Highly Valued Degrees at California State University Long Beach[1]

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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.

- Gains occurred with cohorts that entered during major state university budget cuts, the Great Recession.
- Gains benefitted all ethnic and gender groups, low-income students, and "remedial" students.
- Gains occurred with cohorts that were *far more* diverse and *far more low-income* but with similar academic preparation, compared to earlier cohorts.
- To achieve gains, CSULB implemented a full range of institution-changing strategies, not just a few student success measures.
- Recent gains stand in sharp contrast to campus results following an earlier California recession, when graduation rates plunged to historic lows.
- Different outcomes from two sets of major budget cuts at the same university resulted from different campus leadership, awareness, and commitment to student success.
- CSULB may seek to continue to innovate for student success with digital learning, deeper use of data, and greater synergy between programs.
- The stakes are high: President Obama's baccalaureate completion goals depend heavily upon public master's institutions successfully raising completion rates for diverse students in support of the future economic competitiveness of the nation.
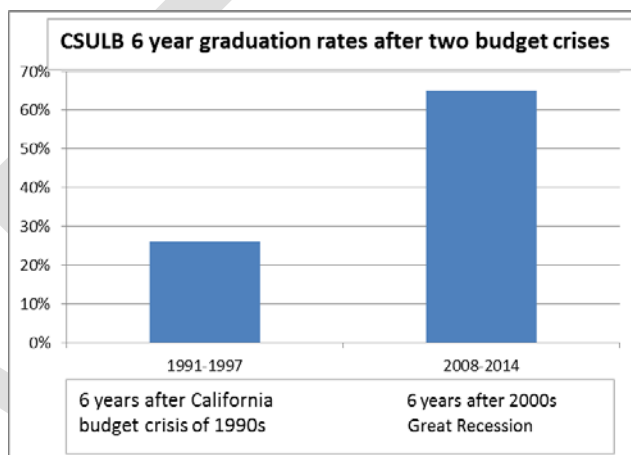
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In 2014, California State University Long Beach (CSULB) received the national award from The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) for *Excellence and Innovation in Student Success and Completion*, recognizing record high graduation rates, significantly above comparable institutions. Surprisingly, these peak rates were obtained for cohorts who entered the university during the Great Recession, which triggered major higher education budget cuts.

A Tale of Two Crises: CSULB endured similarly severe budget cuts in the early 1990s. Students who entered at that time later graduated at the lowest rates in university history, far below comparable institutions. Two instances of severe budget cuts followed by very different outcomes for students provoke a question: what was the difference?

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 accreditors report.

CSULB 6 year graduation rates after two budget crises

1991-1997	2008-2014
6 years after California budget crisis of 1990s	6 years after 2000s Great Recession

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 far more diverse, more low-income, and not academically better prepared than the 1990s. Gains lifted all student gender and ethnic groups and included students who arrived with the dreaded "remedial" label.

Global and National Context: Data published by 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 world-wide baccalaureate completion rates but two decades later has fallen to 17th place. Even more ominously, the U.S. is one of the only developed nations in which the younger generation is not significantly better educated than the older generation (e.g., OECD, 2014). Large public master's universities, such as CSULB, are one of the most important U.S. higher education sectors, enrolling nearly 1.5 million undergraduates. According to *College Results Online*, 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%). The Education Advisory Board, a consulting group that works with over 1,000 U.S. colleges and universities, has reported that many provosts to whom they have spoken are frustrated that they cannot seem to make gains in retention and graduation (EAB, 2015).

In the early 2000s, the pioneering organization Education Trust, created *College Results Online,* which placed graduation data online. This "outed" low graduation rates and achievement gaps and debunked conventional wisdom that nothing affects degree completion other than student

preparation. 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 2009, the U.S. President, noting OECD data, proclaimed national completion goals, a historic first.

An increasing national conversation is asking why, although many universities have been discussing student success for a decade, substantial gains remain elusive, especially with underrepresented students.

CSULB is a large, urban, public master's comprehensive university. With about 37,500 students, the very diverse campus has no majority ethnic group. 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.

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. Coincidentally not long after, a second senior academic leader was hired, who had also participated in the 2005 study. CSULB launched an institution-wide effort to boost completion, eventually branded as the "Highly Valued Degree Initiative" (HVDI), The name was 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.

Strategies
Planning
Communication
Organization
Data
Budget
Innovation
Advising
Support services
Enrollment management
Curriculum
Pedagogy
Tenure-track hiring
K-12 Partnership

HVDI utilized a broad set of strategies to accomplish gains. Some are typical: learning communities, advising, tutoring. Others are less commonly discussed in connection with student success: strategic planning, budget planning and more.

Planning: Prior to 2005, student success was rarely a topic of conversation among CSULB vice presidents or senior academic staff. HVDI utilized the already-existing annual strategic planning process to establish campus goals for degree completion and to foster cross-divisional discussion of student success. Discussions created a venue within which efforts of Academic Affairs could link effectively not only with Student Affairs but with Administration and Finance, which housed Enrollment Services. Cross-divisional cooperation was essential to progress. 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: As student success became a super-ordinate goal, success language made more 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.

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 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 with drill-down to departments, ethnic groups, gender groups, and academic preparation. A "native junior" metric was created to assign native students to academic colleges after choice of majors was sorted out in order to assign accountability goals for each academic college. Data tracking achievement gaps (contrasting underrepresented and non-underrepresented students) revealed almost no gap for transfer students but significant gaps for native students.

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY LONG BEACH — Institutionalresearch >Dashboard

1 - 6 Year FTF Graduation and Retention Rate Rep
Fall 2003 - Fall 2014, University Total

6 - Year

Semester of Entry	Year	Initial Cohort Count	Graduated	Grad within College	Grad Rates	Grad Rates within College	Still Enrolled
Fall 2006	6 - Year	4,467	2,529	1,264	56.62%	28.30%	468
Fall 2007	6 - Year	4,217	2,528	1,360	59.95%	32.25%	450
Fall 2008	6 - Year	4,606	2,987	1,515	64.85%	32.89%	354

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 off the top of the budget every year. This made it possible for the academic division to tell deans and associate deans that any class with adequate student demand would be funded, a sea change from the campus attitude of the 1990s that made a huge difference in eliminating budget-based course bottlenecks, 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 points 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 dedicated professional advisors. During the Great Recession, advising positions were threatened so 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 to support advising. Advisor-facing and student-facing self-service degree audits and degree planners were implemented. More recently, the campus embraced predictive analytics with the view that e-advising does not reduce the need for human advisors, but makes the advising interaction more productive.

Support services: Student services formed another cornerstone. The research literature suggests that best practice requires a solid array of services for all students plus an array of programs for specific needs. The campus increased investments in supplemental instruction, learning assistance, and tutoring. Academic and Student Affairs divisions partnered to develop a learning communities aimed at freshmen who arrived with college preparatory needs. The campus strengthened investments in services for disabled students. Academic and Student Affairs divisions 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 the divisions of Administration and Finance (which housed Enrollment Services) and Student Affairs (which housed Outreach) to develop coordinated, proactive enrollment management processes. Key responsibilities were assigned to academic college associate deans to monitor enrollment patterns and effect improvements. Coupled with the budget commitments made by the campus, proactive enrollment management by college associate deans and department chairs tremendously helped student progress to degree.

Curriculum: At CSULB, average time to degree and average units to degree were well beyond national standards of four years and 120 semester units. Many curricular requirements had arisen by accretion over years without much consideration of timely student progress. Of course, General Education (GE) is famously a battleground in many institutions as departments perceive that maintaining enrollments thorough GE requirements is necessary to justify 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 by the science college 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.

Pedagogy improvements were undertaken in several ways. First, the campus continued and expanded support for high impact practices such as internships, study abroad, and undergraduate research. Second, an online learning community for STEM faculty was created to share pedagogical ideas. Third, based on decades of research demonstrating the frequent superiority of active learning to lecture, faculty teams came together to redesign low completion rate courses. One dedicated professor made strenuous efforts to improve outcomes for an Anatomy and Physiology course; over several years, she experimented with both digital and face-to-face innovations and eventually produced dramatic improvements in

course outcomes. The Physics department invested similar effort with very positive results. A few other teams achieved significant improvements. However, some results were flat and some teams simply could not work together suggesting that dramatic gains with pedagogy are not always easily attained. Recently, CSULB has 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 ended, tenure track hiring began to increase. To become intentional about linking new faculty hiring with student success goals, the campus revised hiring practices. Every dean now meets with every convening hiring committee to discuss how faculty will be prepared to teach diverse students. Every candidate must provide a "Student Success Statement" describing how they are prepared to teach diverse students. Committee recommendations must be justified in part by success statements. These changes have sent a strong message about future faculty hiring priorities.

Long Beach College Promise Partnership: These efforts occurred in local context of a partnership between the university, the local community college, and public school system that centers on a local admission guarantee. As a high-demand campus, it would have been easy for CSULB to become selective. However, because of the local partnership, the institution protected local access. The institution has continued to become even more diverse and to enroll far more Pell students, with entering SAT scores nearly flat. It is clear that the gains made by CSULB have little to do with increased selectivity. In 2015, the Long Beach College Promise Partnership won a $5 million *California Governor's Innovation* award in part because of the same accomplishments recognized by the AASCU award.

Results

The year 2005 (year of the AASCU/Education Trust/NASH study) marks the beginning of the recent era of CSULB's intentional student success improvement efforts. For several cohorts entering CSULB prior to 2005, 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.

For the three cohorts completing six years after the baseline period, freshman graduation rates show steady improvements averaging 4% per year and reaching 65%. All student subgroups benefited from gains. Females gained a bit more than males over the three-year period. African American, Latino, and Native American students all made gains in the 11-13% range (see table). Pell grant recipients rose 13%, reaching over 60%, not far below the campus average. Gains
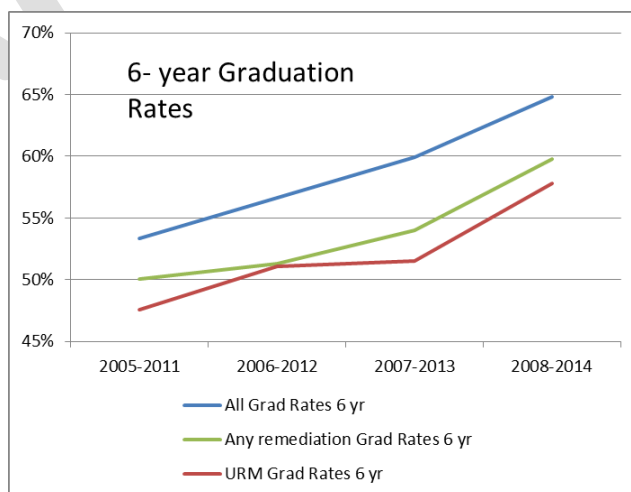
have raised completion rates for students with the dreaded "remedial" label to 60%, only 5% below the overall rate.

Four year transfer graduation rates rose 11% to 79% over five years (because the follow-up period is only four years, more cohorts can be included). Gains for transfer Pell grant recipients were slightly larger, as were gains for Latino and for African American students. The gain for Native Americans was dramatic as a percentage but the numbers are small.

Groups	3 year gains
Freshmen	
Overall	12%
African American	10%
Latino	11%
Native American	13%
Pell	13%
Transfer	
Overall	11%
African American	14%
Native American	22%
Latino	13%
Pell	13%

What about numbers of student? In the post-baseline years, about 3,500 students have graduated or are still enrolled who would not have been at baseline rates. About two-thirds began as first-time freshmen and about one-third as transfers. About two-thirds have already graduated and others are currently 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.

Since six and four year metrics are used, a question might be whether these gains are due to moving students more quickly to graduation within measured periods or whether gains have 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 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 due to students who would never have graduated, absent campus improvements.
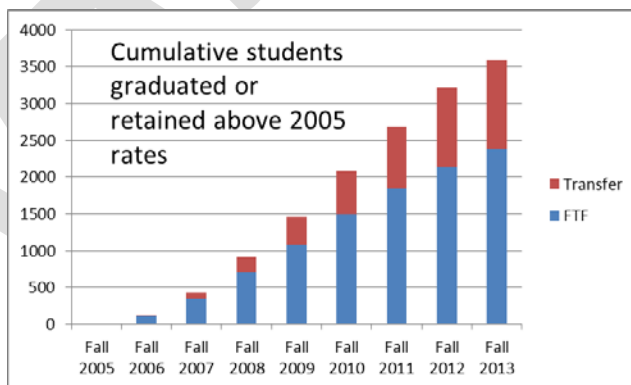
Retention rates for cohorts who have not yet graduated indicate that further improvements are likely. For example, first year retention has risen over 3% to nearly 90% since the 2008 cohort (the last cohort for which 6 year graduation rate gains are currently available). First year retention for all underrepresented groups is up over 7%. African American first year retention is up 4%, Latino first year retention is up nearly 8%, and Native American retention is dramatically up, but the rate is volatile due to small numbers. First year retention for Pell students is up 5%, and males and females have risen about 4% each. The third year retention rate, a strong

predictor of 6 year graduation rates, is up over 3%. The third year rate for underrepresented students is up about 4.5%. These figures are strongly suggestive of further gains to come.

As this paper was being finalized, late arriving news confirmed the prediction of continued gains. 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 gap for freshmen at six years now stands 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 are elusive on most campuses, 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.

Whole institution: The 2005 Student Success Study found a simple litmus test for campuses that are successful with underrepresented students: Have a visitor walk around and ask many people, "Whose job is student success on this campus?" If replies are, "The vice president for student affairs," or "Advisors," then the visitor has not found a campus focused on student success. If the replies are "My job and everyone's," the visitor has found a campus that is focused on the success of students. The CSULB experience in part confirms this idea. Today, visitors often remark that student success is a theme they hear from many representatives of the campus. "Our student success mission" became an over-arching principle embraced by campus leaders, provosts, deans, associate deans, advisors, student support staff, enrollment services staff, most faculty, and many others. For some, having a clear purpose gave meaning to daily work that might otherwise be unglamorous (e.g., course scheduling).

No Magic Bullets: A corollary to the above is that there is no magic bullet for student success. Hence, the subtitle of the 2005 study is "A Matter of Culture and Leadership". It is a mistake to think that a single learning community or intervention will create significant institutional gains. A student's path through a large university is a complex route with many potential roadblocks. Isolated interventions may not be effective because other roadblocks may arise and/or because innovations do not gain synergy from one another to foster a supportive campus culture. After spending millions supporting community college reform efforts, the Gates Foundation arrived at the same conclusion for that sector (Bailey, et al. 2015). The implication is that academic leaders need to foster large scale change efforts in institutions reluctant to embrace change, a difficult challenge for which few higher education leaders are well-prepared.

Less Obvious Strategies: Student success conferences are likely to include offerings about learning communities, tutoring, mentoring, and perhaps course redesign. These are all important activities. However, some very important success strategies are not usually on the agendas of student success conferences: leadership, budgetary commitment, enrollment

management, curricular streamlining, tenure track hiring, and data capabilities. Leaving these out of the conversation ensures that student success efforts will only be marginally effective. To attain major gains, these less obvious strategies must be targets of change and leadership as well; this is a second corollary to the principle of the "whole institution".

Data: Without data, it is nearly impossible to have a productive conversation 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 in principle. Developing the institutional capabilities to slice and dice data is a challenge for many institutions. The combination of skills necessary to lead the development and use of student success data is unusual. That skill set 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. In a recent article in *Public Purpose* (2015), Nassirian wrote, "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…" 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 the complex system of a large university to optimize student 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. Deans played similar key roles within their academic colleges. Vice provosts played key roles organizing and coordinating activities across campus. One vice provost and later a second also served as "indefatigable advocates," a necessary role. Associate deans did much of the heavy lifting for enrollment management and coordination. Enrollment services did a great deal of work developing data to manage enrollment and track individual student progress to degree. Institutional Research did a great deal of work developing reports summarizing individual data to track progress and set goals (CSULB Institutional Research, 2015). The campus wide steering committee was an essential center of gravity.

CSULB also launched a Leadership Fellows Program, identifying aspiring leaders, often at levels of director and department chair. Fellows participated in an intensive two-year collaborative program that covered global, national, and campus issues. This program was different from many that only emphasize leadership skills and dispositions. Rather, CSULB's program focused on the campus strategic plan as a main framework for discussion. Since student success was the overarching goal of the strategic plan, the fellows focused on opportunities to lead for student

success. Several leadership fellows have subsequently entered significant senior leadership positions. The Leadership Fellows Program also won a national award for Excellence and Innovation in 2015.

The faculty is at the heart of any university. Most at CSULB have been very supportive of student success. Some have 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 how hard this can be. 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 (each point = about 40 students at CSULB). A few may not value colleagues' efforts toward student success, regarding that work as inferior to "scholarship of discovery" (Boyer, 1990). The EAB convening focused on the critical importance of engaging the faculty and how provosts can support faculty in this undertaking.

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. Academic Affairs and advancement can collaborate on scholarships and fund-raising. A particularly useful collaboration at CSULB was the Beach Learning Community, which has boosted retention and graduation for the most academically challenged entering freshmen with the "remedial" label. Some say that universities have more silos than the Mid-West but breaking out of silos is needed to move forward.

In Sum: None of the strategies employed at CSULB were especially innovative in isolation. What was relatively unique 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.

In the future, CSULB may seek further innovation. A new 50,000-square-foot student success center is planned. E-advising and predictive analytics will become pervasive. Digital learning will expand online, flipped, and hybrid offerings. First-year experiences will transform from good discrete programs into an integrated first year. High impact practices such as study abroad, undergraduate research and especially, service learning and internships, will expand. Use of data will deepen. Graduate programs will be reinvigorated based on the idea that, in a competitive economy, a master's degree is now a necessary passport.

Time will tell whether the campus will attain this vision but the stakes are high. President Obama established national baccalaureate completion goals because the future economic position of the nation depends upon a well-educated workforce. Michael Crow, President of Arizona State University, has become a leading voice articulating an important new vision for higher education. Like CSULB, Crow's vision emphasizes helping the next, diverse, low-income generation of learners to be successful in completing college. Interestingly, although Arizona State is a Research 1 institution, many of the themes of Crow's model are familiar to public master's institutions, e. g., underrepresented students, commitment to local community, and applied research.

Public master's institutions are actually *the most important type* of four year higher education institution for President Obama's goal because they enroll the largest number of diverse next generation learners. Public master's students already display the demographics of the future generation of U.S. college students: highly diverse, predominantly low-income, and originating from underfunded K-12 schools.

In short, if public master's institutions such as CSULB cannot successfully raise completion rates while maintaining quality degrees, then the President's strategy for future national economic competitiveness is in jeopardy. The impacts of this failure are unlikely to be apparent for a decade or two. More likely, future historians will look at the early 21st century and offer theories on why the U.S. allowed educational attainment to fall behind other developed nations, leading to a decline in relative standard of living.

Conversely, public master's institutions that successfully raise completion rates while maintaining quality degrees become very important models for public higher education. CSULB has begun to demonstrate this possibility and hopefully will take this grand experiment to a new level of success.

Resources

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Photo credit for pictures of students: GradImages™