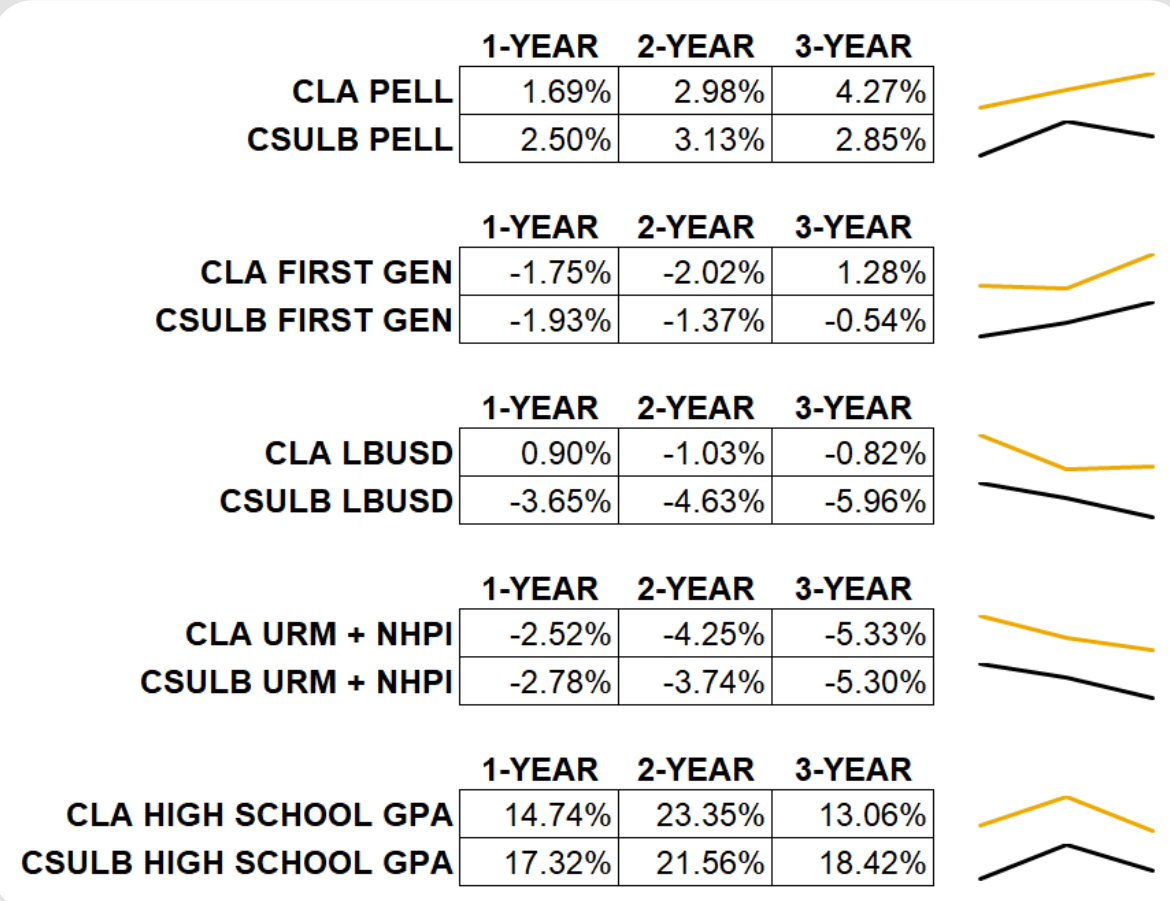
Note: URM includes Black or African American, Indigenous or American Indian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and Latine/x or Hispanic students



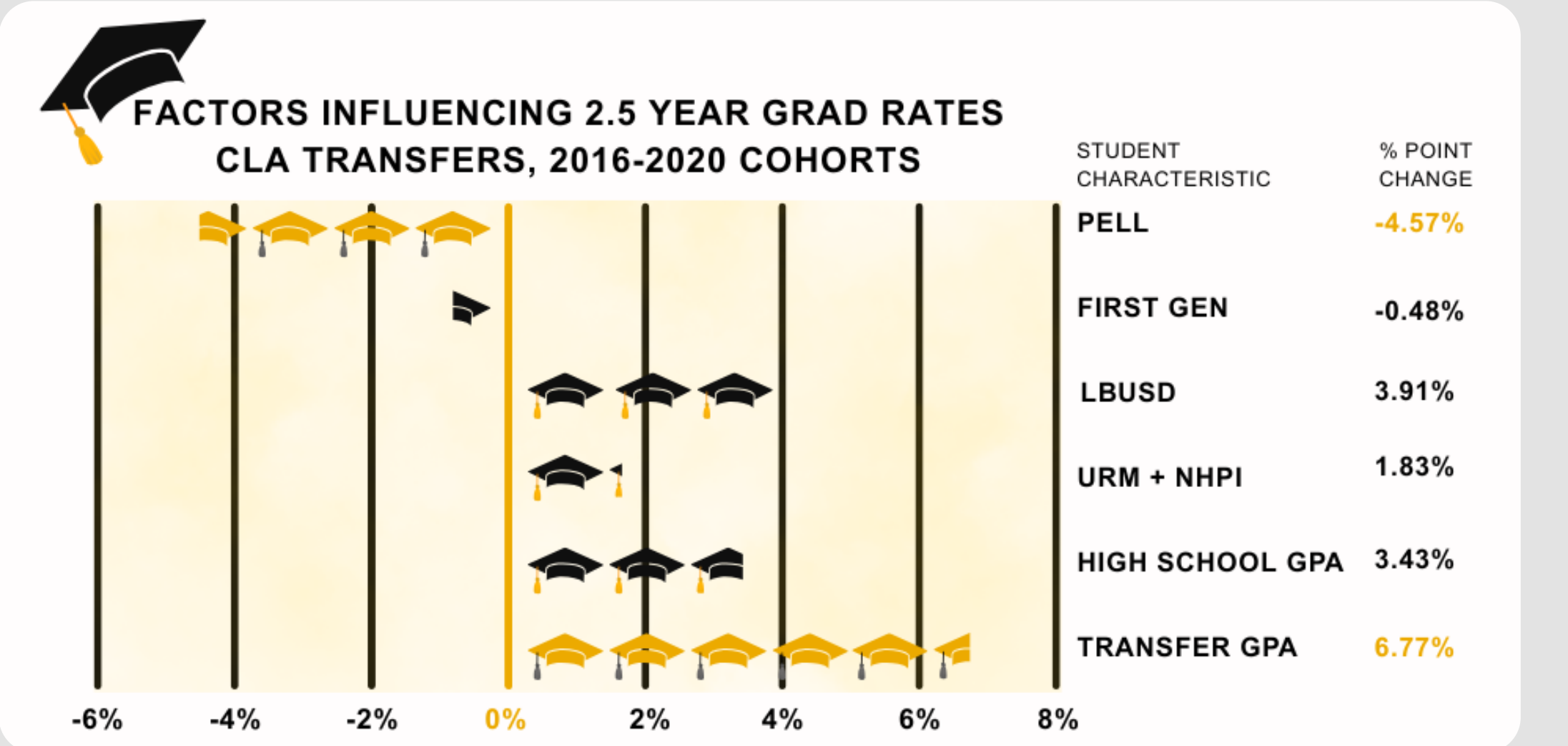
DO OUR CLA FTFY STUDENTS PERSIST COMPARED TO THE REST OF CSULB?

The short answer is **YES!** It is beneficial to be a CLA student in most characteristics we explored, although trends are similar to those for the rest of the university.

The most persistent equity gaps are primarily in the **second and third years** for our CLA students. While we traditionally focus on the first-year experience, student characteristics impact the second and/or third year, specifically for URM and First-Generation students.



TRANSFERS



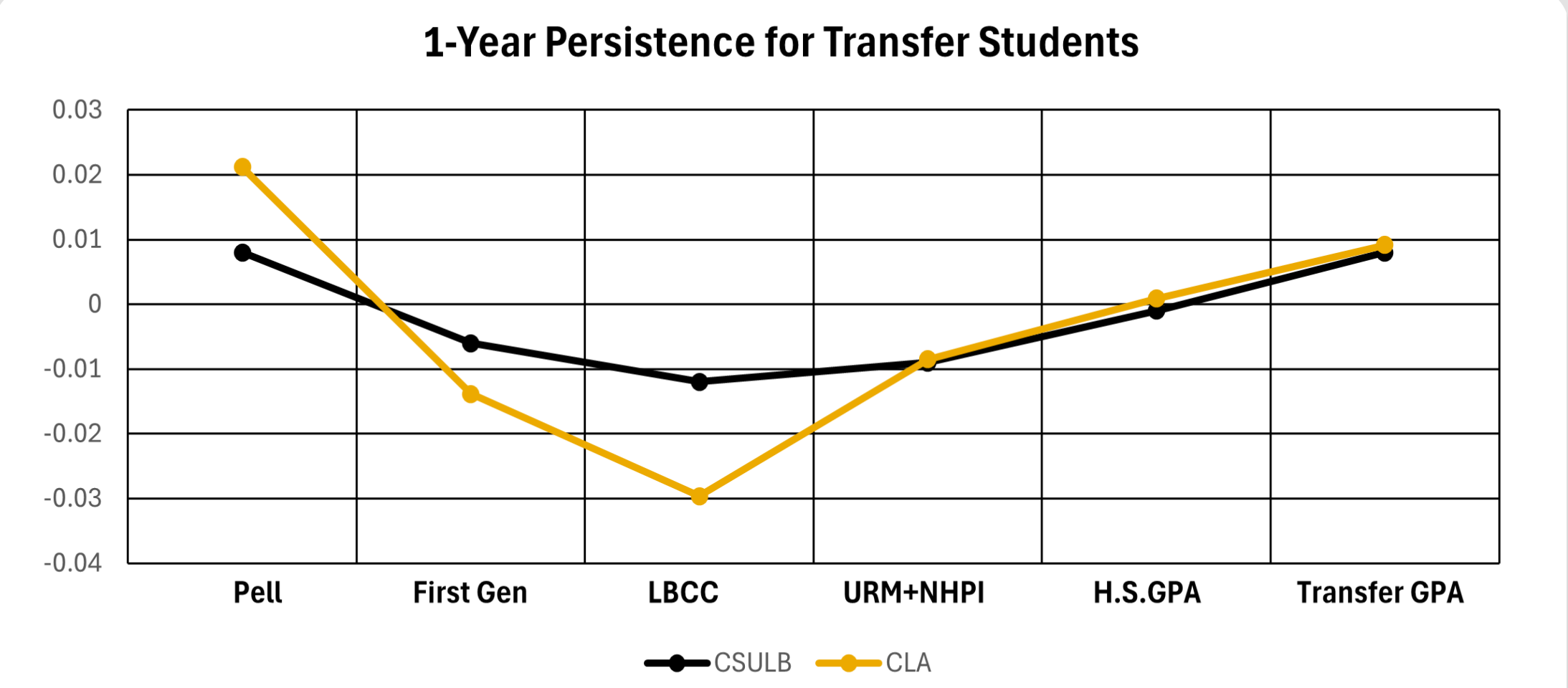
Our data shows two significant factors that affect the probability of CLA transfer students graduating in 2.5 years: **Transfer GPA and Pell Eligibility**.

- CLA transfer students are **6.77** percentage points **more likely** to graduate in 2.5 years due to a one-point increase in GPA.
- CLA Pell-eligible transfer students are **4.6** percentage points **less likely** to graduate in 2.5 years.

The significance of our findings for Pell Eligible students shows that financial/economic circumstances highly affect our CLA Student 2.5-year graduation rates.

Transfer students' 1- year persistence rates are lower when they are a transfer student from LBCC, and a comparison of rates across CSULB and CLA are different: Students across CSULB are 1.2 percentage points **less likely** to persist in the first year, compared to their CLA counterparts, who are **1.8** percentage points **less likely** to persist in the first year.

Pell-eligible transfer students from CLA are more likely to persist in their first year than the aggregate of CSULB students from the same category. Our data showed that there was almost no difference in the persistence rates between URM+NHPI from the aggregate of CSULB and their CLA counterparts, as CSULB students' (aggregate) 1-year persistent rates are slightly lower than their CLA counterparts; however, the difference is minuscule.



Conclusion / Discussion

Our findings reinforce that equity gaps in higher education are not simply about student “achievement” but institutional design, cultural relevance, and structural accountability. In the College of Liberal Arts, **URM, Pell-eligible, and first-generation students**—especially those coming from **LBUSD** or transferring from **LBCC**—**persist and graduate at lower rates** than their peers. These disparities are not statistical anomalies; they reflect deeply embedded inequities in our educational systems.

For FTFY CLA student persistence, the effects of **URM status, first-generation status, and high school GPA** are greater in their **second year** than the first year. CLA students in the “murky middle” might require college preparedness and academic support beyond those available in the first year.

However, we argue that the true crisis lies not in student performance but in institutions’ failure to affirm, support, and adapt to the students they serve. When culturally engaging campus environments are absent, students are more likely to experience alienation, which undermines persistence and belonging. As our data shows, this is particularly true for **transfer students from LBCC and FTFY students from LBUSD**, who navigate racialized and classed systems of higher education often without the institutional support they deserve.

Our data-driven inquiry is an equity-centered practice. It exposes the fault lines of institutional inequity while also pointing toward pathways of resistance, care, and redesign.

Implications for Action

- Our findings indicate the need for structural change beyond short-term programming:
- CSULB must **expand how it defines, measures, and supports student success**—particularly for URM, Pell-eligible, and first-generation students whose experiences are shaped by **intersectional marginalization**
 - Support must **extend beyond the student's first year**, such as continuation of learning communities, culturally relevant programming, and mentorship
 - Rather than interpreting equity gaps as student shortcomings, we must reframe them as **institutional responsibilities**

Key areas for action include deepening partnerships with local institutions like LBUSD and LBCC to strengthen educational pathways into CLA and CSULB.

Within the college, we must:

- Invest in equity-minded advising practices
- Embed culturally responsive pedagogy across departments
- Ensure that high-impact practices—such as **service learning, research opportunities, and capstone experiences**—are **accessible and affirming**

Sustained efforts to understand student experience must be paired with **campus-wide conversations** that treat equity as a shared and urgent responsibility.

Additionally, professional development for faculty and staff should foreground frameworks such as Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth, Ladson-Billings's (1995) culturally relevant pedagogy, and Museum's (2014) Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) model to promote belonging and counter assimilationist norms.

Next Steps / Future Directions

Future studies should identify other pertinent variables such as:

- Support services like Educational Opportunity Program (EOP)
- Beach XP and Other Learning Communities
- Cumulative GPA by semester

CLA departments and programs should be analyzed for persistent equity gaps and we encourage the **co-development of initiatives rooted in student voice and cultural relevance**.

Other areas to explore:

- Integrate qualitative data from the Campus Pulse survey
- Conduct focus groups with students across multiple identities and academic pathways, focusing on themes of **financial strain, workload pressures, and inconsistent advising**
- Living-learning communities connecting academic learning with community knowledge and cultural identity (Tinto, 1998)
- Strengthen equity-focused advising structures and create interactive, disaggregated data dashboards to support continuous reflection and action

Inspired by the principles of Inclusive Excellence (AAC&U, 2005), we envision a future where **equity is embedded across all aspects of institutional life**—from program design to pedagogy, from advising to assessment. These cross-sector efforts would transform CSULB from an institution that simply tracks equity gaps into one that actively and collaboratively closes them—through love, intention, and structural redesign.