FOUR MILLION WAYS TO INCREASE STUDENT SUCCESS

A REPORT ON ALUMNI-STUDENT CONNECTIONS

MESSAGE FROM THE COMMITTEE CO-CHAIRS

Almost a decade ago, the California State University established a bold set of goals that set out to increase graduation rates, eliminate equity gaps in degree completion and meet California's workforce needs. Eight years into Graduation Initiative 2025 (GI2025), four-year graduation rates have almost doubled; however, equity gaps among our students persist, and increasing student enrollment has become an urgent priority.

One possible solution to these issues—the involvement of CSU alumni—has been largely missing from the equation. Given the similar backgrounds of the CSU's alumni and student populations, alumni can play a unique and critical role in mentoring students and helping the CSU meet its goals in closing equity gaps and enrolling more students. Studies show that increased alumni involvement may also lead to more philanthropic giving. However, the lack of organized institutional focus on engaging alumni in student success has resulted in a missed opportunity for meaningful alumni volunteer opportunities—and philanthropy.

In November of 2022 the CSU Alumni Council convened a special committee comprised of subject matter experts from across the university to explore these challenges and opportunities and develop recommendations to increase the level of meaningful alumni-student engagement.

Following extensive discussions and consultation, the committee developed a "student lifecycle" that identified multiple opportunities for alumni-student engagement including assistance with enrollment, retention, persistence to graduation, and closing the equity gap. Expanded connections between alumni and students are projected to have a positive impact on student success, a more engaged alumni network and increased philanthropic investment.

In recognition of the committee's findings and in support of GI2025, the Chancellor's Office has allocated $500,000 for a pilot initiative to engage alumni with the goal of improving student success. This will require a collaborative effort that involves presidents, provosts, vice presidents of Student Affairs and Advancement, alumni offices, career services, faculty and students. Stakeholder groups need to be involved in the process on their campuses to develop these opportunities for engagement. At the system level, the CSU will also consult with and seek support from the California State Student Association (CSSA) and the Academic Senate CSU (ASCSU) as key student and faculty stakeholders. After the first cycle of funding, the CSU will measure results and pinpoint assessments for further growth.

The potential for the CSU is enormous. With over 4 million alumni as a largely untapped resource, the CSU stands to begin a new era in improving student success through alumni engagement.
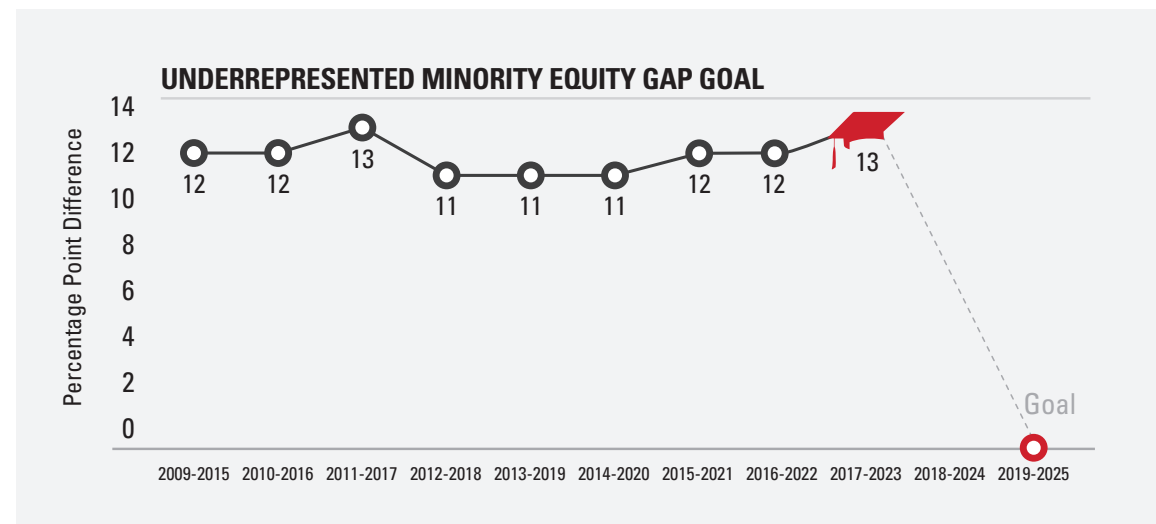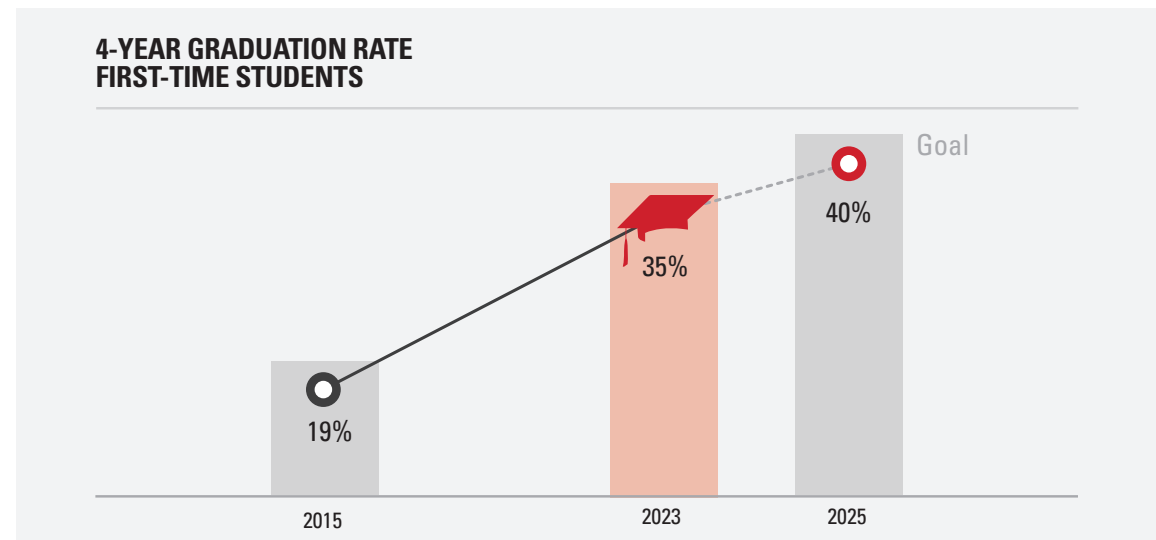
Sincerely,

Dilcie Perez
Deputy Vice Chancellor
Academic and Student Affairs
Co-Chair, Special Committee

Kraig Scheyer
Alumni Representative
Cal Poly San Luis Obispo
CSU Alumni Council
Co-Chair, Special Committee

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As Graduation Initiative 2025 draws to a close, the CSU seeks strategies to finish strong in continuing to increase graduation rates, close stubborn equity gaps and expand access to our 23 universities. Our alumni–more than four million strong and representing one of the largest alumni networks in the nation–can have a significant impact in helping to meet CSU's bold student success goals.

4-YEAR GRADUATION RATE FIRST-TIME STUDENTS

Goal
40%
35%
19%

2015   2023   2025

UNDERREPRESENTED MINORITY EQUITY GAP GOAL

Percentage Point Difference

14
12 12 **13** 12
10   11 11 11 12 12 **13**
8
6
4
2
0   Goal

2009-2015 2010-2016 2011-2017 2012-2018 2013-2019 2014-2020 2015-2021 2016-2022 2017-2023 2018-2024 2019-2025

When compared with university faculty and staff, alumni populations are often more representative of the student body. Alumni can foster a sense of belonging in students and inspire a path forward by sharing their personal stories of what they encountered as they persisted to graduation. Alumni can help students find and develop their strengths, encourage them to get involved on campus and share the importance of forming meaningful connections. Alumni are what we want our students to become.

To examine how alumni can better support student success, the CSU Alumni Council created a special committee comprised of subject matter experts from across campuses and the Chancellor's Office. Representatives included members of the CSU Alumni Council, CSSA, ASCSU, Career Services, Academic and Student Affairs, Information Technology Services, and Strategic Communications.

When the committee dug deeper into available opportunities for alumni involvement, they discovered a lack of meaningful volunteer opportunities to keep alumni engaged. For example, only a handful of positions are available on advisory and leadership boards at each university, and participation is limited due to time or distance barriers. Moreover, connecting alumni engagement to increasing student success has not been an institutional focus.

Indicators suggest that alumni are interested in connecting with students and there are significant benefits to increasing these connections.

- The 2022 CASE Insights on Alumni Engagement study indicates that only 2.5% of alumni nationwide are involved in volunteering. At the CSU, that number is about 1%.

- The same study finds that public universities have an opportunity to leverage alumni-student engagement to increase philanthropy to the university. Almost half of the alumni who volunteered in the past year also made a financial gift.

- The 2018 CSU Alumni Attitude Study indicated that student mentoring was the second most-desired form of alumni engagement from the alumni perspective, and the CSU is not meeting those expectations.

VISION

CSU alumni and students are aware of and engaged in meaningful connections that contribute to student and career success.

COMMITTEE INSIGHTS

As the committee continued to explore the topic of alumni engagement, it identified several themes:

BARRIERS TO ENGAGEMENT

The committee found critical barriers that limit alumni-student engagement including:

- Alumni and students have viewed traditional mentoring as a long-term commitment that requires a lot of time and energy, and are hesitant to make the commitment. Students in particular have an aversion to the word "mentoring";

- Students are intimidated and fearful of engaging with alumni and/or lack the skills to confidently engage with alumni;

EXPLORING THE AVERSION TO "MENTORING"

One student on the committee was adamant that she did not need a mentor and expressed as much to an executive at the Chancellor's Office. The student proceeded to develop a working relationship with the executive, who guided the student by offering advice and regular check-ins, and serving as a sounding board for difficult decisions. When the executive shared that their relationship mirrored a mentorship, the student changed her perception of the value of mentorship.

- Alumni are not aware of opportunities to connect with students, especially beyond traditional mentoring options; and

- Campus resources are scarce to implement and run programs to bring alumni and students together.

STUDENT LIFECYCLE ▶

There are many pivotal moments during a student's educational journey. From recruitment through graduation and beyond, alumni-student connections are key to a successful college journey. This graphic identifies some of these key moments.
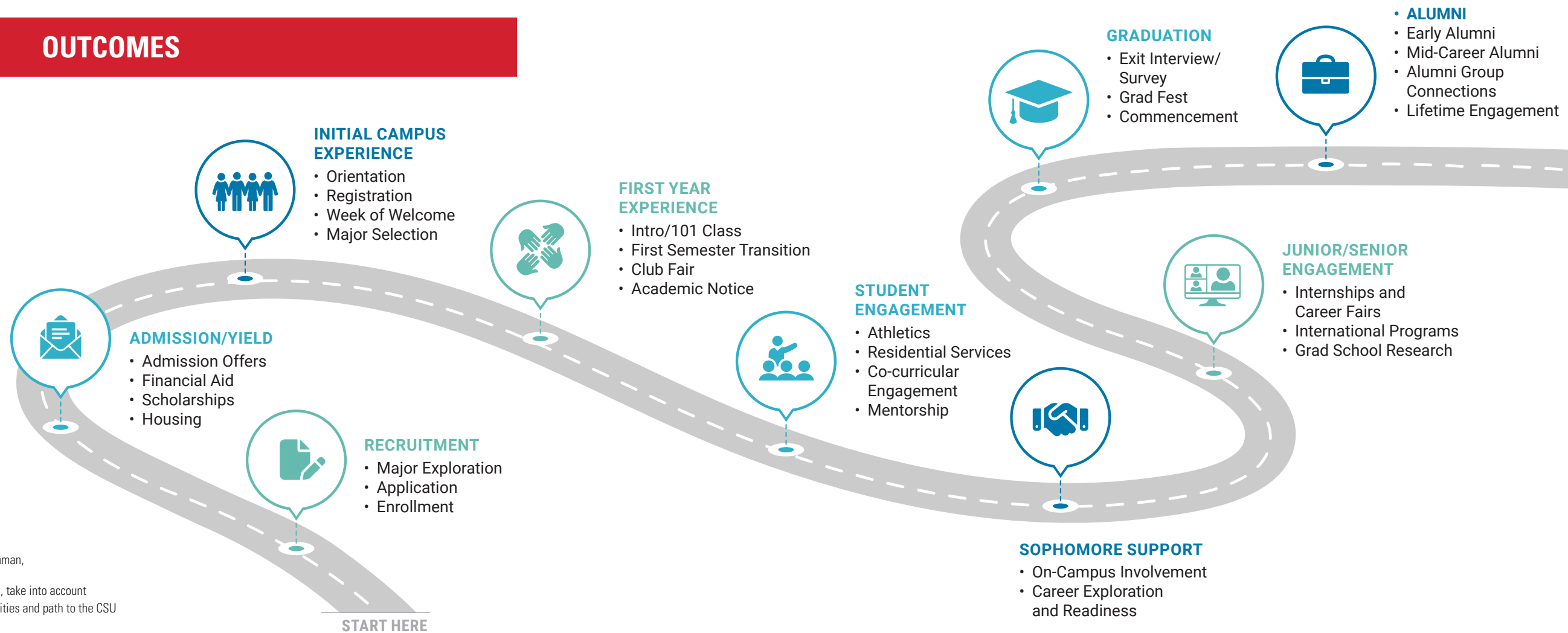
Notes:
- Opportunities vary based on student status (First time freshman, transfer student, or a re-enrolling/returning student)
- As you create opportunities for alumni student connections, take into account the unique needs of students based on their different identities and path to the CSU

ADMISSION/YIELD
- Admission Offers
- Financial Aid
- Scholarships
- Housing

RECRUITMENT
- Major Exploration
- Application
- Enrollment

START HERE

INITIAL CAMPUS EXPERIENCE
- Orientation
- Registration
- Week of Welcome
- Major Selection

FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE
- Intro/101 Class
- First Semester Transition
- Club Fair
- Academic Notice

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT
- Athletics
- Residential Services
- Co-curricular Engagement
- Mentorship

SOPHOMORE SUPPORT
- On-Campus Involvement
- Career Exploration and Readiness

GRADUATION
- Exit Interview/ Survey
- Grad Fest
- Commencement

ALUMNI
- Early Alumni
- Mid-Career Alumni
- Alumni Group Connections
- Lifetime Engagement

JUNIOR/SENIOR ENGAGEMENT
- Internships and Career Fairs
- International Programs
- Grad School Research

ILLUSTRATING OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH THE STUDENT LIFECYCLE

The committee recognized that no common framework describes the opportunities for involvement with students. This limits the ability to share practices and engage key partners across the university.

The committee identified the "student lifecycle" as the common framework. By showing the student journey, from recruitment and enrollment through the first-year experience to graduation and beyond, the committee identified and agreed on moments pivotal to student success.

The student lifecycle can be used to brainstorm opportunities to create meaningful alumni-student connections during pivotal moments. By using this model, the CSU can share these practices systemwide to address the barriers to connections.

> **I just wanted to email you to say I have officially committed to SLO! I'm beyond excited to be going there in the coming fall and I am so grateful for the advice you have given me over the last month."**
>
> *Cal Poly San Luis Obispo student*

A NEED FOR INCREASING PROGRAM SCOPE AND RESOURCES

The committee discovered a mixed range of mentorship programs offered at the CSU's 23 universities; however, a general lack of staff and fiscal resources prohibits these programs from expanding or, in some cases, surviving. As alumni-student connections become a priority of the university, the CSU envisions that these programs will grow to serve a larger number of students in different formats and capitalize on the opportunity for alumni to support student success.

Examples include:

- Engaging alumni directly in enrollment and admission activities by having them connect with prospective students to share the value of their CSU education;

- Connecting students of color with their respective alumni affinity groups, to create a community and better sense of belonging for students;

- Creating opportunities for alumni and students with similar stories to connect, allowing a transfer of lived experience from alumni to students; and

- Increasing the number of campuses that use a third-party software platform to connect alumni and students to make connections more convenient, and to drive increased alumni philanthropic giving.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The committee recommends the following actions to increase alumni and student connections.

INTEGRATE ALUMNI ENGAGEMENT INTO STRATEGIC STUDENT SUCCESS INITIATIVES

- Request each campus to begin or increase partnership between their alumni office and Graduation Initiative student success teams in high-priority strategic initiatives; and

- Partner with Chancellor's Office strategic workgroups (e.g., enrollment, Black Student Success, advising) to engage alumni in university goals and priorities.

The committee recommends that each campus identify criteria and establish a specific metric that the campus wants to improve and where alumni can help in a time-defined manner.

STRATEGIC ENROLLMENT PLANNING

Problem	State-supported student headcount has declined.
Goal	In the next academic year, enrollment will be increased by x% by expanding the yield on admitted students.
Solution	Alumni write emails and call/text admitted students, congratulating them on their acceptance and sharing their stories of success, encouraging them to accept admission to the university.

BLACK STUDENT SUCCESS INITIATIVE

Problem	The gap between Black student retention and persistence is growing compared with other peer groups.
Goal	Increase retention rates between first-year and second-year Black engineering students by x% in the next academic year.
Solution	The alumni office will identify Black and other interested engineering graduates and connect them with first-year students to encourage their return in the next semester. These connections can be one-on-one interactions, guest lectures in class and events sponsored by the Black Student Union/ Black Student Association.

ADVISORY COUNCIL ON STUDENT ADVISING

Problem	The graduation rate gap between Pell Grant recipient students compared with other peer groups is at an all-time high.
Goal	Increase graduation rates for Pell Grant recipient students by x% within one year.
Solution	Create events that address the unique needs of Pell recipients. Invite alumni who were Pell Grant recipients as students to share their stories of persistence, offer advice and motivation and help students find the resources they need on campus.

To support the above recommendation, campuses can apply for seed funding through the Chancellor's Office to develop proof-of-concept alumni-student engagement practices. These projects will support student success while encouraging partnership between departments.

CREATE A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

- Establish a systemwide community of practice where campus professionals engaged in creating alumni-student connections can share information, best practices and ideas.

- Encourage community of practice participants to share information in their own stakeholder group meetings on the work being accomplished systemwide.

- Establish a virtual mentorship platform workgroup to allow platform administrators to meet regularly and discuss how to increase participation of alumni and students on the platform.

CONTINUE WORKING WITH STAKEHOLDER GROUPS

The Alumni Council leadership will continue to meet regularly with CSSA, ASCSU and other key stakeholders to identify barriers and create strategies to foster and bolster student-alumni connections.

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