

FROM OVERSIGHT TO IMPACT

HOW GOVERNING BOARDS AND ADMINISTRATORS ADVANCE

STUDENT SUCCESS

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About AGB

At the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB), we believe in the power of higher education to transform lives, strengthen inclusive democracy, and support a thriving society. We believe that strong higher education starts with great governing boards. AGB provides advocacy, leading practices, educational resources, expert support, and renowned programs that advance board excellence for 40,000 AGB members from more than 2,000 institutions and foundations. For more than 100 years, AGB has been the trusted authority for board members, chief executives, board professionals, and key administrators on higher education governance and leadership. Learn more at www.AGB.org.



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PREFACE

This report is focused on sharing best practices and telling the stories of four institutions that are elevating student success. By highlighting the successful strategies and practices of higher education governing boards in collaboration with key campus administrators, we hope to change how they work together to improve educational outcomes. If more colleges and universities integrate and refine leading practices, perhaps we can change for the better the lives of more students, as well as the narrative about higher education in the United States.

Work on this project began in summer 2024 in response to a joint request for proposals seeking initiatives on policies to improve postsecondary value and student success. The Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) applied for a grant focused on governance and structural dynamics, well suited to AGB's mission and familiar to the project co-leads who have collaborated before on several student-success projects with a governance focus.

AGB was awarded a grant by the Gates Foundation in October 2024 for a one-year project. Work began right away selecting four institutions for this case study-based examination of policies and practices that promote student success. We used as the population from which to select those institutions that were eligible for the U.S. Department of Education's (ED's) Postsecondary Success Recognition Program—institutions with large populations of students who were Pell Grant-eligible, the first in their family to attend college, and from underrepresented minority groups, and which performed better than expected in terms of students' access, retention, progression, completion, and success beyond college. It was an ideal institutional population from which to choose. We added to our selection criteria membership in AGB, variety of institutional type and geography, and researchers' knowledge of and experience with institutions. We selected four public institutions: CUNY Hostos Community College (New York), California State University San Bernardino (California), Kean University (New Jersey), and Prairie View A&M University (Texas). We were delighted that in January 2025,



Hostos Community College was one of six honorees of the 2025 Postsecondary Success Recognition Program.

The policy environment has shifted significantly over the course of the past year. To start, information about the Postsecondary Success Recognition Program honorees can no longer be found on ED's website; 2025 was the inaugural and potentially last year of the awards. Inclusive excellence programs are being eliminated on college campuses to comply with executive orders issued by the Trump Administration. The February 14, 2025, "Dear Colleague" letter from ED equated these efforts in higher education with discrimination in violation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Although the letter was advisory, the sanctions threatened by the department included an end to eligibility for federal funds, which moved many institutions to preemptively eliminate inclusive excellence-related offices, policies, and language.

Politicians, major donors, and members of the public today are accusing institutions of discrimination for their efforts to support college completion for underrepresented minorities. The administration has dramatically reduced the number of ED staff, and the department is threatened with closure. International and undocumented students have been detained or deported as part of the Trump Administration's controversial immigration policies marked by Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids. Federal research grants and overhead allowances for colleges and universities have been reduced or suspended. College presidents have resigned under pressure from the U.S. Department of Justice, political leaders, or other constituencies.

This is an extraordinary environment for examining what is working in public policy and at colleges and universities that have demonstrated exceptional progress in increasing success for all students and in reducing gaps in retention and completion for vulnerable students, the focus of our interest. This is the policy environment in which we conducted this study.

More broadly, public attitudes about higher education and the value of a degree reached new low points in recent years, perhaps moving several foundations to fund this and other projects on improving the value of postsecondary education. Although concerns persist, a recent Gallup poll conducted in partnership with the Lumina Foundation suggests that views about postsecondary education are beginning to trend upward.

Enrollment also remains a challenge. According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, undergraduate enrollment declined in the sector



before and during the pandemic but rose slightly in 2023 and 2024. Enrollment for 2025–2026 might be negatively affected by the demographic “enrollment cliff” for high school graduates, uncertainty for international students, fear of deportation among undocumented students, and changes in financial aid policies, as well as continued criticism of the sector.

Completion rates for college undergraduates, debt for college graduates as well as those with some college but no degree, and earnings differentials for completers compared to high school graduates have been the chief measures in assessing higher education’s value. Primary concerns are low completion rates and indebtedness of graduates and dropouts. Regardless of the criticism, there continues to be strong evidence that lifetime earnings, health, civic engagement, and other indicators of quality of life are better for college graduates.

At the same time, the need for more college-educated workers is also increasing, and the workforce gap is projected at 5.25 million more workers with post-secondary education by 2032, of which 4.5 million will need a bachelor’s degree or higher, according to a recent report from Georgetown University’s Center on Education and the Workforce. The U.S. economy needs more people to choose college—and succeed—to replace retirees and meet the requirements of new jobs.

During these difficult and confusing times, we have been focused on four institutions to learn how they have defied expectations and helped so many of their students succeed—a majority of whom are students from low-income backgrounds, underrepresented minorities, or first-generation college students. We looked at policies and initiatives that made a difference—from the board and administration, and from state and local government. These colleges were keenly aware of the changes in the policy environment in 2025, especially regarding programs that identify students by race or ethnicity.

Repeatedly, we were impressed by the commitment of these institutions to their students and to the evidence-based practices that informed their efforts to help all their students succeed and to succeed in greater numbers. They also noted that though these efforts helped all students, gains were greater for students from vulnerable groups (low socioeconomic groups, underrepresented minorities, and the first in their family to attend college) and helped eliminate gaps in completion rates.

Kemal M. Atkins, EdD, and Merrill P. Schwartz, PhD
Project Co-Leads and AGB Consultants
October 2025







EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose

In recent years the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) has seen and responded to a growing need for boards to understand and exercise their responsibilities for oversight of academic affairs and effectively contribute to increasing student success at their institutions. Higher education has been under fire for the cost of a degree, questionable return on investment, low graduation rates, and debt for students, especially those with some college but no degree. This report can help boards and key administrators address these challenges.

Governing boards hold the ultimate fiduciary responsibility for all institutional matters, including student success. However, despite the governing board's central role in shaping institutional priorities, there is a notable gap in the research examining how boards leverage their authority and collaborate with administrators to improve student outcomes. Without clearer evidence and effective models of board-administration collaboration, governing boards risk relying on narrow or episodic interventions rather than adopting and sustaining strategic approaches that support student success at scale. Furthermore, the coordination of federal, state, and institutional policies remains an underdeveloped area of board engagement, leaving a critical gap in governance of student-success initiatives. This report highlights how four institutions are advancing student success through effective collaboration between governing boards and campus administrators. By sharing these exemplary approaches, the report aims to inspire colleges and universities to strengthen governance partnerships, improve student outcomes, enhance postsecondary value, and positively shape the future of higher education in the United States.

Methods of Analyzing the Problem

Through a systematic review of student-success practices in the literature and case-study methodology, this report provides rich descriptions of board practices and policies that advance student success and increase postsecondary value. At four case-study campuses, the researchers conducted an environmental scan and systematic review of governing board practices and resultant policies that contributed to improved student outcomes. In addition, the researchers conducted interviews (virtual and in-person) with institutional and foundation board members—including student members—and key administrators to gain an understanding of the ways governing boards collaborate with university presidents, their cabinets, and faculty leaders to improve student success; identify effective governing support for institutional improvement and student success; and gain an understanding of the context for change at the case-study institutions and how that context influenced the development and implementation of their student-success strategies. Board agendas and minutes, institutional strategic plans, and progress reports provided additional contextual information.

The project co-leads also participated in the Campus Visit program offered by the National Institute for Student Success (NISS) at Georgia State University, followed by a private meeting with Timothy Renick, NISS’s founding executive director, to explore their insights on student success in higher education further. NISS is a national organization that partners with colleges and universities to identify and remove barriers to student success and achievement. As a result, we deepened our understanding of the Success Program at Georgia State University, widely regarded as the gold standard for student-success practices, and learned more about NISS’s “evidence-based, data-driven strategies for student success,”¹ which synthesized our insights about student-success initiatives with our case-study institutions.

Results of Analysis

Although each institution is unique and operates within its own context, a common set of conditions and promising practices emerged across all of them.



1. **Relevant and extensive leadership experience:** Governing boards, systems, and president's cabinets had among them people with deep knowledge of education at secondary and postsecondary levels and successful leadership experiences that informed their work.
2. **Student success as the main thing:** Leaders repeatedly emphasized that student success is not “one priority among many” but the central organizing principle of their institutions. Governing boards, presidents, and cabinets embedded student success in strategic plans, key performance indicators, budget priorities, and communications. Leadership at every level—governing boards, foundations, system administration, presidents, cabinets, faculty, and staff—demonstrated alignment around a shared commitment to student success.
3. **Culture of collaboration:** Presidents established a clear expectation that cabinet members work together across divisions, breaking down silos to solve problems collectively. Student success was everyone's responsibility. Team successes were celebrated and recognized, reinforcing a culture of collaboration and accountability.
4. **Data-driven decision-making:** Student success efforts were informed by integrated, institutionwide data systems that guided strategic planning and day-to-day operations. Investments were made in training users and updating systems to constantly improve information and its use. Data systems provided real-time information to inform and trigger communication with students. Boards periodically received and reviewed key data on student-success metrics.
5. **Identification and removal of barriers:** Institutions actively identified and addressed barriers that prevented student enrollment, persistence, and completion. Institutions adjusted structures, policies, and services to meet the needs of today's students rather than expecting students to conform to outdated models. This included board-level policies on admission, financial aid, budgets, personnel, transfer students, and relationships with K-12 schools.
6. **Deep knowledge of students:** Colleges demonstrated strong awareness of their student demographics and lived realities. Many students were working adults, first-generation, financially vulnerable, and parents. Leaders described their students, in the words of one, as being “one flat tire away from dropping out.” Student organizations or representatives had a voice in shaping policies and practices because leaders regularly sought and responded to student input.



7. **Holistic student-support models:** Institutions viewed personal needs as academic needs, addressing mental health, food insecurity, housing, clothing, finances, and childcare needs alongside coursework and advising. Systematic approaches supported students in making timely program and career decisions. Strategies reflected a whole-person approach. Advising was typically team oriented.
8. **Community connection:** Success strategies were tied to local partnerships and community engagement, recognizing that institutions and students thrive in broader ecosystems. Connections with foundation board members, employers, and community leaders provided internships, mentors, employment, scholarships, and other support.
9. **Mission-driven focus:** Presidents consistently referenced their institution's mission as the driver of student-success strategies, reinforcing that inclusive excellence and completion goals are inseparable from institutional purpose.
10. **Institutional definitions of student success:** Institutions and systems defined student success in ways that reflected their mission and student population. For example:
 - California State University focused on enrollment growth and graduation rates, and eliminating gaps in student success and California State University San Bernardino emphasized improving the student experience.
 - Hostos Community College highlighted supporting students' personal goals and employment outcomes, and actions by the City University of New York centered on increasing enrollment and completion rates and meeting workforce needs in the city and state.
 - Prairie View A&M University adopted a highly personalized approach, tailoring support to individual aspirations.
 - Kean University supported a positive and full collegiate experience that prepares students for their future, focusing on academic support, fostering a sense of belonging, and developing a strong foundation of well-being through social connection, financial literacy, and spiritual wellness.

Recommendations

1. **Engage Governing Boards as Strategic Partners.**
 - Leverage board oversight to drive accountability and commitment.
 - Deploy senior administrators as staff liaisons to board committees, with expectations of mutual trust, clarity of roles, integrity, and effective communication.



- Establish board committees that allow holistic approaches to challenges, such as student success or student experience committees.
- Consider joint board committee meetings to facilitate holistic policies and planning. Encourage attendance at committee meetings by other board and cabinet members to gain their input and perspectives.
- Regularly share reports containing disaggregated student data with the board, accompanied by analysis for improved understanding.
- Provide institution and foundation board members, as well as the president's cabinet, with educational sessions and resources on student needs, inclusive excellence, student-success metrics, and exemplary approaches to improve student outcomes. Inspire change based on leading development of best practices.
- Regularly include speakers who can share student experiences and inform the institution and foundation boards about changing student needs, community needs, and state and local workforce trends.
- Encourage institution and foundation board members to attend important campus events and show their support for the president in difficult times as well as in celebration of success.

2. Focus on Affordability, Access, and Value.

- Expand financial assistance strategies (for example, emergency grants, last-dollar scholarships for students who have exhausted all other forms of financial aid).
- Strengthen recruitment pipelines from underrepresented populations.
- Adopt flexible tuition payment structures to reduce stop-outs due to financial barriers.
- Eliminate financial barriers such as application fees or holds on registration to enable students to enroll and progress, supported with financial advising and emergency aid.
- Pursue state-level policy and funding support for expanding enrollment for certificates and degrees to meet workforce demand for important economic, health, and welfare needs.

3. Implement Retention and Student-Success Strategies Focused on Inclusive Excellence.

- Form cross-functional task forces on campus using retention performance management or similar platforms.



- Set and track inclusive excellence goals disaggregated by cohort (race/ethnicity, first-generation, Pell status, academic program, transfer status).
- Redesign advising models, early-alert systems, and course scheduling and sequencing to proactively support persistence.

4. Use Data to Inform Continuous Improvement.

- Develop visual dashboards and reports to track student progress and highlight equitable outcomes.
- Disaggregate data by student demographics, academic program, and campus engagement.
- Eliminate data silos; integrate academic, student affairs, and financial data across the institution; invest in improvements and train end users of data systems.
- Link data insights to strategic planning and resource allocation.

5. Elevate and Amplify the Student Voice.

- Create standing opportunities for students to provide input into policies, programs, and services.
- Include students as collaborative partners with administrators in designing solutions to challenges.

This study affirms that college, university, foundation, and system governing boards have a critical role to play in their oversight of and impact on student success. Student success is inseparable from the mission of higher education institutions. As governing boards and administrators sharpen their focus on student success, frameworks such as John Kotter's 8-Step Process for Leading Change² and Boleman and Deal's Four Frame Model³ for examining organizations through structural, human resource, political, and symbolic lenses can equip leaders with the tools needed to design and implement change effectively, and assess the institutional context in which change is taking place. Additionally, these frameworks can help inspire movement, address resistance, and sustain transformation efforts that improve institutional performance and student success. Finally, AGB's programs, publications, and services informed the work of these case-study institutions and continue to be a source of ideas and best practices for higher education leaders.



FROM OVERSIGHT TO IMPACT







INTRODUCTION

About the Project

AGB is grateful to the Gates Foundation for its generous grant for this project focused on student success to better understand and support boards in this mission-critical work. Key questions that guided our research were:

1. How can governing boards use their authority to improve the value of post-secondary education through policies that advance student success, economic mobility, affordability, and equitable workforce outcomes?
2. How can the different layers of governing bodies in higher education play a more prominent and complementary role in supporting institutional improvement and holding institutional leaders accountable for outcomes? What role does policy need to play?
3. What can governing boards do to support the coordination of federal, state, or institutional policies that oversee student outcomes?

We are also grateful to the four institutions and their boards that shared their strategies with us, making it possible to provide insights into the policies and practices that advance student success: California State University San Bernardino (CSUSB) and the California State University (CSU) Board of Trustees; Hostos Community College and the City University of New York (CUNY) Board of Trustees; Kean University and the Kean University Board of Trustees; and Prairie View A&M University (PVAMU) and The Texas A&M University System Board of Regents. This report is a culmination of our year-long collaboration with their boards, presidents, key administrators, foundation board leaders, and others who shared their experiences, knowing they would be contributing to the broader higher education community and to students and families throughout



the country. They agreed to do so with attribution, so those who wish to know more can learn about their efforts.

This is AGB's fourth project on governing boards and student success, including an earlier project with support from the Gates Foundation; a joint project with the Gardner Institute and multiple institutions in Kentucky funded by the Ascendium Education Foundation; and a special edition of *Trusteeship* magazine, "Success Beyond Completion—The New Attainment & Opportunity Agenda: Why Completion Isn't Enough," (March/April 2024), produced with support from the Strada Education Foundation. This project was informed by this earlier body of work; related resources can be found on AGB.org in the Knowledge Center's Student Success pages.

Three of the four institutions featured in the case studies in this report were selected from among those eligible for the U.S. Department of Education's (ED's) Postsecondary Success Recognition Program—and all four of them excel in advancing student success while enrolling a greater-than-average percentage of students who were Pell Grant recipients, underrepresented minorities, and the first in their families to attend college. This was precisely the population of institutions we sought to learn from about policies and practices for achieving better outcomes for students. Hostos Community College distinguished itself as one of six recipients of ED's 2025 Postsecondary Success Recognition Program award.⁴

Also featured in this report and a focus of our research is Georgia State University (GSU) and its National Institute for Student Success (NISS). ED recognized GSU with a special trailblazer award as part of the department's 2025 Recognition awards. This award celebrated GSU for its model practices to increase student success and NISS for the technical assistance it has provided to hundreds of other colleges seeking to emulate their efforts. NISS is cited in the literature about student success, and its approaches informed our examination of best practices in the four case-study institutions.

Defining and Measuring Student Success

We learned early in our work examining the key drivers for advancing student success that focusing on policies per se was limiting. Our case-study institutions



helped clarify that boards do much more than pass resolutions, and that much of the policy work is done at the campus as part of implementation. Boards set direction, hire presidents, plan, establish goals and deadlines, approve budgets, and reallocate resources, in addition to approving resolutions. System boards are also supported by system heads and extensive system staff (three of the four case-study institutions were part of systems) to advance the mission and goals of the system through each of its institutions.

In a system, working out metrics and implementing policies needs to reflect differences among the system's institutions, particularly each institution's unique mission. Hostos Community College is part of a system that includes community colleges, four-year colleges, and graduate schools. CSUSB noted that there was a great deal of difference in the composition of student populations among the 22 CSU campuses, even in a system of four-year regional public universities. Prairie View A&M, the only historically Black college in the A&M System, noted the challenges in being compared to the flagship institution, which differs in size, funding, and mission.

Among the key metrics for student success most boards monitor are enrollment, retention, and, especially, completion of degrees. Anthony Carnevale, director of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, noted, "The bachelor's degree remains the most critical higher education offering for delivering career earnings. This fact translates into the rightful primacy of tracking success in delivering attainment of bachelor's degrees."⁵

Institutions also use more holistic definitions of student success that reflect their missions. These might include developing life skills, preparing for a career, contributing to society, civic engagement, health and well-being, and personal fulfillment. Community colleges may address needs of adult learners who are pursuing personal goals or updating skills that do not include degree completion; they may define student success in terms of fulfilling the personal needs and goals of each student.

Increasingly, measures of success emphasize postgraduation earnings to show the value added by the college or the return on investment for the student and funding sources. This is reflected in measures of earnings postgraduation at various points in time, often compared to high school graduates, and disaggregated by program of study. For example, how much does a psychology major earn at one,



five, and ten years after graduation compared to a high school graduate without any college? ED is developing measures of program-level earnings data for each institution and currently includes median earnings of students after ten years in its College Scorecard. Details are available for the most popular fields of study. Institutions and systems, such as CUNY, have developed data tools for students that describe typical jobs and earnings to help the students explore career choices and select majors.

Josh Wyner, executive director of Aspen Institute's College Experience Program, cautions governing boards to look at graduates' postgraduation education in relation to earnings. If graduates are pursuing graduate and professional degrees, and delaying earnings, this should be reflected in the data. "Because many students attend college before entering the labor market—students with bachelor's degrees going on to graduate school and those with associate's degrees going on to four-year colleges—Wyner believes it is important for boards to look at how many students continue in higher education and, among those who do, how many earn a subsequent degree," according to a recent article in *Trusteeship* magazine.⁶

In looking at data to move the needle on college success, Timothy Renick, executive director of the NISS, observed that the number of degrees awarded is important but that those numbers do not provide timely information to help institutions intervene and improve student outcomes. "So we started to look for more proximate, early indicators of what will turn into improved graduation rates," he said.⁷

Among those metrics were:

- **Time to degree—especially for low-income students who receive financial aid based on four years of eligibility.** Reducing time to degree closer to four years increased graduation rates.
- **Timely selection of major—in the first or second year of study.** Choosing or changing a major later led to increased time to degree and was associated with decreased completion rates.
- **Unmet need was closely correlated with GPA—as unmet need went up, GPA went down, risking the eligibility of students for**



merit and other financial aid. Lost aid was associated with students dropping out.

Knowing these warning signs allowed GSU to introduce practices to address each of these barriers to student success. In doing so, it was able to decrease average time to degree by more than a semester and dramatically increase graduation rates. These strategies are outlined in detail in the next section.







HIGHLIGHTS FROM A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

What We Know About Student Success

The secrets to student success are not a mystery. In fact, the keys to unlocking student success are widely acknowledged in the higher education literature, though a variety of experts express the findings in different terms. NISS puts it succinctly: identify barriers, use data to inform strategy, take action to remove barriers.⁸ Laura Jacobsen, a faculty member at Radford University, wrote in *Inside Higher Ed* about six pillars of student success: affinity, community, career, early alert, support, and storytelling.⁹

Our own research, which focused on policy levers as well as effective practices, used five broad categories to capture strategies to advance student success: **data-based decision-making, students' basic needs, holistic advising, access/affordability, and leadership/governance.**

Data-Based Decision-Making

Ensuring student success is a strategic imperative that requires commitment across all levels of higher education governance.¹⁰ By analyzing metrics such as retention rates, course completion, and postgraduation success, boards can identify areas needing improvement and allocate resources accordingly.¹¹ AGB emphasizes that boards have a fiduciary duty to oversee student outcomes, asserting such as strategic and financial priorities. To fulfill their responsibility, boards must regularly review disaggregated, longitudinal data to identify areas needing improvement and allocate resources effectively.¹² This data-driven approach enables institutions to implement targeted strategies that enhance student achievement and inclusive excellence.

Students' Basic Needs

Governing boards, institutional leaders, and related foundations must collaborate strategically among themselves and with elected officials to design and implement programs that respond to students' financial and quality-of-life needs, helping students to persist to degree completion.¹³ This includes scrutinizing tuition policy, expanding need-based aid, and supporting resources that meet students' basic needs. Higher education leaders must actively prioritize access and affordability to ensure institutions deliver resources that provide value for all students and serve as a critical method to improve student completion rates.¹⁴

In particular, effective governance calls for a coordinated design of support systems, tuition waivers and support, transportation subsidies, book stipends, and emergency funds, among other resources, all linked with academic advice and career services to maximize returns on student success across all populations.¹⁵ Policy research and oversight organizations such as the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO) underscore these priorities in their 2024 reports, ranking college affordability and state funding for financial aid among the top issues for state higher education systems. By embedding inclusive excellence-driven financial support in institutional strategy, boards fulfill their responsibility to ensure higher education is both accessible and sustainable for all students.¹⁶

A model case is CUNY's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP). ASAP provides students with comprehensive financial support, including tuition-

“We noticed that every semester more than 1,000 students were leaving school because they were short of money to cover tuition and fees.”

*Timothy M. Renick*¹⁷

gap scholarships, textbook stipends, and unlimited MetroCards. Similarly, the CSU system implemented a strategy providing financial assistance, gap scholarships, and emergency student loan funds using philanthropic support from the system's foundation. These supports are designed to remove financial barriers to enrollment and completion, enabling students to persist and

graduate efficiently. For example, Renick (2019) highlights NISS's emphasis at GSU on the importance of affordability and support of students' basic needs. GSU



implemented Panther Retention Grants that add up to \$1,500 to the accounts of students who fall behind in tuition payments.

Holistic Advising

Comprehensive and proactive advising models are critical components of student retention and success.¹⁸ Integrated advising models that combine academic guidance with career planning create a holistic framework that recognizes the full student and supports them beyond early-stage and late-stage interventions.¹⁹ These models intentionally draw on data from second-year performance and prerequisite-course completion to inform advising needs and support students' holistic development.

Access and Affordability

Research consistently highlights access and affordability as central factors of students' success in higher education. Rising tuition costs and inadequate financial aid programs are contributors to lower enrollment, persistence, and completion rates, especially for low-income and first-generation students.²⁰ Need-based aid, scholarships, and tuition-free initiatives are ways to expand access and have been shown to improve enrollment and degree completion among historically underserved student populations, including Pell-eligible students and students of color.²¹

Kuh et al. (2005) found that affordability directly affects students' ability to become involved in campus life, use support services, and prioritize schoolwork over outside work, all of which are strong predictors of higher rates of student success.²² In terms of policy, investments in affordability, such as state funding for need-based aid, help to narrow gaps in degree attainment among students from different socioeconomic backgrounds.²³

“There are associated costs for each student who does not succeed—for the student, the institution, and society.”

*Raquel M. Rall and Demetri L. Morgan*²⁴

The literature consistently shows that access and affordability are essential to



keeping students enrolled, engaged, and on track toward completion. Institutions that fail to address their students' financial barriers risk undermining their other student-success initiatives.

Leadership and Governance

Higher education governing boards, in partnership with institutional leaders, faculty, and related foundations, must ensure that curricula and co-curricular experiences teach and develop transferable skills that align with stakeholders' expectations and local workforce needs. Moreover, aligning student degree pathways with state-defined success metrics, including credential completion in targeted fields, attainment benchmarks, and workforce alignment, is essential to student success after graduation.²⁵ Boards should further leverage corporate and state-employer partnerships to support student workforce entry and engagement.

A shared-responsibility approach is critical for aligning student course pathways with both career attainment and state needs. Governing boards have a responsibility to ensure curricular offerings directly support workforce needs and assure constituents of the value of higher education.²⁶ However, they also have a fiduciary responsibility to protect the institution's mission. Governing boards must also respect the parameters of shared governance at their institutions. Consistent with the institution's mission, governing boards may decide what academic programs will be offered, but faculty members are subject matter experts who determine what is taught. They design and implement the curriculum and therefore have a shared, hands-on role in student success. SHEEO-led initiatives, such as its statewide strategic networks, reinforce this cooperative model by bridging institutional leadership and policy agendas to strengthen student success statewide. This networked structure frames alignment as a cooperative enterprise, positioning higher education as a strategic partner in economic and workforce development.



RELATED RESOURCES

For more information, see *Shared Governance for Agile Institutions: A Practical Guide for Universities and Colleges* by Steven C. Bahls (AGB, 2023) and the *AGB Board of Directors' Statement on Shared Governance* (AGB, 2017).

The 2024–2025 SHEEO policy priorities underscore economic and workforce development as the top concern for state leaders, advocating that institutional academic planning be directly linked to state performance goals. Similarly, reports from the John N. Gardner Institute for Undergraduate Education highlight the importance of structuring the curriculum and advising in ways that support postsecondary-to-career transitions while also meeting state metrics for workforce readiness and equitable outcomes.²⁷ Together, these strategies create a governance framework that ensures educational pathways are intentionally and collectively designed to deliver value to students, institutions, and the broader economy.

Increasingly, the value of higher education will be measured in the earnings of graduates. Jeb Bush, a former governor of Florida, noted that, “Students deserve programs that lead to meaningful, high-wage employment, and taxpayers deserve accountability for the billions they invest each year.” He recommended states evaluate public institutions by examining “every associate and bachelor’s degree program in the state, assessing whether they help students earn more than they would with only a high school diploma. It’s a simple benchmark that will be at the heart of every state’s postsecondary strategy under the recently passed federal budget reconciliation bill, which will require states to measure graduates’ median income four years after program completion and may result in decreased federal funding if earnings fall below a certain level.”²⁸

Jeb Bush offers one definition of student success—finding a remunerative job. On the campuses we studied, several best practices emerged from examination of our case-study institutions and were informed by a review of the literature. In this report we offer governing boards and key administrators insights into how to



apply these best practices to their own institutions and provide examples of how this works in practice in the institutions we studied.

In addition to finding many common elements in strategies to promote student success, we also found many commonalities in the definitions of student success. Metrics for enrollment, retention, persistence, graduation/completion, earnings, licensure, or subsequent education of graduates were almost universal in campuses' definitions and formulations regarding student success. Many analyzed these data using key student demographics to identify gaps in success among student groups, such as Pell Grant recipients, first-generation students, transfer students, and underrepresented minorities. Knowing who succeeds at an institution, and who does not, was an essential part of data-informed decisions. High-level metrics on enrollment, retention, and graduation were most common in system-level longitudinal and comparative data, and they were reported in online systems and to system boards.

In addition, presidents and cabinet-level administrators tracked indicators of the broader student experience, including “actionable data” to inform interventions to change outcomes for students. These ranged from institutional-level data on participation in high-impact experiences (undergraduate research with faculty, internships, study abroad); to drop, fail, withdrawal, incomplete (DFWI) rates for gateway courses; to student-level data on grades for the first test in a gateway course; to enrolling in too many highly demanding classes at once or in courses out of sequence for majors. Administrators also tracked financial data, including unpaid balances and exhausting eligibility for aid, signals that a student might stop out. An administrator at one of our case-study institutions commented that though the system cares about numbers, “We care about the student experience.” Looking at aggregate data allowed institutions to identify barriers and identify systemic solutions. Using data systems to track and communicate with students in real time at critical points allowed institutions to change outcomes.



DEFINITION OF STUDENT SUCCESS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LOUISVILLE

Successful students *make intentional and informed choices; persist to a timely completion* in their chosen pathways; *utilize campus resources* as appropriate; *make meaningful connections* with peers, faculty, staff, alumni and community partners. They are *prepared academically and personally to engage in their educations and the post-degree pursuits* of their choosing.

Equitable student success can only happen when the *institution and its people commit* to supporting every admitted student through practices and policies that *minimize barriers and maximize opportunities for students to become engaged citizens, leaders, and scholars.*

Excerpted from Office of the Provost, “Student Success,” University of Louisville, accessed September 29, 2025, <https://louisville.edu/provost/student-success/student-success>.

Detailed information on student experiences was actively managed in real time and integrated with advising and communication systems designed to inform and keep students on track. We found at all four case-study institutions and systems significant investments in technology and user training. All four institutions used a software platform that managed enrollment data and allowed administrators, faculty, and other staff to communicate with and advise students. They used a variety of other data systems for scheduling courses and other administrative functions. Several mentioned the growing pains of transitioning from one data system to another and the ongoing need for training of end users. All noted that data were essential to informing their strategies.

GSU is a recognized leader in student-success practices, and in 2020 founded NISS to respond to interest from other institutions in learning from and using its approaches. Over 500 institutions have visited NISS. Timothy Renick, executive director of NISS, recounted his experience developing a set of key indicators to trigger interventions with students to keep them on track. He expected to find a handful of metrics and ended up with hundreds. GSU employs predictive analytics



in an automated system that communicates the right message to the right students at the right time, and triggers outreach from advisers as well. Texting is typically used for communicating with students, and messages are targeted to those who need the information, not broadcast to all students. This is part of a multi-pronged approach that includes intensive freshman programs, meta majors (custom majors that combine elements from multiple degree programs) and guided degree pathways, holistic advising, targeted financial aid, course improvements to reduce DFWI rates, and more. Graduation rates have improved dramatically at GSU, increasing by 22 percentage points since 2003.

RELATED RESOURCE

For more information about metrics for student access and success, see *Understanding Enrollment Management: A Guide for College and University Board Members* by Don Hossler and Jerome A. Lucido (AGB, 2020).

Policy-Level Solutions: When the Institution Is Part of the Problem

GSU is guided by NISS's principles, central among them looking at ways in which the institution is the problem. Renick finds that institutions often know what they should be doing but lack integrated, campuswide solutions at scale. His advice is: (1) Lead with data, the coin of the realm in academia; (2) Focus on systems, including administrative processes, not faculty; (3) Do not wait for "x" to happen—there are always reasons to delay; and (4) Use pilots and have a plan to scale what works. In the current policy environment, Renick advises that you can attain more equitable outcomes without targeting efforts by race. Student-success efforts should be available to and will benefit all students and will show even more dramatic increases in retention and graduation for the most vulnerable students.



The NISS “Pillars of Success” are proactive advising, structured first-year support, academic design and support, financial wellness, outreach and communications, career-oriented learning, and data. Its work is based on three core principles:

- Institutions inadvertently hinder their students’ success through policies, practices, and structures that are among the key drivers of student attrition and equity gaps.
- Institutions can use data to identify and to understand these institutionally created barriers to completion.
- Institutions can deploy data to create more effective systems and produce stronger and more equitable enrollment, retention, and graduation outcomes.²⁹

In other words, colleges and universities need to examine and change their own policies and practices when these create barriers to student success. Although there are common problems and solutions, each institution must understand its own students’ challenges and establish priorities.

In a recent collaboration between the Gardner Institute and AGB, funded by the Ascendium Education Foundation, the two organizations conducted a project that combined long-term board education and development efforts with intensive data mining and analysis to bring about institutional transformation for equitable student success. The project produced a playbook, and among the key takeaways were these four barriers to progress on student success:

1. Turnover of leadership and board members is a challenge to continuing and sustaining the work.
2. Lack of buy-in and trust among different roles on campus is a challenge to advancing the work.
3. Institutions need guidance and concrete examples of successful implementation of strategies that foster equitable student success.
4. Many board members approach the issue of equitable student success with entrenched deficit mindsets.³⁰



It was clear that the four institutions in our case-study research—and other leading practitioners in student success—have dealt with these four challenges successfully. We think this contributed to their progress and their status as leaders in expanding student success. Here are ways they addressed these four challenges:

1. **Their leadership included long-serving board members, presidents, and cabinet members who maintained a focus on student success, even as inevitable changes in leadership occurred.** New chief executives were charged with advancing student success and brought experiences that contributed to forward movement. This included a long-serving board chair who previously oversaw K-12 education in the city, a system head who led another institution in the system and had previously served in another presidency, and a president who served previously as a board member and K-12 education commissioner for the state. These were leaders who contributed to solving problems.

RELATED RESOURCE

More information about the powerful role board chairs can play in promoting student success is available in Jeffrey B. Trammell's *Effective Board Chairs: A Guide for University and College Chairs* (AGB, 2016).

2. **There was a clear sense of working together purposefully among cabinet members and between boards and institutional leaders.** Each president also set an expectation that cabinet members would work collaboratively to support student success. We heard things from cabinet members such as, “no silos,” “that’s what the president expects,” “that’s how we do things here,” and “student success is everyone’s job.” Faculty leaders were also collaborators. Mutual respect and ultimate commitment to students set the tone.
3. **There was expert guidance on what works and how to employ the tools available through sophisticated data analytics.** Presidents and boards established goals and priorities and provided resources to make key changes. Enrollment management was supported structurally by board committees, cabinet-level vice



presidents, and institutionwide data systems. Outside experts were brought in as consultants. Systems used their ability to convene communities of practice to pilot and scale new approaches and offered funds as incentives. Institutionwide solutions were employed at scale.

4. **Boards organized their work for student success and invested time in learning about real student challenges and experiences.** There were methods to receive regular student input. Boards and presidents looked for ways to change their institutions to address student needs and did not view students as the problem. One president, dealing with issues during the pandemic, created a student problem-solving group and charged it with bringing ideas for solutions along with problems to monthly meetings. Others heard from student government leaders or student trustees at board meetings, adding personal stories to data to make a compelling case about needs. Each of our case-study institutions enrolled a student population with higher-than-average percentages of Pell Grant recipients, first-generation college students, and underrepresented minorities. This was a point of pride among leaders of these institutions and inspired their service. They wanted their students to succeed and their communities to thrive. They understood the challenges of being poor, working while going to college, family obligations, and unfamiliarity with college, and they sought to make over their institutions to meet these needs.



LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLES

AGB developed a “Board Responsibility for Equitable Student-Success” toolkit that includes a set of leadership principles to guide boards in fulfilling their responsibility for equitable student success (see excerpt).

“Equitable student success is intrinsic to the mission and essential for the financial stability and reputation of the institution. The greater the number of students who succeed, the more efficiently the university operates. Demonstrating the value of higher education and return on investment is more important than ever. This includes increasing the number of students who succeed in college. If students earn a higher education credential, they are better prepared for work and better able to pay off debt. Moreover, they remain favorably connected to the institution. There are associated costs for each student who does not succeed—for students, the institution, and society. Current levels of student success fall short, particularly for the most vulnerable populations whether they attend community colleges or the most selective Ivy League institutions. Boards are accountable for equitable student success through their fiduciary duties of loyalty, care, and obedience.

What does it take for boards to transform institutions for equitable student success? These leadership principles can guide the governing board in exercising consistent oversight, inspiring change, and sustaining this long-term effort.

1. Equitable student success is possible only with the intentional collaboration of key stakeholders.
2. Equitable student success is transformational. Transformation requires board engagement.
3. Equitable student success is mission critical and strategy-centric.
4. Equitable student success requires the board’s commitment to continuous learning.
5. Equitable student success must be data informed across the institution.
6. Equitable student success must be uniquely overseen by the board to address the culture, climate, and aspirations of each institution.
7. Equitable student success requires the board to examine its policies and practices with an equity lens.
8. Equitable student success leverages a process of continual improvement.”

Excerpted from AGB, “Leadership Principles,” October 2022, https://agb.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/AGB_LEADERSHIP_PRINCIPLES_ESS_OCTOBER2022.pdf.



Understanding Today's College Students

Students today are different from those who attended college when many trustees were students themselves 30, 40, or 50 years ago. The image of a residential college, with full-time undergraduates, 18 to 22 years old, earning a degree in four years has been replaced with the reality of a more varied cohort of students who have other responsibilities, including jobs and children, who take longer to complete degrees, attend more than one college, and have more limited financial resources to pay for college. (See Figure 1, “Today’s College Students.”)

FIGURE 1: Today's College Students

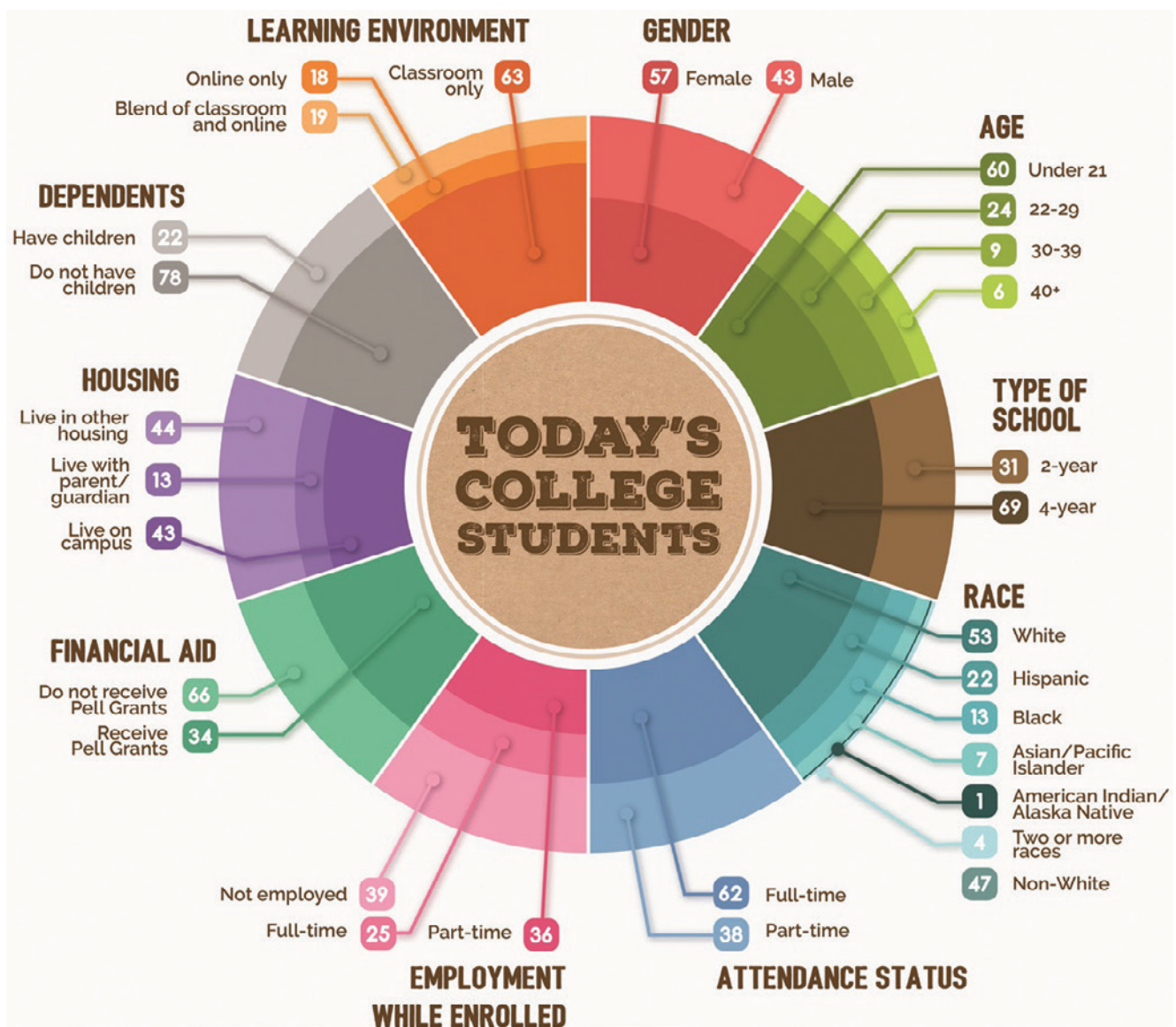


Photo Credit: Gates Foundation.³¹

Understanding your students and their needs is key to unlocking the secrets for student success. This is essential for identifying barriers and addressing student needs holistically. Case-study institutions used a holistic, whole-person approach to support student success. They considered barriers such as food insecurity, housing insecurity, emergency financial needs, exhausted financial aid, transportation costs, childcare, mental health, sense of belonging, and other human needs.

Their policies and practices were informed by actively listening to student voices to understand their experiences and develop solutions responsive to their needs. They used teams of advisers (academic, career, mental health, and financial) to address related needs holistically. They also recognized that time and money matter. On-campus employment, for example, enabled students to work and learn. Free transportation between campuses facilitated getting to class. They removed financial barriers such as application fees and holds on registration.



MISSION, STRATEGY, AND DATA

Equitable student success is mission critical and strategy-centric.

Equity is not just a moral imperative; it is also a business imperative. Colleges and universities must be inclusive communities, enabling individuals to thrive intellectually, socially, ethically, emotionally, financially, spiritually, and physically. Boards must establish the value of and motivation for equity in order for this work to be sustainable. This includes applying an equity lens to budget decisions and strategic priorities to ensure resource decisions advance equity goals.

Boards should assess indicators of current and future institutional performance, aligning equity goals with strategic plans and resources. Raising retention and completion rates, improving campus climate, ensuring basic student needs, preparing students for success in a global community, serving the changing student demographic population, upholding the relevance and value of credentials, serving our communities, and engaging in cutting-edge research are all tied to winning strategies for equitable student success, long-term institutional vitality, and mission fulfillment. . . .

Determining what data are needed for strategic insights and oversight is an essential element of board work. Balancing the need to examine success for different groups and keep board engagement at a strategic level takes discipline and respect for the roles of the board, president, and administration. A unique contribution of boards is asking probing questions that frame issues in search of solutions. Boards that micromanage rather than macrogovern will get lost in the weeds.

Excerpted from AGB, “Board Responsibility for Equitable Student Success: Leadership Principles,” 2022, <https://agb.org/student-success-initiatives/board-oversight-of-equitable-student-success/leadership-principles/>.







FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings from the Case Studies

The findings of this study, which examined the role that governing boards and their policies and practices play in advancing improved student outcomes, confirm a common set of conditions and several key practices related to student success.

Common Conditions

The higher education environment in the states where the case-study institutions are located is shaped significantly by the attitudes of state governors and legislatures toward higher education. Fundamental to this viewpoint remains the question of whether higher education is regarded as a public good or a private benefit, and whether reinvestment in education can be sustained given the nation's growing debt.³² The stance taken by state leaders can either impede or support institutions in advancing their mission.

When board members and administrators were asked about state and federal policies that had most effectively supported student success, leaders at CSUSB, Hostos Community College, and Kean University highlighted state-supported grant and scholarship programs. These policies expanded access and strengthened support services that are essential to students as they progress through college. Importantly, many of these programs are designed to benefit the students who comprise a large percentage of these institutions' enrollment: historically underserved students and those who are the first in their families to attend college. Leaders at PVAMU pointed to the Texas Success Initiative, which supports initiatives to ensure that students are ready for college-level coursework before enrolling.

Board members and administrators consistently emphasized that cultivating



strong relationships and maintaining open lines of communication with law-makers and political leaders is essential to sustaining these policies. Governing boards can and do play a pivotal role in this work, including those of institutionally related foundations. As AGB stresses, board members are powerful advocates who serve as ambassadors for their institutions and for higher education more broadly.³³

In response to questions about roles and responsibilities of governing boards, board members and institutional leaders demonstrated strong alignment in their understanding of their potential impact on advancing student access and success. Both groups consistently emphasized the board's responsibility for general oversight of the institution and its role in setting strategic priorities through strategic planning, adoption of institutional policies and regulations, and accountability of leadership for achieving institutional goals.

Importantly, participants identified specific board actions and practices that directly contribute to institutional improvement in student success. These included:

- Approving and supporting the creation of new administrative structures designed to advance student success and achievement;
- Allocating funding for student-success initiatives; and
- Endorsing the review and implementation of policies aimed at removing barriers to access and completion.

A complete list of the key student-success practices employed by these institutions is described in more detail in the following section.

Ten Key Practices for Student Success

Across the institutions studied, a common set of conditions and promising practices emerged as foundational to advancing student success:

- 1. Relevant and extensive leadership experience:** Governing boards, systems, and president's cabinets had among them people with deep knowledge of education at secondary and postsecondary levels and successful leadership experiences that informed their work.



2. **Student success as the main thing:** Leaders repeatedly emphasized that student success is not “one priority among many” but the central organizing principle of their institutions. Governing boards, presidents, and cabinets embedded student success in strategic plans, key performance indicators, budget priorities, and communications. Leadership at every level—state coordinating boards, system and institutional governing boards, foundations, system administration, presidents, cabinets, faculty, and staff—demonstrated alignment around a shared commitment to student success.
3. **Culture of collaboration:** Presidents established a clear expectation that cabinet members work together across divisions, breaking down silos to solve problems collectively. Student success was everyone’s responsibility. Team successes were celebrated and recognized, reinforcing a culture of collaboration and accountability.
4. **Data-driven decision-making:** Student-success efforts were informed by integrated, institutionwide data systems that guided strategic planning and day-to-day operations. Data systems provided real-time information to inform and trigger communication with students. Boards periodically received and reviewed key data on student-success metrics. Investments were made in training users and updating systems to constantly improve information and its use.
5. **Identification and removal of barriers:** Institutions actively identified and addressed barriers that prevented student enrollment, persistence, and completion. Institutions adjusted structures, policies, and services to meet the needs of today’s students rather than expecting students to conform to outdated models.
6. **Deep knowledge of students:** Colleges demonstrated strong awareness of their student demographics and lived realities. Many students were working adults, first-generation, financially vulnerable, and parents. Leaders described their students, in the words of one, as being “one flat tire away from dropping out.” Leaders regularly sought and responded to student input in shaping institutional policies and practices. Student organizations or representatives had a voice in policies and practices.
7. **Holistic student-support models:** Institutions viewed personal needs as academic needs, addressing mental health, food insecurity, housing, clothing, finances, and childcare needs alongside coursework and advising. Systematic approaches supported students in making timely program and career decisions. Strategies reflected a whole-person approach. Advising was typically team oriented.



8. **Community connection:** Success strategies were tied to local partnerships and community engagement, recognizing that institutions and students thrive in broader ecosystems. Connections with foundation board members, employers, and community leaders provided internships, mentors, employment, scholarships, and other support.
9. **Mission-driven focus:** Presidents consistently referenced their institution's mission as the driver of student-success strategies, reinforcing that inclusive excellence and completion goals are inseparable from institutional purpose.
10. **Institutional definitions of student success:** Institutions defined student success in ways that reflected their mission and student population. For example:
 - CSU focused on enrollment growth and graduation rates, and eliminating gaps in student success.
 - CSUSB emphasized improving the student experience.
 - Hostos highlighted supporting students' personal goals and employment outcomes.
 - CUNY centered on increasing enrollment and completion rates and meeting workforce needs in the city and state.
 - Prairie View adopted a highly personalized approach, tailoring support to individual aspirations.
 - Kean University defined student success by supporting a positive and full collegiate experience that prepares students for their future, focusing on academic support, fostering a sense of belonging, and developing a strong foundation of well-being through social connection, financial literacy, and spiritual wellness.

As Kemal Atkins notes in “Advancing Student Success for Governing Boards” in *A Guide to Strategic Board Retreats in Higher Education* (AGB, 2025), student success must be understood as an institutional priority requiring both structural commitment and cultural alignment. Boards and presidents are most effective when they reinforce a unified vision, dismantle barriers, and adapt institutional systems to support today's students.³⁴



Recommendations

1. Engage Governing Boards as Strategic Partners.

- Leverage board oversight to drive accountability and commitment.
- Deploy senior administrators as staff liaisons to board committees, with expectations of mutual trust, clarity of roles, integrity, and effective communication.
- Establish board committees that allow holistic approaches to challenges such as student success or student experience committees.
- Consider joint board committee meetings to facilitate holistic policies and planning. Encourage attendance at committee meetings by other board and cabinet members to gain their input and perspectives.
- Regularly share reports containing disaggregated student data with the board, accompanied by analysis for improved understanding.
- Provide institution and foundation board members, as well as the president's cabinet, with educational sessions and resources on student needs, inclusive excellence, student-success metrics, and exemplary approaches to improve student outcomes. Inspire change based on leading development of best practices.
- Regularly include speakers who can share student experiences and inform the institution and foundation boards about changing student needs, community needs, and state and local workforce trends.
- Encourage board members to attend important campus events and show their support for the president in difficult times as well as in celebration of success.

“Student success cannot be delegated solely to academic affairs or student affairs—it requires consistent oversight and engagement from governing boards.”

Kemal M. Atkins³⁵

2. Focus on Affordability and Access.

- Expand financial assistance strategies (for example, emergency grants, last-dollar scholarships for students who have exhausted all other forms of financial aid).



- Strengthen recruitment pipelines from underrepresented populations.
- Adopt flexible tuition payment structures to reduce stop-outs due to financial barriers.
- Eliminate financial barriers such as application fees or holds on registration to enable students to enroll and progress, supported with financial advising and emergency aid.
- Pursue state-level policy and funding support for expanding enrollment for certificates and degrees to meet workforce demand for important economic, health, and welfare needs.

3. Implement Retention and Student-Success Strategies Focused on Inclusive Excellence.

“Institutions must be intentional in redesigning structures to meet students where they are, not where tradition has left them.”

Kemal M. Atkins³⁶

- Form cross-functional task forces on campus using retention performance management or similar platforms.
- Set and track inclusive excellence goals disaggregated by cohort (race/ethnicity, first-generation, Pell Grant status, academic program, transfer status).
- Redesign advising models, early-alert systems, and course scheduling and sequencing to proactively support persistence.

4. Use Data to Inform Continuous Improvement.

- Develop visual dashboards and reports to track student progress and highlight equitable outcomes.

“If you don’t have the proper frame of how you want to approach and use the data it is relatively useless.”

Aashir Nasim, PhD, provost, PVAMU

- Disaggregate data by student demographics, academic program, and campus engagement.
- Eliminate data silos; integrate academic, student affairs, and financial data across the institution; invest in improvements and train end users of data systems.
- Link data insights to strategic planning and resource allocation.



5. Elevate and Amplify the Student Voice.

- Create standing opportunities for students to provide input into policies, programs, and services.
- Include students as collaborative partners with administrators in designing solutions to challenges.

Call to Action

As we observed earlier in this report, the practices that lead to improved student success are not a mystery. This study

affirms that college governing boards have a critical role to play in the oversight of and impact on student success. Student success is inseparable from the mission of higher education institutions. When boards place the mission at the center of their deliberations and decisions, they create the conditions for administrators, faculty, and staff to align their work with the institution's ultimate purpose: enabling students to learn, persist, and thrive.

The fiduciary responsibilities of governing boards extend beyond financial stewardship. Boards are not only accountable for the financial health and sustainability of their institutions, but also for shaping campus culture and climate. This broader understanding of governance emphasizes that oversight of student success is not ancillary to the board's role, but central to it.

During a recent AGB project with institutions in Kentucky, we asserted that if board members embraced the *Principles of Trusteeship* (AGB, 2021) and acted collectively, they would be well on their way to having a positive impact on student success. The *Principles of Trusteeship* call on boards to:

- Understand governance as a collective responsibility.
- Lead by example with integrity and accountability.

“Kean University’s President’s Advisory Council (PAC) was created in the fall of 2020 by President Repollet. PAC is a roundtable of student leaders from across campus who bring a wide range of experiences, viewpoints, and backgrounds to provide the president and his administration with direct input and feedback regarding concerns and solutions around the university.”

*Kean University PAC*³⁷



- Remain mission-focused in all decision-making.
- Steward resources responsibly for long-term vitality.
- Champion inclusive excellence.
- Commit to continuous learning about higher education and the institution they serve.

For boards to realize this vision, several steps are essential. They must begin with an honest assessment of their own performance, reflecting on how effectively they fulfill their fiduciary responsibilities. They should also examine whether their composition provides the thought, talent, and influence necessary to understand and address the realities facing today's students. Boards must be intentional about learning who their students are, the challenges they face, and the support they need to succeed. In a recent *Trusteeship* article about how boards can help improve student success, Sara Goldrick-Rab said, "I encourage college leaders to start with curiosity and ask better questions. Seek information about how students are really experiencing your institution and pay close attention to the experiences of people who are not currently engaging with or succeeding there." Rab encourages institutional leaders to use these data to inform their decisions and to ensure that institutional policies address "students' human needs, promote their health, and undergird their financial well-being so they can focus on academics."³⁸

Frameworks such as John Kotter's 8-Step Process for Leading Change³⁹ are important tools for colleges and universities because they provide a clear, structured approach for guiding transformation in complex institutional environments. Change in higher education is hard. It often requires strong vision and leadership, and an intentional approach to building urgency, creating coalitions, communicating strategically, and institutionalizing innovative practices. Kotter's and other similar models offer roadmaps that help leaders sequence these steps in ways that inspire action and maintain momentum. Paul Friga writes that the optimal approach to strategic planning today is "faster, simpler, stronger,"⁴⁰ which in the context of student success is critical because the conditions and issues that impede student success must be addressed by urgent and swift action.

It is essential that institutions and their boards conduct an honest self-assessment. Jim Collins argues that "through confronting the brutal facts of an organization's reality" it can make the "right decisions" that lead to better outcomes.⁴¹ Boleman and



Deal's Four Frame Model, which examines organizations through structural, human resource, political, and symbolic lenses, can help leaders gain a more holistic understanding of institutional strengths, weaknesses, culture, power, and authority.⁴² When coupled with frameworks such as Kotter's 8-Step process, higher education leaders and board members can be equipped to not only design and implement change effectively but also assess the institutional context in which change is taking place. Further, these frameworks can help inspire movement, address resistance, and sustain transformational efforts that improve institutional performance and student success.

Finally, boards must identify and regularly review meaningful student-success metrics to ensure that their decisions are informed by evidence and aligned with mission.

By embracing these practices, governing boards can move beyond narrow measures of institutional health toward a holistic vision of success—one in which fiscal responsibility, stewardship of mission, and student achievement are interdependent. In doing so, boards not only strengthen their institutions but also fulfill their highest responsibility: advancing the success of every student they serve.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BOARD MEMBERS, PRESIDENTS, AND CHANCELLORS

The *AGB Board of Directors' Statement on Board Responsibility for the Oversight of College Completion* (AGB, 2016) is a useful resource that emphasizes that governing boards are accountable for ensuring that college completion, a measure of student success, is a top priority for the institution. While AGB's focus on *student success* has intensified over the last several years, it recognized almost a decade ago that governing boards, in collaboration with institutional leaders and faculty, play a vital role in advancing student success and ensuring that the institution accomplishes its mission. This statement underscores that role and provides a helpful checklist, included in this report, to aid board members in their oversight responsibility.

For more see *AGB Board of Directors' Statement on Board Responsibility for the Oversight of College Completion*, Washington, D.C.: AGB, 2016, 10–11.







CHECKLISTS FOR BOARDS AND CHIEF EXECUTIVES

CHECKLIST FOR BOARDS

- ❑ **Ensure that completion goals are set in the context of institutional mission.** Monitor progress toward goals regularly. Boards should not manage the processes for implementation of goals, but they should evaluate the results.
- ❑ **Ask questions about the institution's strategies to help ensure that students complete their degrees or credentials in a timely fashion.** Ask whether institutional resources—people and funding—are being appropriately deployed to support completion goals.
- ❑ **Include progress on completion goals in the president's or chancellor's annual assessment.** Hold the president and senior administrators accountable for established goals related to completion and for implementation of effective policies and practices to enhance completion efforts.
- ❑ **Allocate time on board and committee agendas to discuss institutional and public policy issues regarding college completion, as well as related opportunities and challenges.**
- ❑ **Ensure boards are structured to prioritize student success, with means that sustain commitment through chief executive or chief academic officer transitions.**
- ❑ **Designate one or more board committees to review completion efforts and results.** Ensure that committees report to the board regularly on their findings. The full board should review data and engage in conversations about student access, retention, and completion.

- ❑ **Insist on board-level summaries of institutional data on student progress toward certificates and degrees, retention rates, and student-transfer and dropout rates.** Regularly benchmark performance against that of peer institutions and top-performing institutions, with an eye toward identifying best practices that can be implemented at the institution.
- ❑ **Include educational quality in board discussions of completion.** Monitor progress toward goals for student-learning outcomes.

Excerpted from *AGB Board of Directors' Statement on Board Responsibility for the Oversight of College Completion*, Washington, D.C.: AGB, 2016, 11.



CHECKLIST FOR CHIEF EXECUTIVES

- ❑ Engage the board in discussions of the mission and values of the institution, the student body the institution serves, and the institution's commitment to completion.
- ❑ Develop a context-specific definition of student success tailored to the institution's mission and the diverse needs of the student population that it serves.
- ❑ Collaborate with the senior staff and board to establish clear goals for college-completion efforts that serve as benchmarks for the institution and as targets for performance assessments and accountability.
- ❑ Ensure that orientation programs for new board members highlight the board's responsibility for the oversight of educational quality and college completion among the full set of responsibilities.
- ❑ Provide the board with meaningful board-level data and dashboard indicators related to student-retention and completion rates. Include data disaggregated by race/ethnicity, gender, family income, organizational involvement, and other categories that are appropriate for the institution. Include information about transfer students and articulation agreements with partner institutions. Engage the board in regular conversations about this information.
- ❑ Track and report trend data on debt, earnings, and additional educational attainment of graduates by program of study.
- ❑ Update the board on progress on goals from the last institutional accreditation visit related to student success.
- ❑ Ensure that there is a focus on high-quality degrees and credentials, not just *more* degrees and credentials. Regularly provide information on student-learning outcomes and progress on improvement of educational quality.

Excerpted from *AGB Board of Directors' Statement on Board Responsibility for the Oversight of College Completion*, Washington, D.C.: AGB, 2016, 10.







QUESTIONS FOR BOARDS, CHIEF EXECUTIVES, AND STATE HIGHER EDUCATION POLICYMAKERS

QUESTIONS FOR BOARDS

- What is the makeup of the institution's student body? What is the mix of students from various nationalities and backgrounds—racial, socioeconomic, religious, and otherwise?
- Is the number of students applying and enrolling in the institution today increasing or declining? Among what groups—and why? What are the key needs of those different students, and is the institution meeting them?
- How many first-time students stay to graduate? How long does it take on average? What is the transfer rate? What are the retention and graduation rates by race, ethnicity, and gender? Have they been falling or rising?
- Has the board worked with the president and other top administrators to identify any key roadblocks students may confront in remaining at the institution and obtaining their degree—and how to work to remove those roadblocks?
- How much has tuition risen in the past five years, and how much might it rise in the near future? What is the average student debt for those who graduate, and what is the range? What is the average student debt for those who dropped out before completion of a degree?
- What percentage of students qualify for Pell Grants? How much institutional aid do we provide students, and what are our policies for providing

it? Should those policies be reconsidered and in what ways? If the institution is a private one, is the discounting strategy clear and sustainable?

- Is the board prepared to explain the value and importance of a college degree to key current and potential constituencies, including students and their parents, donors, policymakers, and the public?
- Is the board encouraging the president and senior administrators to focus on improving the student experience and meeting the needs of a changing student population? Is the board overseeing the institution in ways that encourage it to be innovative when it comes to student services and success?
- How is the board overseeing the institutional response to the dismantling of affirmative action in admissions? Is it ensuring the institution has developed a strategy to achieve inclusive excellence goals and help every enrolled student stay in college and obtain their degree? What processes and policies may the institution need to implement or change to ensure it is pursuing equitable student success?
- Are the board and president united in their vision for market-responsive educational outcomes for all students? Are the board, president, and other institutional administrators discussing the best ways to offer more career-related programs and infuse job-related skills into more traditional disciplines, like those in the liberal arts? Does the board understand the current curriculum, including elements of work-readiness and career-readiness?

Excerpted from “Student Success, the Student Experience, and Campus Inclusion,” in *Top Strategic Issues for Boards 2024–2025*, (Washington, D.C.: AGB, 2024), 37.



QUESTIONS FOR CHIEF EXECUTIVES

- Are all our students—across race, income, first-generation status, and gender—equally likely to persist, graduate, and thrive after graduation?
- Where do inclusive excellence gaps exist, and what specific strategies are we using to close them?
- How do we define “student success” beyond graduation rates (for example, a sense of belonging, career-readiness, civic engagement, earnings, advanced degrees)?
- Do we have timely, actionable data on retention, progression, completion, and post-graduate outcomes?
- How often do we disaggregate student-success data, and how is it used to inform decisions?
- How do we measure the impact of key initiatives on both student learning and student well-being?
- What investments yield the greatest impact on student success, and are we scaling them?
- How do students experience our institution—academically, socially, and financially—and where are the pressure points?
- Are we listening to student voices in shaping our strategies?
- Are our budgets, staffing, and structures aligned with our stated commitment to student success?
- How are we engaging employers, alumni, and community partners to enhance student-success outcomes?
- Are our academic programs aligned with the skills and opportunities students need for the future of work? Are our academic programs aligned with future regional and state workforce needs?
- What innovations (in technology, pedagogy, partnerships) are most likely to improve long-term student success?



QUESTIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

- Who is enrolling in our colleges, and who is being left out?
- Are students able to afford college without excessive debt, and do they have access to the supports needed to persist?
- Are students completing their degrees or credentials on time, and where are the points of greatest attrition?
- Do outcomes (retention, graduation, employment) differ by race, income, first-generation status, or geography—and what policies are in place to close those gaps?
- Are students gaining the knowledge, skills, and competencies that align with workforce and civic needs?
- What public policies are needed to address workforce gaps in critical areas of need?
- Are graduates finding meaningful employment, upward mobility, and civic engagement opportunities that justify their investment in higher education?
- How are colleges being held accountable for student success, and how are state or federal funds tied to outcomes?
- How has public funding for higher education affected the average price of college for students?
- Are higher education, K-12, workforce, and community systems aligned to create sustainable pipelines for student success?



FOUR CASE STUDIES WITH DETAILS







CASE STUDY:

CSU San Bernardino and California State University Board of Trustees



The following case study is based on interviews and information collected in 2025, unless noted otherwise.

Description of the Institution

California State University, San Bernardino [CSUSB] is a preeminent center of intellectual and cultural activity in inland Southern California. Opened in 1965 and set at the foothills of the beautiful San Bernardino Mountains, the university serves more than 20,000 students each year and graduates about 4,000 students annually.

CSUSB reflects the dynamic diversity of the region and has the most diverse student population of any university in the Inland Empire, and it has the second highest African American and Hispanic enrollments of all public universities in California. 70 percent of those who graduate are the first in their families to do so.

The university offers more than 70 traditional baccalaureate and master's degree programs, education credential and certificate programs, and a doctoral program. In recent years, CSUSB added its first doctorate (educational leadership), engineering program (computer science and engineering), and MFA programs in creative writing and studio art/design. Every CSUSB academic program that is eligible has earned national accreditation. The university also is home to the California Professor of the Year (Stuart Sumida).

The university has an annual statewide economic impact of more than half a billion dollars, along with more than \$32 million in yearly statewide tax revenue.

Excerpted from CSUSB, "About CSUSB," accessed August 27, 2025, <https://www.csusb.edu/about-csusb>.



Mission, Purpose, Students Served

Vision: CSUSB is a model for transforming lives.

Mission Statement: At CSUSB, we promote each other's growth and success and enhance the vitality of our region through active learning, effective mentoring, impactful scholarship, and civic engagement. We cultivate the professional, ethical, and intellectual development of our diverse students, faculty, and staff so they thrive and make positive contributions to our globally connected society.

Core Values: P.A.C.K.

- **Progress:** Innovation, sustainability, and integrity are essential components of our commitment to students, faculty, staff, and community members. We are responsible stewards of the university and the environment and are dedicated to sustainable growth and development.
- **Access:** We are committed to our student population and fostering their success. We recognize that equitable access to information, research, experiences, and resources is vital to a positive educational environment, thriving athletics, and extracurricular activities. We believe in transparency, eliminating barriers, and empowering each other so everyone may fully participate in gaining knowledge and derive the greatest benefits from university life.
- **Community:** We are actively engaged in contributing to our region and committed to the social mobility of our students and community members. We value justice and equity in all that we do, and work collaboratively to be inclusive in achieving collective and individual goals.
- **Kindness:** We recognize, respect, and value each member of the campus community, and treat everyone with kindness and compassion. We are invested in the academic, economic, social, emotional, psychological, and physical well-being of our students and campus colleagues. We believe a healthy university is one in which we all thrive.

Excerpted from CSUSB, "Vision, Mission & Core Values," accessed August 27, 2025, <https://www.csusb.edu/strategic-plan/vision-mission-core-values>.



Description of the Board and System

The CSU Board of Trustees is required by state law to have 25 voting members. Five serve ex officio: the governor, lieutenant governor, speaker of the assembly, state superintendent of public instruction, and the chancellor. Sixteen members are appointed by the governor and confirmed by the state senate; they serve eight-year terms. Additionally, the governor appoints two student trustees chosen from nominees of the California State Student Association, who serve staggered two-year terms; and a faculty trustee chosen from among nominees of the academic senate. Finally, the alumni association appoints one alumni trustee. The alumni and faculty trustees serve two-year terms.⁴³

The CSU system is made up of 23 institutions (transitioning to 22 in 2026)⁴⁴ serving more than 450,000 students and awarding more than 125,000 degrees annually.

The mission of [CSU] is:

- To advance and extend knowledge, learning, and culture, especially throughout California.
- To provide opportunities for individuals to develop intellectually, personally, and professionally.
- To prepare significant numbers of educated, responsible people to contribute to California's schools, economy, culture, and future.
- To encourage and provide access to an excellent education to all who are prepared for and wish to participate in collegiate study.
- To offer undergraduate and graduate instruction leading to bachelor's and higher degrees in the liberal arts and sciences, the applied fields, and the professions, including the doctoral degree when authorized.
- To prepare students for international, multicultural society.
- To provide public services that enrich the university and its communities.

California State University, "The Mission of the California State University," accessed August 27, 2025, <https://www.calstate.edu/csu-system/about-the-csu/Pages/mission.aspx>.



Description of the Governance Structure for Higher Education in the State

California has a unique structure for higher education, developed as the “California Master Plan” in 1960 that created three systems: University of California (research universities), CSU (comprehensive four-year colleges), and California Community Colleges (two-year degrees). There is no coordinating board in the state, but the systems, state and local government, and legislature take actions to coordinate. Direct transfer is one example, started as a pilot in Riverside County with the CSU system and scaled to the state through a bill which was pending the governor’s signature as of late September 2025.⁴⁵ This includes relationships among CSU campuses, local high schools, and community colleges. Another example was the development of a systemwide general education curriculum. The state legislature rejected a faculty recommendation for a separate general education curriculum for transfer students and prompted the system to create a single general education curriculum for all CSU students.⁴⁶



Leaders and Contributors to this Case Study

CSU San Bernardino, as of August 2025

Tomás D. Morales, president

David Dufault-Hunter, vice president, strategic enrollment management and marketing

Bryan Haddock, chief of staff and associate vice president

Katherine Hartley, deputy chief of staff

Rafik Mohamed, provost and vice president academic affairs

Robert J. Nava, vice president, university advancement and executive director, CSUSB Philanthropic Foundation; liaison for project

Paz Oliverez, vice president, student affairs

Robin Phillips, vice president, human resources

Samuel Sudhakar, CFO and vice president, finance, technology, and operations

Ray Watts, associate vice president for philanthropic giving

Monica Alejandre, secretary and associate vice president, advancement operations

Lou Monville, chair of the Advocacy Committee, CSUSB Philanthropic Foundation

Nefertiti Long, vice chair, CSUSB Philanthropic Foundation

Diego Rendon, president, Associated Students Inc; student trustee, CSUSB Philanthropic Foundation

CSU

Carson Fajardo, student trustee, CSU Board of Trustees; former president, Associated Students Inc; former student trustee, CSUSB Philanthropic Foundation

Andy Jones, executive vice chancellor and general counsel; secretary of the CSU Board of Trustees

Dilcie Perez, deputy vice chancellor academic and student affairs, CSU



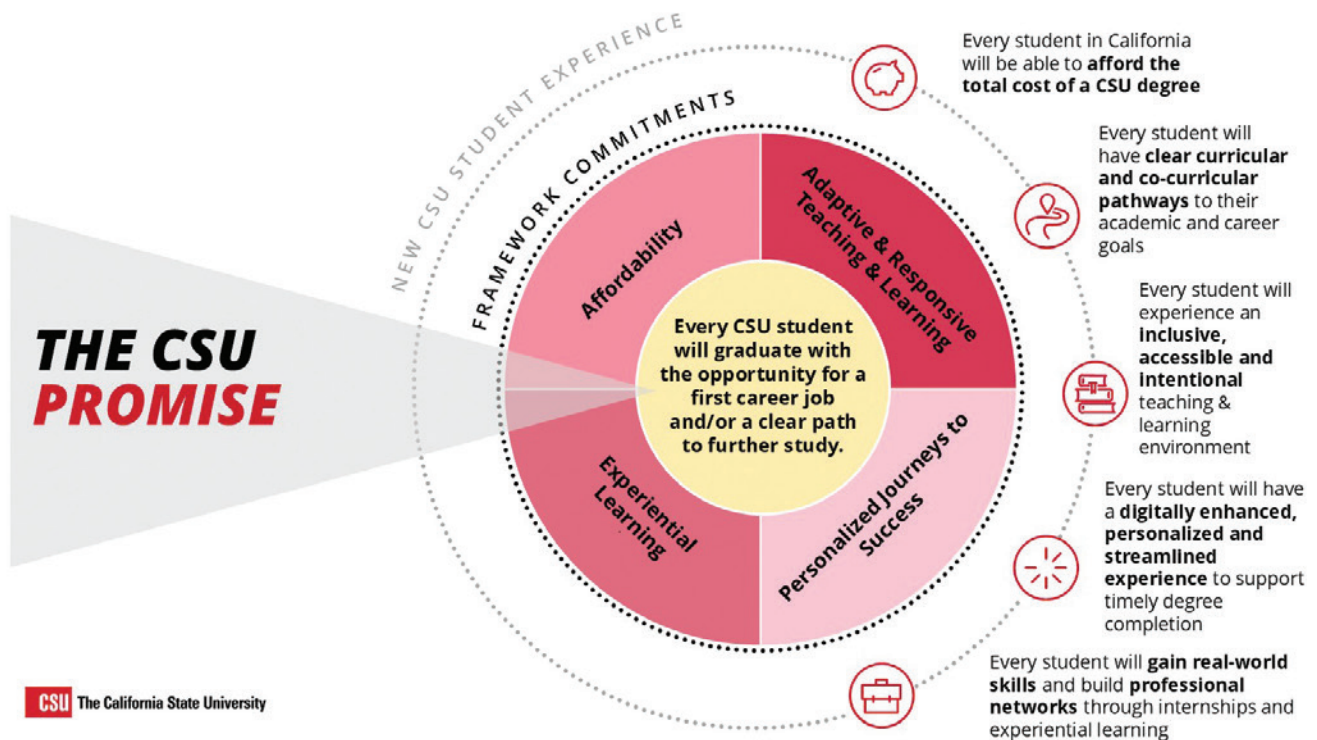
Strategic Plan Focused on Student Success

CSU used the 2024–2025 academic year for the “Year of Engagement” to research and develop a systemwide student-success framework. The new plan, CSU Forward, was launched in September 2025. This was also a “year of engagement” for the board, with agenda items on student success at each meeting. The presentation at the November 20–21, 2024, meeting of the CSU board’s committee on educational policy emphasized the importance of increasing persistence of students and graduation rates. Key metrics and goals included increasing freshmen four-year and six-year graduation rates, graduation rates for transfer students, and eliminating the gap in these rates for Pell Grant recipients and historically underrepresented students. This is important in terms of the institution’s mission but also has financial impacts on graduates’ lifetime earnings, the state economy and tax revenue, and CSU’s funding.⁴⁷

The CSU educational policy committee’s presentation to the board on September 9, 2025, included a final report on the Year of Engagement and details for the Student Success Framework, including “The CSU Promise: New Student Experience” (see Figure 2), new metrics and goals, and an implementation strategy. Each metric is aligned with goals in the strategic plan (see details). In addition to continuing to track metrics on enrollment, retention, and graduation (disaggregated by student demographics), new outcome metrics and goals were introduced to measure performance for undergraduate students and postgraduation milestones (job placement, net cost of attendance, access and affordability, student satisfaction, experiential-learning participation rates, alumni engagement, and career earnings two years, five years, and ten years after graduation). The plan also includes strategies to identify and remove barriers in administrative practices and systemwide policies. Although there are ambitious system-level goals for each of the new and continued metrics, institutional goals will reflect the mission and student characteristics of each of the system’s 22 universities.⁴⁸

A partnership with Educational Testing Service was also announced at the September 9, 2025, board meeting, which will test a career-navigation tool for students’ career planning at seven CSU campuses. The goal is to implement the resource systemwide to support the promise that every graduate will have a first-career job or path to further study.⁴⁹



FIGURE 2: The CSU Promise

Credit: CSU Board of Trustees, “Year of Engagement: Student Success Report Framework, Final Report,” Power-Point Presentation, September 7–10, 2025.

The vision for the new CSU system’s strategic plan, “Advancing Higher Education’s Essential Value,” concludes with, “This plan establishes a multifaceted approach to mobilizing coordinated action with transparent accountability while holding firm to our vision that every student succeeds.” The plan includes these four objectives (explained in more detail):

1. Economic Mobility Engine
2. Sustainable Affordability
3. Employer of Choice
4. Statewide Impact

The plan also includes these five key performance indicators:

1. Value of the CSU Degree
2. Affordability and Access

3. Maximizing California's Investment
4. Premier Workplace
5. California's Competitive Advantage

How progress will be measured is detailed in the plan with three-year milestones set for each of the four performance objectives, with numerical goals.⁵⁰

The milestones for Objective 2: Sustainable Affordability are:

- **“Commit to student outcomes,”** with progress toward goals of 50 percent four-year graduation rates and 72 percent six-year graduation rates.
- **“Strengthen affordability,”** with the goal that 100 percent of students from families earning under \$75,000 graduate debt-free.
- **“Demonstrate operational efficiency,”** with implementation of systemwide shared services and infrastructure.
- **“Achieve funding equity,”** with advocacy for state funding equal to CSU's services and value.
- **“Create systemwide student access,”** with the goal of enabling 25 percent of students to access courses and programs online across the universities in the system.⁵¹

Strategies for student success emphasize the need to exploit the capabilities of the CSU system through collaboration among the system's 22 universities, as well as through technological advances, and systemwide data collection and analytics. Leadership to foster change and institutional transformation are part of the plan to ensure CSU's capacity to achieve the plan's goals, including enhancing policy and regulatory capacity.

As the system's plan states, “The future of California begins with thriving students. And thriving students begin with [CSU].”⁵²



CSUSB Strategic Plan 2023–2028

Goals:

- **Goal 1: Student Success**—Engage every CSUSB student in inclusive experiences that foster their curiosity and transform their lives and communities.
- **Goal 2: Faculty and Staff Success**—Attract and retain outstanding and dedicated staff and faculty by cultivating a safe environment where they thrive professionally and personally; in which their voices are represented; and which fosters impactful collaborative partnerships.
- **Goal 3: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion**—Advance an environment where every member of the university plays an active role in diversity, equity, and inclusion excellence through engagement, empowerment, education, and accountability.
- **Goal 4: Internationalization**—Elevate CSUSB as a global institution that provides inclusive and transformative international experiences for our students, faculty, and staff.

Excerpted from CSUSB, “Strategic Plan 2023–2028: Goals,” accessed August 27, 2025, <https://www.csusb.edu/strategic-plan/goals>.

The number one goal in the CSUSB strategic plan is student success. Outcomes for this goal include pedagogy in curricular and co-curricular experiences that is responsive and culturally relevant, enhancing individuals’ abilities to succeed as college students and lifelong learners, and enhancing their sense of belonging. Among the strategies to achieve these outcomes are identifying and removing barriers in institutional policies and practices, strategic enrollment management, facilitating access to resources, providing orientation and basic education for first-year and transfer students, mental health services, culturally relevant library resources, increased funding for summer credits, mentoring and outlines of course pathways, and collaboration across divisions to provide holistic services. Evident throughout the description of strategies is an awareness that the institution must change to meet student needs.

Key Data, Metrics, and Dashboards

CSUSB has a long record of successfully welcoming students into college, with strong second-year retention rates that consistently place it close to or above national norms for public universities. In the mid-2010s, CSUSB’s second-year retention exceeded 85 percent, well above the national average, and even today it



retains nearly 80 percent of students into their second year, which is comparable to the national benchmark for four-year public institutions. Within the CSU system, where the average is about 83 percent, CSUSB is performing competitively, especially given the distinctive demographics and needs of its student body.

Like other institutions, CSUSB has seen more modest retention into the third and fourth years, reflecting the broader challenges students face as they progress toward graduation. Even so, recent stabilization in the third-year and fourth-year trends suggests that the university's student success initiatives are helping to slow earlier declines. The story here is one of strength in helping students transition into college, coupled with new opportunities to extend that same level of support through the later years.

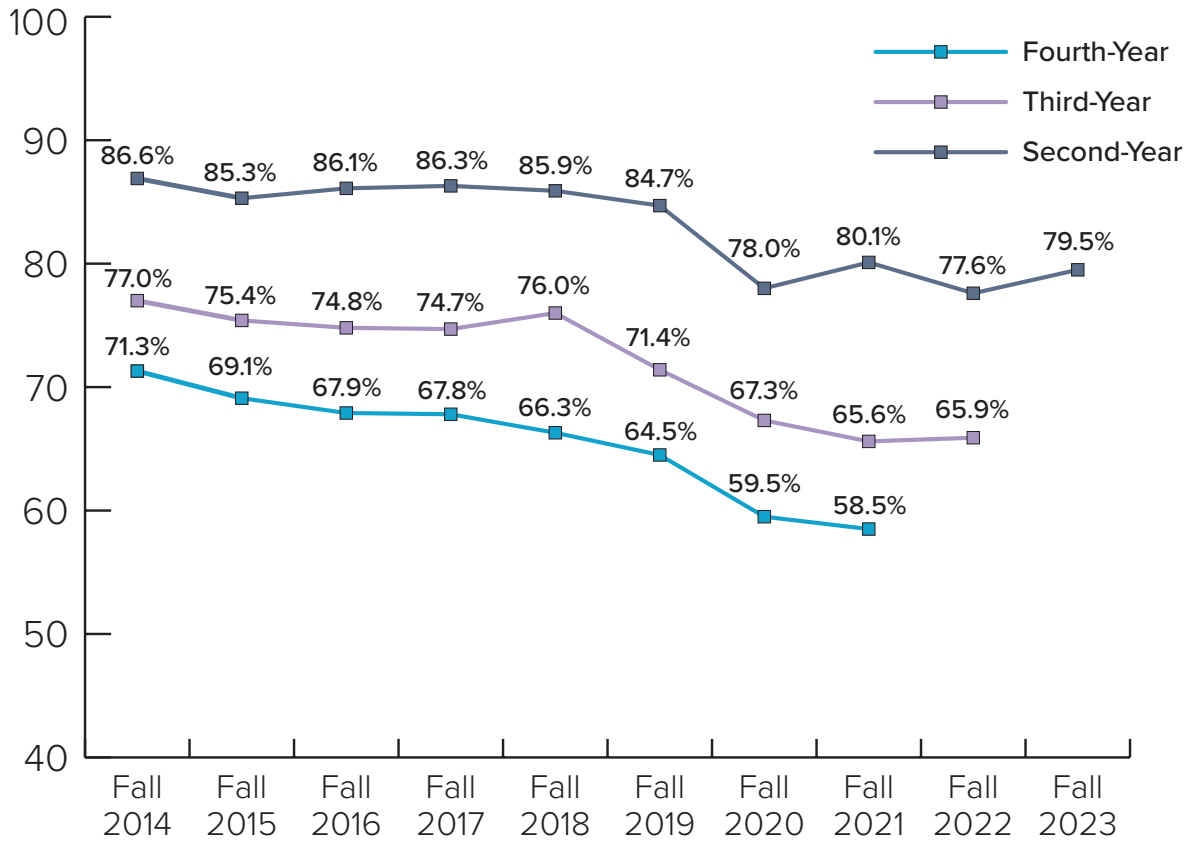
CSU has invested in data-management systems and requires regular submission of data on enrollment, retention, and graduation at four years and six years, disaggregated by student demographic characteristics and campus. President Morales said the CSUSB campus reports 55 metrics to the board on student success. Data are publicly available online and display longitudinal data starting in 2014, searchable by a variety of variables, by institution, with comparisons for selected institutions and totals for the system. CSU trend data on graduation and persistence are available back to 2000.

Data Dashboards are available online for:

- Applications and Admissions (for undergraduate and graduate students).
- Degrees Issued (by degree level and type).
- Enrollment (by level, discipline, campus, and student ethnicity).
- Graduation Rates (Full-time first-time freshmen, transfers, and continuing rates for science, technology, engineering, and math degrees).
- Labor Market Outcomes (employment and earnings of graduates by campus, major, degree level, transfer status, and year; trend data available for time intervals, years since degree, and earnings premium compared to high school graduates by student demographics, and by industry).
- Student Origin (public or private California high school, other source in California, or other/unknown).
- Teaching Credential Enrollment (students in teacher-preparation programs).
- Teaching Credential Issued (five-year trend data on new and renewed credentials).



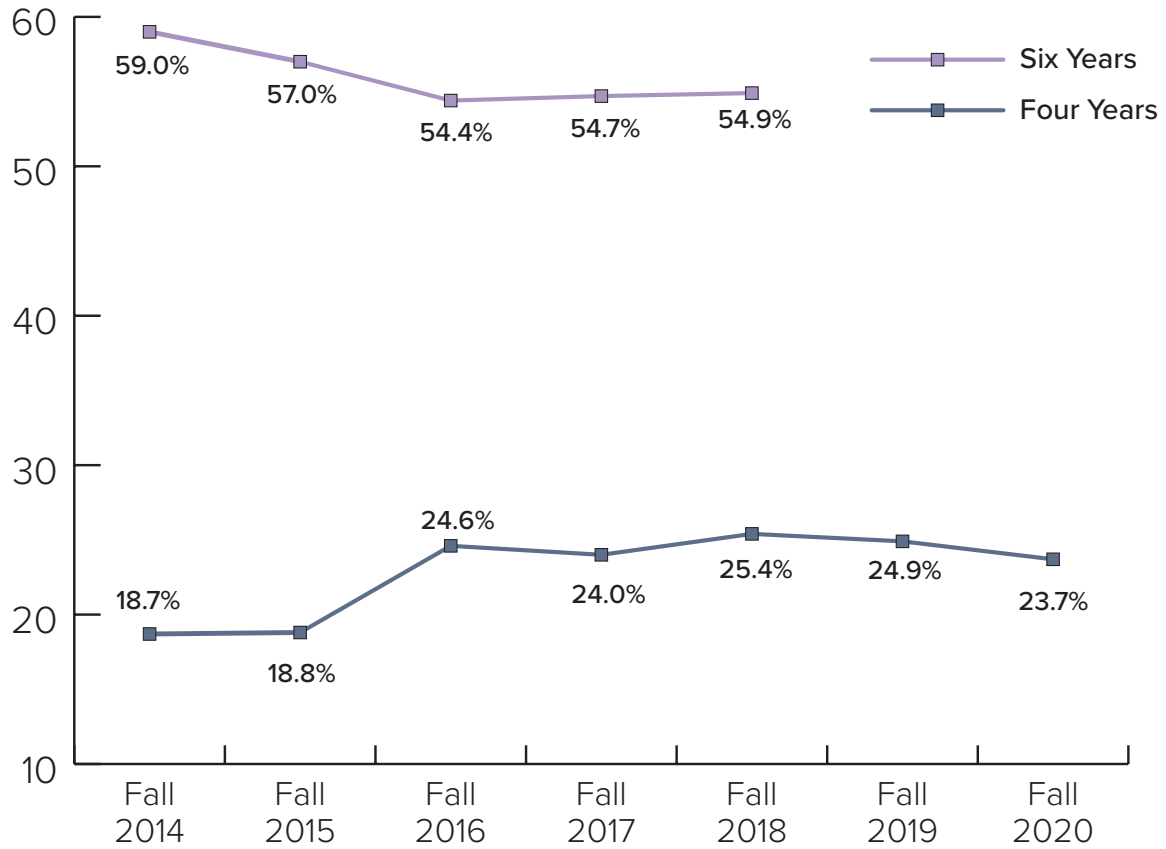
FIGURE 3: Full-time, First-time Freshmen Retention Rates by Cohort



Credit: CSUSB



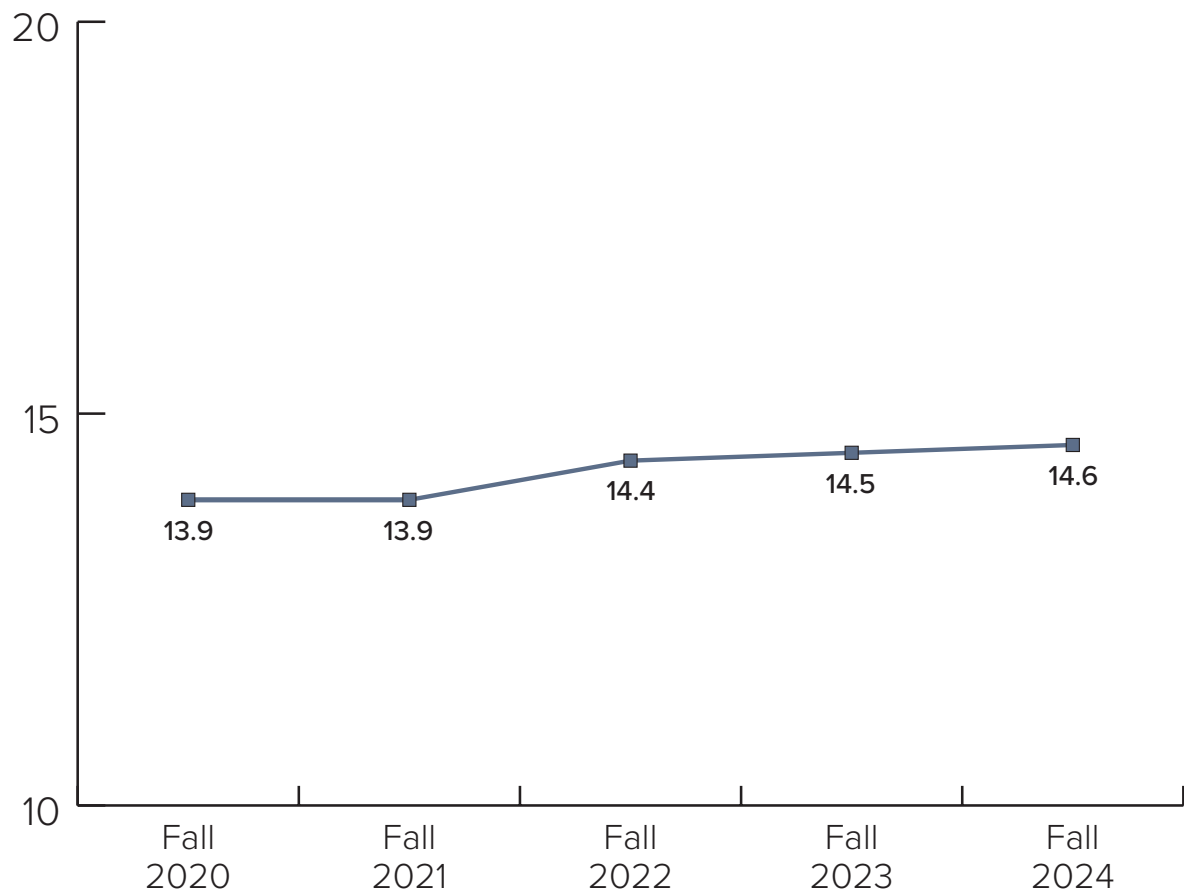
**FIGURE 4: Full-time, First-time Freshmen
Graduation Rates by Cohort**



Credit: CSUSB

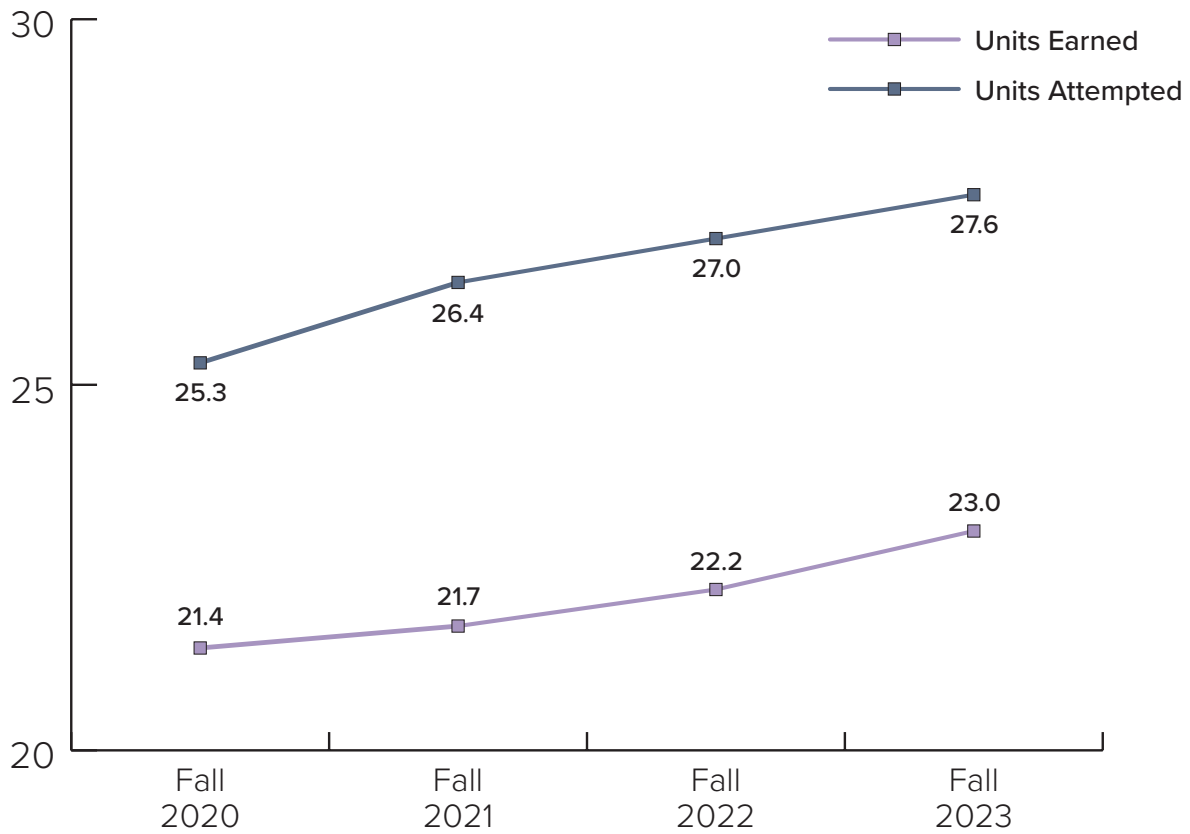


FIGURE 5: First-Time Freshmen Mean Unit Load



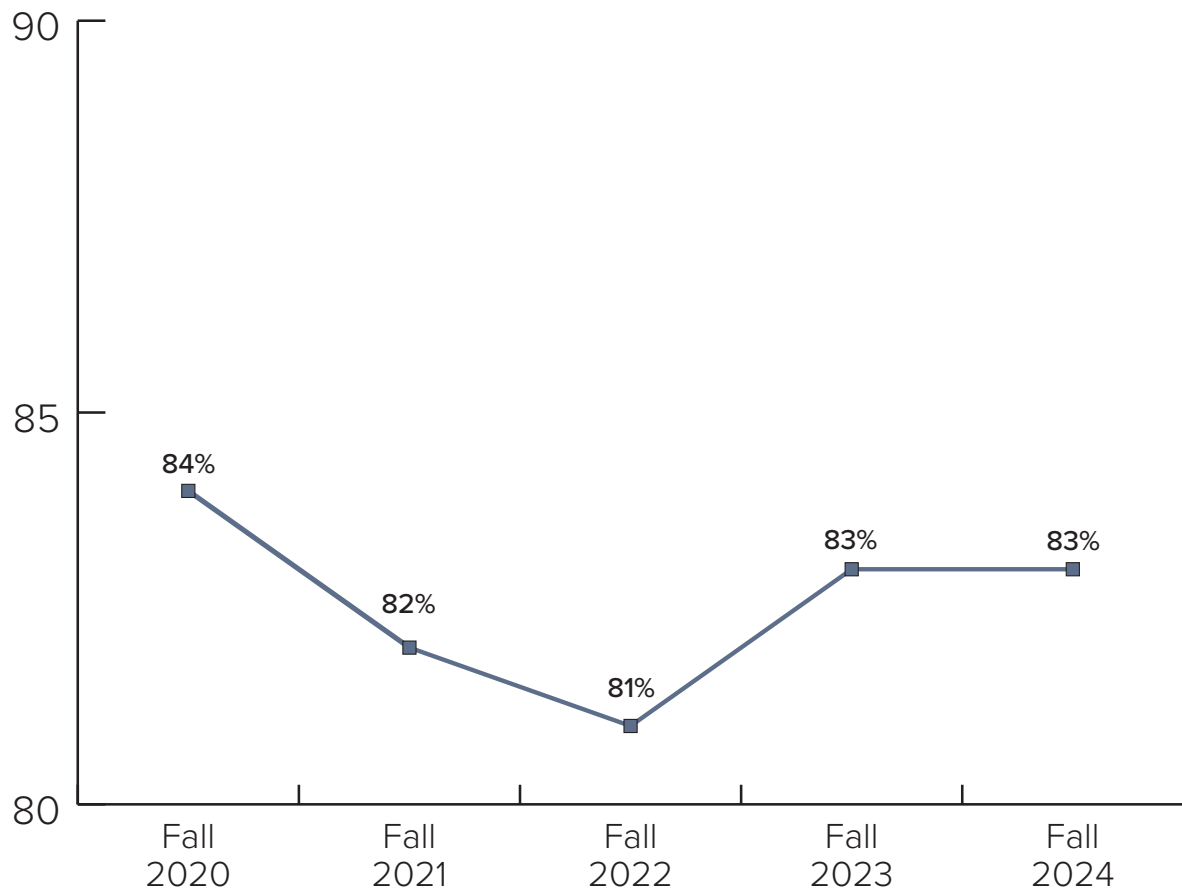
Credit: CSUSB



FIGURE 6: First-Time Freshmen First-Year Unit Accumulation

Credit: CSUSB

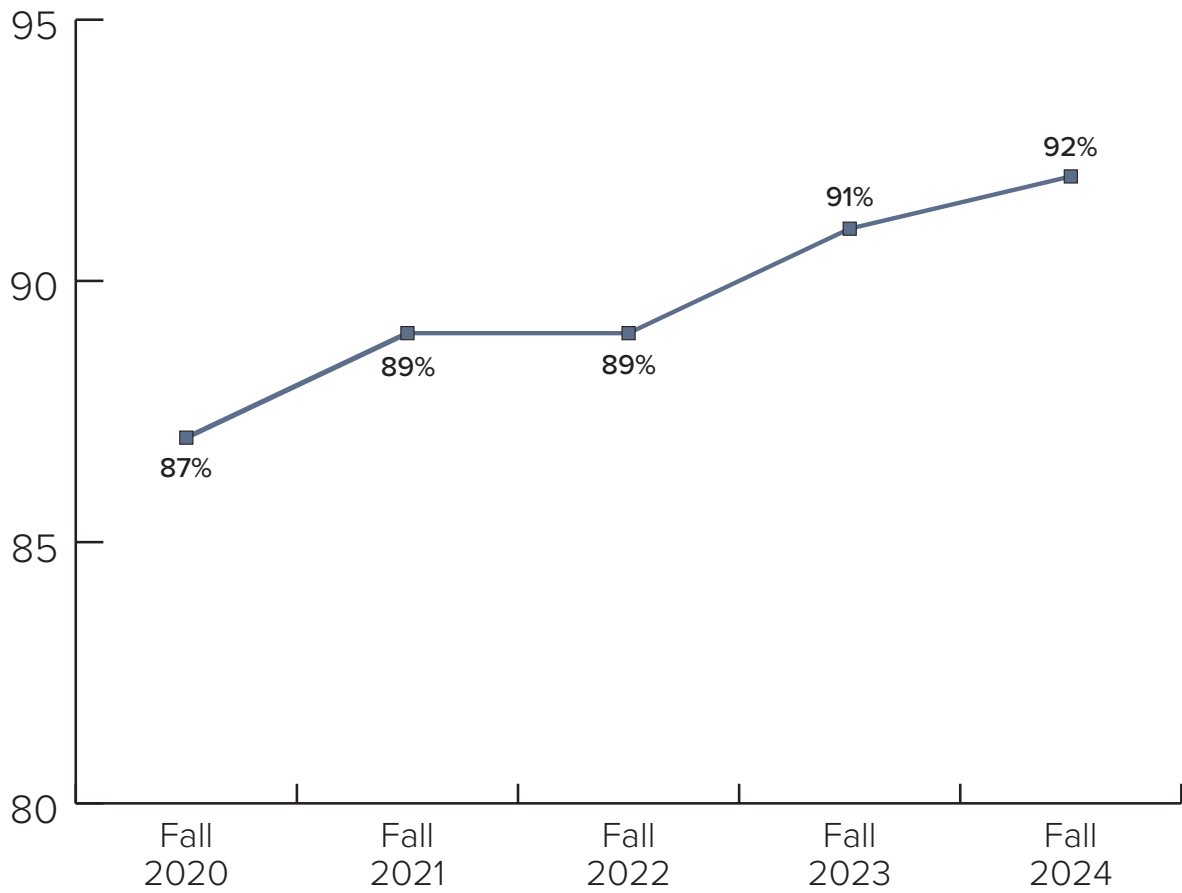


FIGURE 7: First-Time Freshmen First-Term Units Earned

Note: Golden Four general education requirements include: Critical Thinking, Oral Communication, Quantitative Reasoning, and Written Communication.

Credit: CSUSB



FIGURE 8: First-Time Freshmen Fall-to-Spring Retention

Credit: CSUSB



Description of the State

California is experiencing dramatic cuts in the state budget for 2025–2026, including changes in funding to higher education. The governor signed a budget on June 27, 2025, that deferred 3 percent of funding to the next fiscal year with the option for loans to restore funds.⁵³ CSU board meetings on May 20, 2025, and July 22, 2025, included discussions of loan options, the impact of funding levels on the budget, and unavoidable increases in costs for contracts, energy, and health care. CSU Chancellor Mildred Garcia reported that the system will implement an 8 percent cut in operating expenses for the chancellor’s office and cuts of 3 percent for the rest of the system.⁵⁴

Despite these budget concerns, the chancellor highlighted progress on development of a new draft strategic plan, with four strategic objectives that prominently featured student success (emphasis added in bold):

1. Strengthen CSU as a premier engine for economic mobility and workforce resilience through flexible and technology-enhanced learning experiences **to dramatically improve student success.**
2. Prove higher education value through financial resilience and operational effectiveness **grounded in a commitment to student success.**
3. Establish CSU as an employer of choice through professional excellence that advances system transformation **in service of student success.**
4. Build CSU’s unified statewide impact and community connection through strategic system integration **focused on long-term student success.**

Among the key metrics for measuring success of the strategic plan are four-year and six-year graduation rates, percentage of low-income students who graduate debt-free, and employment rates at 12 months after graduating.⁵⁵

The following information from the California systems’ websites provides useful context.

System-by-system Details

- CSU
 - What it is (from system site):
 - The nation’s largest and most diverse four-year public university system; 23 universities (transitioning to 22 in 2026)⁵⁶ and 7 off-campus centers.⁵⁷



- Students served:
 - >460,000 (Fall 2024).⁵⁸
- Governing board:
 - CSU Board of Trustees.⁵⁹
- **University of California (UC)**
 - What it is (from system site):
 - “The world’s leading public research university system,” with 10 campuses, 6 academic health centers, and 3 national labs.
 - Students served:
 - >295,000.⁶⁰
 - Governing board:
 - UC Board of Regents.⁶¹
- **California Community Colleges (CCC)**
 - What it is (from system site):
 - The largest higher education system in the U.S., with 116 colleges.
 - Students served:
 - Approximately 2.1 million (2023–24).⁶²
 - Governing board:
 - Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges.⁶³

Higher Education Structure

- Three public segments (CSU, UC, CCC), each with its own governing board; no statewide coordinating board.⁶⁴
- How many institutions are in the public systems:
 - CSU 23; UC 10; CCC 116. (Total public campuses/colleges = 149.)⁶⁵
- Is there a coordinating board?
 - No.⁶⁶
- How many governing boards?
 - 3 (CSU Board of Trustees, UC Board of Regents, CCC Board of Governors).⁶⁷
- Total population served across all boards: Approximately 2.86 million students. (UC >295,000; CSU >460,000; CCC approximately 2.1 million.)⁶⁸



TABLE 1: Higher Education Structure

System	Description	Number of Institutions	Students Served	Governing Board	Website
CSU	Nation's largest and most diverse four-year public university system; 23 universities and 7 off-campus centers.	23 universities (transitioning to 22 in 2026)	>460,000	CSU Board of Trustees	www.calstate.edu
UC	The world's leading public research university system, with 10 campuses, 6 medical centers, and 3 national labs.	10 campuses	>295,000	UC Board of Regents	www.universityofcalifornia.edu
CCC	Largest higher education system in the U.S., offering two-year degrees, transfer pathways, and workforce training.	116 colleges	Approx. 2.1 million	CCC Board of Governors	www.cccco.edu

For more information, visit AGB's state profiles.

Barriers to Student Success

CSU prides itself on educating “America’s new majority, comprised of low-income students, students of color, first-generation students, adults, and students from all walks of life seeking brighter opportunities.”⁶⁹ The student body for CSU varies by campus but overall includes 51.9 percent of students from underrepresented minorities. Nearly half of CSU students receive Pell Grants, and nearly one-third are first-generation college students. CSU enrolled 461,612 students in fall 2024, an increase of more than 2 percent compared with the previous year. CSU sees itself as an engine of opportunity for the state; 87 percent of freshmen are from California high schools, and 94 percent of its students are from California.⁷⁰

CSUSB enrollment in 2024 was 17,900,⁷¹ 75 percent of whom are traditionally



underserved students,⁷² and over 40 percent are first-generation college students.⁷³ As of 2023, approximately half received Pell Grants.⁷⁴

Growing Inland Achievement, a leader in coordinating regional K-16 services to expand educational opportunity, partnered with the CSU system, analyzed grades of high school students (grades 9 to 12), and identified a significant increase in students in need of supplemented instruction in general education courses in math or English. One challenge for CSU is that its state funding is based on the number of students, not on their level of preparedness or student needs. A funding formula that reflects student characteristics could better address the need for additional resources for student-support services.

Rafik Mohamed, CSUSB's provost, identified these primary goals for the campus: increase graduation rates, decrease time to degree, and eliminate gaps in these metrics among student groups. He cited several barriers identified in CSU's Graduation Initiative 2025: Curricular pathways did not make sense, there were no roadmaps for students to follow in registering for courses in their majors, schedules were not built for multiple years of study in particular fields, and first-time full-time students had a 13 percent four-year graduation rate. Many students accumulated 200 or more credits, wasting time and resources for students and CSU. This initiative led to building new curricular pathways to degrees supported by better advising.⁷⁵

CSUSB's institutional research team was essential in identifying bottlenecks and other problems. For example, there was a 55 percent DFWI rate in introductory biology, and the number one indicator for students stopping out was failing one or two courses in the first year. The provost engaged chairs and department heads to work with faculty, provide data, and develop solutions to increase student success. Providing data on DFWI rates was a new practice, and faculty members were not aware of the patterns. The addition of supplemental instruction and mandatory discussion sections were a difference maker in student performance. Although many students were skeptical, they participated in these activities after professional academic advisers were used to reach out to students in need of more support and tell them, "This class has supplemental instruction." There was a successful partnership among institutional research, information technology, and student advisers devoted to students' academic success. The partners deployed a digital learning management system that provided early warnings for students at risk.



However, in a meeting with the CSUSB president's cabinet, they recognized that there was an unmet need because of an insufficient amount of aid provided to low-income students, a need that had not been measured and addressed. For students to thrive and not merely survive, aid must address unmet need.

Mental health and student success are correlated, especially for low-income students who need help but cannot afford services elsewhere and might have to wait weeks for an appointment with a health professional. With more resources, the provost would like to invest in more staff to help students with outreach and mental health services. CSUSB has seen a huge spike in years since the pandemic in the need for mental health services and is struggling to keep pace with the need.

Actions Taken That Made a Difference

Leadership/Governance

Tomás Morales was appointed president of CSUSB in 2012, the fourth president of CSUSB since its founding in 1965. One of the characteristics of effective leaders is their long service. He also served as president of the College of Staten Island in the CUNY System from 2007 to 2012. His experience in CUNY, a system with two-year and four-year institutions, made him especially sensitive to the importance of relationships with the colleges from which prospective students transfer.

CSU receives students from over 100 community colleges in the CCC system. One significant change in the past for CSUSB (and other CSU campuses) was changing its calendar from quarters to semesters in fall 2020 to align itself with the academic calendars of California high schools and community colleges, thus aiding dual-enrollment and transfer students. CSUSB also has an automatic admissions arrangement for qualified high school students in the region, started as a pilot with a local school district. As of September 2025, a bill was pending with California's governor (SB-640 2025–2026)⁷⁶ which would adopt such an arrangement as a statewide policy for CSU, CCC, and California high schools. The CSU system supported both the calendar change and the automatic admissions program.

President Morales also serves as president of the CSUSB Philanthropic Foundation. He typically includes an educational component at each foundation board meeting, and during a two-day retreat in Palm Desert in 2025, he held a special



study session focusing on enrollment management and student success. A valuable resource for such educational activities is AGB's *A Guide to Strategic Board Retreats in Higher Education* and its chapter "Advancing Student Success for Governing Boards" (AGB, 2025).

Foundation board members we interviewed reported that data provided by the president on student retention, progression, and graduation, along with presentations by students with personal stories about challenges to their academic success, then informed foundation priorities and the volunteer service of board members. Additionally, members of the president's cabinet serve as members of the foundation board, contributing to alignment of the foundation and institution in planning and priorities. Foundation board members were actively involved as mentors for students, provided financial-literacy training, sponsored paid internships, contributed to food pantries and clothing drives, and attended events on campus.

A common refrain among cabinet members and from the president was "no silos"—student success is everyone's business. The president holds an annual leadership retreat on student success for about 150 campus leaders, director-level and up, that includes department chairs, deans, the lead custodian, and student leaders. Cabinet members felt the most compelling part of the day was the panel of students. The students were candid about things many of the staff members did not know.

Students' Basic Needs

A holistic approach to treating basic human needs as part of academic needs was a common practice among our case-study institutions, including CSUSB. Student success could be derailed by many factors; timely interventions could prevent students from stopping out or allow them to return. The CSU system adopted as part of Graduation Initiative 2025 several changes in food services, housing, financial aid, and other policies to meet students' basic needs that were implemented by each campus.

In November 2022, CSU implemented the CSU Basic Needs Initiative—a plan to address students' food and housing insecurity with food pantries, emergency housing and grants for rental assistance, case managers, a program called Basic Needs Ambassadors (training for faculty, staff, and students), clothing resources, financial-literacy workshops, and other resources throughout its campuses.



Meeting students' basic needs inside and outside the classroom was recognized as critical to student success.⁷⁷

The members of the board of the CSUSB Philanthropic Foundation were well informed about challenges students face, and students' basic needs inform board members' fundraising priorities and volunteer activities. This was especially helpful to the university after new and unexpected needs arose when the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020.

Data-based Decision-making

President Morales said CSUSB has made significant investments in institutional research and data analytics, including tracking such student characteristics as freshman or transfer status (50 percent of entering students are transfers), along with the high school or community college from which they came. Each CSU campus reports progress on key metrics to the system at least twice a year, including four-year and six-year graduation rates, and two-year and four-year graduation rates for transfer students—all disaggregated by student demographic characteristics (Pell recipient, race, sex, and so forth). The cabinet uses dashboards and detailed information on students to guide decisions on enrollment and retention strategies, as well as advising.

Strategic Enrollment Management

CSU will launch its strategic enrollment management plan in fall 2025. The goals presented to the system's education policy committee at the May 19–21, 2025, board meeting included:

- Charting a new course to improve access and enrollment opportunities.
- Elevating CSU's role as California's and the nation's university of choice.
- Providing recommendations to support data-informed enrollment decisions.⁷⁸

The plan will address access and retention, student demand and workforce needs, lifelong learning opportunities, leveraging “systemness” for enrollment resources and relationships, and building needed infrastructure for the system and institutions. Data management and communication are essential strategies.



Key elements of the strategic enrollment management plan include improvements in financial aid and direct admissions policies and practices. (See “Affordability/Access.”)

Cradle to Career Data System

The state has engaged with several entities to create a “Cradle to Career” data system. This longitudinal data system was created by legislation in 2019 with the goal of connecting data on K-12 schools, colleges, social services, and employment to better understand outcomes for Californians, from early childhood to adulthood, while protecting individual privacy.⁷⁹ Data tools are designed for use by students, families, educators, advocates, and researchers. It is intended to support planning and transitions for students and facilitate data-informed decision-making.⁸⁰

Holistic Advising

Holistic advising considers the full range of a student’s academic, personal, and career needs, creating a more supportive and integrated experience. By moving beyond course selection to include conversations about goals, challenges, and well-being, advisers build stronger connections that encourage persistence and completion. This approach has helped CSUSB identify barriers early, connect students with appropriate resources, and foster a sense of belonging. As a result, there have been improvements in retention rates, timely graduation, and student satisfaction.

The CSUSB Student Success Initiative includes a range of offices, including Academic Success and Undergraduate Advising, that connects services for academic advising, peer advising, supplemental instruction, mentoring, tutoring, writing, and advising in the major.⁸¹ There is also information available through the CSUSB Advising Podcast, with over 100 episodes.⁸²

A refrain from several cabinet members was the challenge of bringing students back on campus following the pandemic. A point of pride for the CSUSB Palm Desert campus was securing funding for a new student services building, which will provide a gathering place and centralized services for students, including an advising/tutoring center, career center, expanded library, health care, study spaces, and dining. The advocacy committee of the CSUSB Philanthropic Foundation played a key role in making a convincing and timely case for state funding. The building is scheduled for completion in 2026 or 2027.



Relationships and experience developed during the long service of CSUSB President Morales and then-foundation CEO Robert Nava and Advocacy Committee Chair Lou Monville’s service as past chair and trustee emeritus of the CSU Board of Trustees helped in their advocacy efforts. Robert Nava and Lou Monville described the community’s coordinated efforts for securing needed state funding for the new student-services building in “The Role of Advocacy and Community Relations for Foundation Boards,” in *Trusteeship*, May/June 2024:

In 2021, the California state budget surplus provided a window of opportunity to seek capital funds for a much-needed student services building. The budget surplus also resulted in intense competition from state agencies seeking the available funds. This one-time opportunity to secure funds was a call to action for a large coalition of city officials, business leaders, and PDC [Palm Desert Campus] students. The CSUSB Philanthropic Foundation Advocacy Committee and the PDC Advancement Board partnered with local Assemblymembers Chad Mays and Eduardo Garcia, Priority-One Coachella, the City of Palm Desert, and the CSUSB Associated Students to develop a grassroots strategy to secure funds for the student services building. Committee and community members called and met with their state legislators in their district offices, and a delegation traveled to Sacramento to advocate for the building and to ask for support for the project. Our collective efforts resulted in securing \$79,000,000 for the new building. State funding for the building was secured outside of the traditional budget process and will be the first state-funded building on the campus.⁸³

Affordability/Access

Direct Admissions: CSU conducted a successful direct-admission pilot program for seniors graduating in 2025 from high schools in Riverside, California. CSUSB is nearby and one of several colleges receiving applicants from these high schools. As noted previously, a bill (SB-640) in the California legislature would establish a process for automatic admissions to CSU for qualified high school seniors and Associate Degree for Transfer (ADT) recipients throughout California. The bill was approved unanimously by the legislature’s higher education committee in July 2025, by the full legislature in September 2025, and, as amended, describes this effort as a way to remove barriers, especially for first-generation college students unfamiliar with the application process.⁸⁴

Note that an earlier policy established the ADT, which created pathways for degree-seeking transfer students to attain junior status at a CSU campus, and



graduate with 120 credits and a bachelor's degree in the same major. The ADT pairs specific California community colleges and CSU campuses by major.⁸⁵

Financial Aid: The CSU Strategic Workgroup on Financial Aid reported to the system's Joint Educational Policy and Finance Committees at the May 19–21, 2025, board of trustees meeting, summarizing policy changes for the 2025–2026 academic year. These were in response to a resolution of the system's board in January 2024, highlights of which were:

- Address the total cost of attendance.
- No student should be precluded from enrolling by cost.
- Maximize state and federal aid.
- Support recruitment and success.
- Align with CSU graduation and success goals.
- Provide greater consistency across campuses in aid administration.

Policy Changes Effective 2025–2026

- Full tuition grants are available to eligible undergraduates with annual household incomes of up to \$125,000.
- The State University Grant (SUG) is expanding to include cost of attendance awards.
- Greater emphasis is placed on maximizing federal and state financial aid, including Cal Grants.
- Postbaccalaureate SUG awards will be proportional to postbaccalaureate student enrollment on each CSU campus.

Progress Made: Infrastructure

- Improving the student financial aid experience through:
 - Online and mobile document submission.
 - Clear and consistent financial aid award notices and communications aligned with the College Cost Transparency Initiative's guidelines.
 - Transitioning to a new, student-friendly scholarship application.
 - Exploring centralized or multicampus financial aid processing.⁸⁶





CASE STUDY:

Hostos Community College and City University of New York Board of Trustees



Hostos Community
College



The following case study is based on interviews and information collected in 2025, unless noted otherwise.

Description of the Institution

Hostos Community College is an educational agent for change that has been transforming and improving the quality of life in the South Bronx and neighboring communities for over half a century. Since 1968, Hostos has been a gateway to intellectual growth and socioeconomic mobility, as well as a point of departure for lifelong learning, success in professional careers, and transfer to advanced higher education programs.

Hostos offers 28 associate degree programs and one certificate program that facilitate transfer to [CUNY's] four-year colleges or baccalaureate studies at other institutions. The institution is one of only six national recipients of the U.S. Department of Education's inaugural Postsecondary Success Recognition Program for promoting equitable access, success, and positive post-college outcomes for underserved students and a two-time Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence finalist. The college has an award-winning Division of Continuing Education and Workforce Development that offers professional development courses and certificate-bearing workforce training programs. Hostos also boasts both men's and women's basketball teams, which have won multiple CUNY Athletic Conference and National Junior College Athletic Association championships, with the women's team making history in 2025 as the only team ever to secure eight consecutive titles in CUNY's history.

Excerpted from CUNY Hostos Community College, "About Hostos," accessed September 24, 2025, <https://www.hostos.cuny.edu/About-Hostos>.



Mission, Purpose, Students Served

Consistent with CUNY's mission to provide access to higher education for all who seek it, the mission of Eugenio María de Hostos Community College is to offer access to higher education leading to intellectual growth and socioeconomic mobility through the development of linguistic, mathematical, technological, and critical thinking proficiencies needed for lifelong learning and for success in a variety of programs including careers, liberal arts, transfer, and those professional programs leading to licensure.

The college takes pride in its historical role in educating students from diverse ethnic, racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, particularly Hispanics and African Americans, and increasingly students from West Africa and the Caribbean. An integral part of fulfilling its mission is to provide transitional language instruction for all English-as-a-Second-Language learners and fostering a multicultural environment for all students. Hostos Community College, in addition to offering degree programs, is determined to be a resource to the South Bronx and other communities served by the college by providing continuing education, cultural events, and expertise for the further development of the communities it serves.

Excerpted from CUNY Hostos Community College, "Our Mission," accessed September 24, 2025, <https://www.hostos.cuny.edu/About-Hostos/Our-Mission>.

Hostos Community College was one of six recipients of ED's inaugural 2025 Postsecondary Success Recognition Award. The press release from ED on January 8, 2025, included this tribute:

"Hostos Community College, part of the [CUNY] system, enrolls a diverse student body of over 5,000 students in the South Bronx with over 90 percent underrepresented students of color and over 65 percent of students receiving Pell Grants. At Hostos, 56 percent of students transfer or graduate within 8 years, and students earn on average 1.4 times more than high school graduates in the state after college. Hostos puts student needs at the top of its priorities and offers resources to help students overcome potential barriers to their success, including their One Stop center, food pantry, and childcare center. Student Government President Dainma Martinez says, 'Hostos has been more than just an institution for me: it has been a community that understands the challenges students like me face. The support provided by Hostos goes beyond academics; it empowers us to find our voice, pursue our goals, and serve as leaders in our communities.'"⁸⁷



Description of the Board and System

CUNY was established in 1961 by state statute and is funded primarily by the state and the city of New York. It is governed by a board of 17 members, 10 appointed by New York's governor and five by New York City's (NYC's) mayor with the advice and consent of the state senate, and two ex officio members—the chair of the university student senate (with a vote) and the chair of the university faculty senate (nonvoting). The CUNY board, supported by the chancellor and system administration, oversees seven community colleges, 11 senior colleges, and several specialized or professional schools across the five boroughs of NYC.⁸⁸

Their deep experience in higher education leadership, public elementary and secondary education, and NYC politics is evident in the long-serving leaders of the CUNY board, system, and Hostos Community College. William C. Thompson Jr., chair of the board since 2016, was reappointed to the board in 2023 and serves as chair of the executive committee and the board's subcommittee on enrollment. He previously served five terms as president of the NYC Board of Education.⁸⁹ CUNY System Chancellor Felix Rodriguez was appointed in 2019; he previously served as president of Hostos Community College (2009–2014) and Queens College (2014–2019).⁹⁰ CUNY Hostos Community College President Daisy Cocco De Filippis was appointed in 2020 and previously served as president of Naugatuck Valley Community College (2008–2020) and as Hostos's chief academic officer (2002–2008).⁹¹ Each of these key leaders understands the relationships among the colleges in the system and of CUNY colleges to NYC public schools, employers, and government. The chancellor and president have deep experience at Hostos.



Leaders and Contributors to this Case Study

We had the generous support and cooperation of more than a dozen key administrators and board members from CUNY and Hostos Community College in conducting this study:

CUNY

William C. Thompson Jr., board chair (and member, board of directors, AGB)

Felix Rodriguez, chancellor

Gayle Horwitz, former senior adviser to the chancellor and secretary to the board

Anne Fenton, associate vice chancellor and former deputy secretary to the board, now secretary to the board

Alicia Alvero, interim executive vice chancellor and university provost

Wendy Hensel, former provost (and as of January 2025, president, University of Hawaii System)

Hostos Community College

Daisy Cocco De Filippis, president

Esther Rodriguez-Chardavoyne, senior vice president of administration and finance

Shiang-Kwei Wang, provost and vice president of academic affairs

Althea Sterling, vice president of student development and enrollment management

Evelyn Fernandez-Ketcham, vice president of continuing education and workforce development

Colette Atkins, vice president of institutional advancement

Babette Audant, assistant vice president of institutional effectiveness, research, and assessment; project liaison



Strategic Plan Focused on Student Success

Hostos is at the midpoint of a five-year strategic plan. The “Six Goals and 21 Strategies” that provide the structure for the “Hostos Strategic Plan Framework 2023–2028” embody the principles of equitable student success. Metrics for student success are included and relate to strategic plan goals.

GOAL 1: EQUITABLE ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION AT HOSTOS FOR OUR DIVERSE STUDENT POPULATION

1. Implement a comprehensive and integrated First Year Experience program for all Hostos students.
2. Offer an integrated and multi-phased student advisement model.
3. Effectively communicate student support resources to all students.
4. Strengthen students’ ability to finance their higher education.

GOAL 2: BUILD A CULTURE OF JUSTICE, DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION AT HOSTOS

1. Increase justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion (JDEI)-related education opportunities for faculty and staff.
2. Institutionalize JDEI-related policies, processes, and structures.
3. Encourage faculty to establish a more culturally diverse, inclusive pedagogy and curriculum as a requirement for all programs while respecting academic freedom.
4. Institute JDEI-related climate assessment practices.
5. Strengthen inclusion, belonging, and equity of experiences for student constituencies experiencing inequitable outcomes.

GOAL 3: PROMOTE ENGLISH AND MATH LEARNING

1. Facilitate successful student navigation through Gateway courses.
2. Build student desire to pursue further learning in English and math.



GOAL 4: ACADEMIC PROGRAMS THAT BALANCE INTELLECTUAL GROWTH AND WORKFORCE PREPAREDNESS

1. Ensuring progression of intellectual growth in general education coursework.
2. Strengthen infrastructure of liberal arts degrees and options to make liberal arts a degree of choice.
3. Strengthen experiential learning and career preparation across majors.
4. Measure and develop foreign language and technological competencies across majors.
5. Develop the institutional infrastructure to deliver quality online academic programs.

GOAL 5: INCREASE STUDENT SOCIOECONOMIC MOBILITY

1. Increase career exploration and placement support for Hostos students.
2. Strengthen transfer to [bachelor's degrees] and beyond.

GOAL 6: CHAMPION SOCIAL JUSTICE FOR THE SOUTH BRONX

1. Strengthen systems for mission-based strategic collaboration across sectors.
2. Expand Hostos' arts and culture offerings for students and the broader community.
3. Strengthen K-12 partnerships to support career and admission pathways into Hostos.

Excerpted from CUNY Hostos Community College, "2023–2028 Strategic Plan," accessed September 24, 2025, <https://www.hostos.cuny.edu/Administrative-Offices/Office-of-the-President/2023-2028-Strategic-Strategic-Plan>.



Key Data, Metrics, and Dashboards

CUNY follows a performance-management process (PMP)⁹² that links planning and goal setting by the system and its colleges and professional schools, measures annual progress toward key goals, and recognizes excellent performance.⁹³

Measurable college-wide key performance indicators (KPIs) represent indicators of progress toward the collective activities of this plan. They are largely pulled from the PMP indicators, which are tracked across CUNY colleges.

CUNY offers an interactive Student Data Book (trend data available from 1990 to present, sortable by year, institution, degree/certificate, and student demographic characteristics).

Hostos Community College Strategic Plan 2023–2028 and KPIs

The following KPIs are excerpted from the current CUNY Hostos strategic plan, “Hostos: Elevating Justice.” These Hostos KPIs are closely tied to student success outcomes: enrollment, retention, persistence, graduation, first-year credit accumulation, gateway course success, transfer rate, and wages postgraduation.

TABLE 2: Hostos Collegewide KPIs 2023–2028

Total headcount enrollment (including first-time freshmen, transfer, readmits, and nondegree students)
Student retention rates (fall to spring/1 term, 1-year, and 2-year)
Student persistence rates
Graduation rates (2-year and 3-year)
First-year credit accumulation (20 credits or more, 30 credits or more)
Gateway course success (English and math)
Student transfer rate (postgraduation)
Graduate wages (1 year, 3 years, and 5 years postgraduation)

Excerpted from Hostos Community College, “Hostos: Elevating Justice,” accessed October 14, 2025, 7, <https://hostos.cuny.edu/getattachment/Administrative-Offices/Office-of-the-President/Institutional-Research/Strategic-Planning/2023-2028-Strategic-Planning-Process/Hostos-CC-SP-2023%E2%80%932028-Digital-Version.pdf>.



Description of the State

The University of the State of New York (USNY) consists of all elementary, secondary, and postsecondary education institutions, and other libraries, museums, institutions, schools, organizations and agencies for education. University is a broad term encompassing all the institutions offering education in the state. USNY's board of regents is responsible for the general supervision of and setting policy for all education activities within the state and presides over USNY and the state education department. The education department's Office of Higher Education administers federal programs, oversees college outreach, authorizes institutions, and registers academic degree programs. New York State has two public higher education sectors/systems: CUNY and the State University of New York (SUNY). Governing boards have primary authority over the policies, procedures, and operations of their systems and appoint the chancellors. The Higher Education Services Corporation, which is not part of the education department, administers student financial aid programs.⁹⁴

Every eight years, the board of regents, in collaboration with the higher education community, develops and adopts the Statewide Plan for Higher Education. The plan sets system goals and objectives and addresses priority matters of statewide concern to the state's residents, workforce, and community, as well as New York State's institutions of higher education (IHEs). The plan includes the long-range master plans of CUNY, SUNY, and New York's independent and proprietary IHEs.

The following information provides useful context for the structure of public higher education in New York.

- **Coordinating Board?**

- Yes. The USNY, led by the board of regents, serves as a broad coordinating umbrella—including both public and private institutions, libraries, museums, and more. It operates through the New York State Education Department.⁹⁵

- **Governing Boards?**

- Yes. There are distinct governing boards for each major public system:
 - SUNY is governed by the SUNY Board of Trustees.⁹⁶
 - CUNY is governed by its own CUNY Board of Trustees.



These boards directly oversee institutions within each system.⁹⁷

New York's governance model features one or more systemwide governing boards without a single statewide board solely overseeing all public institutions. Additionally, it includes a state-level coordinating/regulatory agency (USNY) alongside SUNY and CUNY governing boards.

TABLE 3: Higher Education Structure

System	Description	Number of Institutions	Students Served	Governing Board	Website / Notes
USNY	Umbrella coordinating body across public and private institutions, K–12, libraries, museums, credentials, and policy via New York State Education Department (NYSED)	More than 500 entities including approximately 250 colleges ⁹⁸	N/A (coordination, not enrollment)	Board of Regents (17 members)	NYSED – Office of Higher Education
SUNY	State University of New York system: includes university centers, comprehensive colleges, statutory colleges, and community colleges	Approx. 64 campuses ⁹⁹	Approx. 1.4 million students ¹⁰⁰	SUNY Board of Trustees (18 members) ¹⁰¹	State University of New York
CUNY	City University of New York system: urban public university system in NYC with senior, community, and professional colleges	26 colleges ¹⁰²	Approx. 240,000 students ¹⁰³	CUNY Board of Trustees	City University of New York

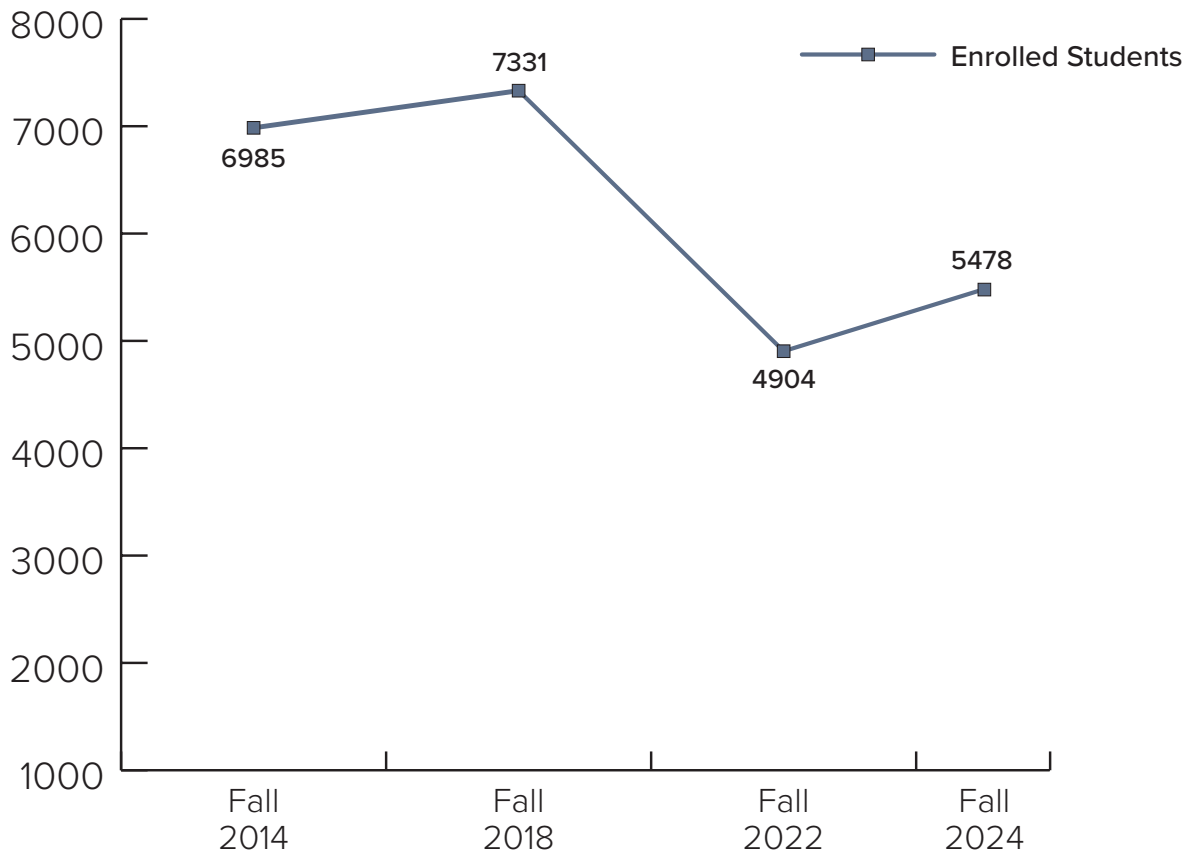
For more information, visit AGB's state profiles.



Barriers to Student Success

The COVID pandemic in 2020 had a devastating impact on all aspects of life for several years, including higher education, with lingering effects today. The pandemic negatively affected CUNY's enrollment, which fell to a low of 225,881 in fall 2022, but has rebounded by almost 12,000 students since. Overall enrollment in the CUNY system in fall 2024 was almost a quarter of a million students, with a headcount of 237,671, down from 275,132 in fall 2014, but the highest enrollment over the past decade. Enrollment at Hostos Community College grew from 6,985 in fall 2014 to a high of 7,331 in 2018, then fell dramatically to 4,904 in 2022, recovering to 5,478 in fall 2024, the most recent fall enrollment data available.

FIGURE 9: Enrollments



Credit: CUNY Hostos Community College



Hostos Community College is in the Bronx, one of the poorest congressional districts in the United States. Over 90 percent of its students are from underrepresented minority groups and over 65 percent receive Pell Grants. College leaders have cited their commitment to meeting human needs as part of the college mission and have recognized the overall challenge of affordability of college and living expenses for students. These challenges included food and housing insecurity, childcare needs of students who are parents, transportation challenges, costs of books and educational materials, clothing for interviews and internships, internet and computer access, and more.

Access and affordability are core parts of the CUNY mission and have been priorities in years past as well as during the pandemic. Interviewees identified several barriers to student success: cost of tuition; application fee and process; multiple applications for federal, state, and institutional aid; transportation; online options lacking for certificates and degrees; costs of study abroad; unfairness of unpaid internships; and loss of credits toward degrees for transfer students. An underlying challenge was prospective students' lack of familiarity with college and the need for strategies for navigating the first year for these largely first-generation students. Each of these barriers have been addressed with changes in policies and practices to support student success.

Actions Taken That Made a Difference

Reflecting a holistic approach to addressing student needs and an understanding that the institution needs to change to remove barriers and provide systematic support, at Hostos we found solutions that reflected each of these key areas, combined in a variety of ways: data-based decision-making, holistic advising, recognition of students' basic needs, attention to affordability/access, and changes in leadership/governance. We have categorized these solutions as "Structuring the Institution for Student Success" and "Identifying and Removing Barriers to Access and Progression." Strategies were informed by data, policies were changed to support new practices, and the cabinet, president, and board were guided by a shared focus on a strategic plan that centered on student success. Although not an exhaustive account of their efforts, what follows are highlights of actions for improved student success at CUNY and Hostos.



Structure the Institution for Student Success

The CUNY board was restructured, and a new educational policy committee was created in fall 2022, along with a subcommittee on enrollment, chaired by the board chair. Form follows function and reflects the importance of these areas. Then-Board Secretary Gayle Horwitz commented that the new board structure also reflected other changes in board culture—a more engaged board, more robust agendas, data-driven reports, and data-informed board decisions.

CUNY leaders—the board chair, system chancellor, and Hostos president—all prioritize student success. This is evident in the strategic plan, priorities of the board, and the KPIs for every institution in the system, including Hostos. The board, system, president, and cabinet were driven by the need to understand student issues and learn from data as well as from students' firsthand accounts. For example, the student trustee on the board is credited with raising issues in a board meeting about internet and computer access when the pandemic hit, and the board responded by ordering 100,000 laptops for CUNY students and arranging delivery to campuses in the Bronx. The system made the transition to online instruction a week after the pandemic was declared.

The Hostos president and cabinet members also recognized the importance of communication with students. President Daisy De Filippis meets with the student government association monthly, along with Senior Vice President Esther Rodriguez-Chardavoyne, who commented, “The cabinet gets along well and Daisy fosters working together.” Other administrators also echoed the expectation that all cabinet members will work together to support student success—noting the president expects collaboration. Evelyn Fernandez-Ketcham added that making the vice president for continuing education and workforce development a cabinet position gave her a seat at the table and has increased matriculation of continuing-education students.

CUNY has also invested in data systems to identify barriers to student success and inform board decisions. These include platforms to map degree pathways and monitor applicants during the matriculation process and to continue to monitor students' progress in communicating with students, faculty members, and advisers. This included contracts for data systems for each institution as well as training for advisers. The Hostos cabinet employed these data systems to develop many of the strategies used to remove barriers at the college. This focus on data was a common practice across case-study institutions.



These leaders focused on identifying and removing barriers to student success using a variety of methods:

- **CUNY Transfer Initiative**—A board resolution in 2023 set a timetable and directed the system administration to institute seamless transfer within CUNY and eliminate credit loss during transfer. Working with Wendy Hensel, the system’s chief academic officer at the time, disciplinary faculty groups aligned two-year and four-year college-degree pathways, and administrators implemented timely decision-making on transfer applications. This led to an increase in credits accepted in degree pathways for the most popular degrees. This will benefit approximately 15,000 “upward transfer” CUNY students annually (transferring from community colleges to senior institutions), starting in fall 2025. A key to success was taking a competency-based approach to evaluating required learning, rather than looking for identical texts and courses. Provost Hensel cited the sense of urgency created by “catastrophic” drops in enrollment during the pandemic and persuasive data supporting such change, along with personal stories of student government leaders. A clear board resolution contributed to the sense of urgency in achieving changes within 18 months; the board chair was quoted as saying, “this won’t take two years” in setting a timeline. As the provost described it, this change was not tinkering around the edges; policies that got in the way were changed. This included changes in courses offered and timely transfers out of community colleges by advising students not to accumulate additional credits that would not count toward degrees.
- **Investment in Technology**—CUNY implemented an online platform to show students which courses are part of bachelor’s degree pathways, as well as predictive analytics to identify students’ needs and proactively reach out to them with timely and targeted advising. Triggers included not registering on time, registering for too many highly demanding courses at once, not opening course materials online, failing a test in the first few weeks of a gateway course, and failing to pay fees. Training was also included for advisers.



- **Auto-admit for Qualified NYC High-school Graduates and Waiver of Application Fees**—This change and an agreement reached between CUNY and the City of New York led to an immediate increase in applications and enrollment. The board approved a waiver of application fees and instituted a process for timely acceptance letters to be sent to graduating students at public high schools in NYC. This practice will be expanded to private high schools in NYC in the 2025–2026 academic year. More than a dozen other states have instituted an auto-admit process for qualified high school students to public colleges, and New Jersey is proposing to do so.¹⁰⁴
- **College Now**—CUNY’s dual-enrollment program for high-school students from NYC public schools was extended to include independent and parochial schools, developing new enrollment pipelines. CUNY’s board authorized a tuition structure and initiative for this in May 2024.
- **CUNY Online**—Using \$8 million in federal stimulus funds during the pandemic, in 2022 CUNY expanded online course offerings, degrees, and programs throughout the system. This included support for development and instructional delivery of online courses, as well as student-support services and enhanced technology. This included completing the formulation of more than a dozen new degree programs by 2023. Online courses and complete online programs are designed to increase access, especially for adult learners in high-demand fields.
- **CUNY CARES**—Robust advising and holistic approaches to student needs; advising was integrated to encompass academic, career, mental health, financial, transportation, housing, food, and other needs, all considered essential parts of academic needs. The system invested in targeted aid, including public transportation passes, food pantries, childcare, on-campus employment, need-based scholarships, and paid internships.
- **CUNY Comeback Program**—This initiative erased more than \$100 million in unpaid tuition and fees for more than 57,000 students



and distributed \$455 million in emergency grants to students from federal stimulus funds.

- **Eliminated Hold on Transcripts for Debt**—In August 2021, CUNY ended the policy that banned CUNY colleges from releasing transcripts for students and graduates with unpaid tuition and fees. By January 2022, CUNY had released transcripts for 42,852 students.¹⁰⁵ See highlights of this policy change on the chancellor’s webpage.
- **CUNY Fast**—In 2024–2025, this CUNY program worked with high schools and colleges to increase completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), Tuition Assistance Program, and New York State Dream Act applications for incoming CUNY students.¹⁰⁶ When there were delays in the FAFSA application process in 2023 and 2024, CUNY nonetheless proudly saw an increase in completed financial aid applications.
- **CUNY Reconnect**—There are four million working-age adults in New York without a postsecondary credential. In FY23 and FY24, CUNY Reconnect included increased outreach, in-person and virtual enrollment counseling, and spent \$2.8 million for Forgiveness and Completion Grants to attract older students to college. On July 1, 2025, New York’s Governor Kathy Hochul approved free community college for CUNY and SUNY starting in fall 2025 for adults between the ages of 25 and 55 who seek to pursue credentials in high-demand career fields. Said NYC Council Member Eric Dinowitz, “Governor Hochul’s program will significantly expand the reach and impact of CUNY Reconnect, which launched in 2022. As of fall 2024, CUNY Reconnect has supported over 40,000 New Yorkers in their efforts to return to college. Drawing from the proven strategies of outreach, re-enrollment, and support services that made Reconnect successful, the governor’s program expands this work by providing tuition-free pathways specifically aligned with labor market needs.”¹⁰⁷
- **Fundraising and Philanthropy**—In addition to efforts to reduce student costs and forgive debts, fundraising and philanthropy directly



support student needs through scholarships, mentoring, and other support programs. According to Collette Atkins, vice president for institutional advancement and executive director of the philanthropic foundation for Hostos, its board is focused on student needs such as emergency grants for utilities and housing, a food pantry, support for parents and expectant parents, paid internships, a scholarship endowment for students who have run out of other aid, mentoring for STEM students, and peer mentoring for transfer students. The foundation board is focused on emerging needs and supporting the institutional strategic plan. The percentage of alumni giving to the foundation and the amounts raised are important metrics. In addition, in 2021, a \$15 million gift from MacKenzie Scott was the largest gift Hostos had ever received. It led to the creation of a multifaceted plan, the “President’s Initiative for Student Success, College Growth, and Stakeholders’ Engagement,” that included establishing a research center for improving student success, mentorship through on-campus jobs, financial aid, internships, and research grants. The research center provides grants to faculty for research that includes student research assistants and has resulted in many high-impact student experiences.¹⁰⁸

More information about these initiatives is available
on the CUNY Board of Trustees website.





CASE STUDY:

Kean University, Kean University Board of Trustees, Kean University Foundation, and Kean University Foundation Board of Directors



The following case study is based on interviews and information collected in 2025, unless noted otherwise.

Description of the Institution

Kean University leaders take great pride in the deep roots the institution has established in the community. Leaders describe Kean as an urban anchor university that is widely recognized as integral to the community's vitality and is actively engaged in helping the community overcome its challenges and forge partnerships. Kean University has evolved from its founding as a teachers college in 1855 into a comprehensive, global institution that today serves a diverse population of over 17,000 students. In February 2025, Kean University achieved an R2 research designation from the Carnegie Classification of IHEs, meaning that Kean is recognized for its doctoral programs and high level of research activity. In 2025, Kean was ranked number 81 nationally for social mobility by *U.S. News & World Report* (the institution has been ranked among the top universities in social mobility for seven consecutive years).¹⁰⁹ Kean's President, Lamont O. Repollet, EdD, said that "Reaching this tremendous milestone has been my goal since I became president." In terms of student success, Repollet believes that building a research culture at Kean "will shape the future of Kean and drive meaningful change for our students and communities."¹¹⁰



Kean offers over 50 undergraduate programs, 70 graduate programs, and 23 online programs that provide students with opportunities to learn on their own schedule. Additionally, Kean offers numerous opportunities for students to study abroad, including at a fully English-speaking campus in China, Wenzhou-Kean University.¹¹¹

Mission

Kean University, New Jersey's first urban research university, creates a world-class, innovative, and inclusive society through equity and excellence in teaching, learning, global research, and impactful public engagement.

Core Values

Academic Excellence: Kean University strives for excellence in all aspects of academia. Committed to upholding rigorous standards, intellectual curiosity, and the active pursuit of knowledge, we hope to ignite a passion for lifelong learning in our students, faculty, and staff.

Equity: Kean University intentionally deconstructs barriers that hinder access to opportunities. As champions of diversity, we foster an environment where all individuals, regardless of their background, circumstance, or perspective, can thrive in teaching and learning.

Inclusivity: Kean University deliberately embraces the transformative power of inclusion. We recognize our strength lies in the varied perspectives and experiences within our learning community. By celebrating and valuing varied perspectives, we prepare our students, staff, and faculty to intentionally build relationships that assist them in navigating our complex, global society.

Wellness: Kean University aspires to collaboratively create a vibrant, equitable, supportive, and inclusive culture of care in which all members of the Kean community feel energized, safe, and empowered to thrive and engage in the campus community.

Social Mobility: Kean University serves as a catalyst for social mobility, enabling students to transcend socioeconomic barriers and realize their full potential. Through personalized support, mentorship programs, and hands-on learning experiences, we equip our students with the tools to seize new opportunities, break the cycle of inequality, and create positive change in their lives and communities.

Public Impact: We embrace a core value of fostering public engagement and promoting meaningful public impact. We strive to cultivate a collaborative environment that empowers students, faculty, and staff to actively contribute their knowledge and expertise to address societal challenges and create positive change in our communities.

Excerpted from “Kean University Mission Statement,” accessed October 3, 2025, <https://www.kean.edu/about/mission-statement>.



Leadership

President Repollet began his tenure as president at Kean University in July 2020, during the height of the COVID crisis. Despite this initial challenge, Repollet led Kean into a period of transformative growth and innovation that has elevated its national profile and expanded its global impact. Since his appointment, Repollet has championed initiatives that have advanced research capacity, strengthened workforce pipelines, created innovative dual-degree partnerships with institutions such as Howard University, expanded international exchange opportunities, and established Kean as a national model for student success. Under Repollet's leadership, Kean achieved a historic milestone with its Carnegie R2 designation and received national recognition from *U.S. News & World Report* for advancing social mobility, which further reflects its expanding role as a driver of opportunity and excellence.¹¹²

Before arriving at Kean, Repollet made history as New Jersey's first Black commissioner of education. He also held other leadership positions in education, including as a former member of Kean's board, public-school superintendent, principal, teacher, and coach.¹¹³

Description of the Board

"Kean is a public university governed by a board of trustees and managed by a president duly appointed by the board. The board currently consists of 15 members appointed by the governor of New Jersey, as well as a student trustee representative elected annually by the student body. Pursuant to the Higher Education Restructuring Act of 1994 [state-level], the board has general supervision and oversight over the university. The president is responsible for the day-to-day operations of the university and the implementation of policies established by the board."¹¹⁴

The Higher Education Restructuring Act of 1994 empowers the board to:

- Set tuition and fees and hold public hearings.
- Recommend appointment of trustees to governor with senate's consent.
- Determine the size and make up of board of trustees (7–15).
- Invest monies, with other than Division of Investments, with approval of treasury.
- Choose legal counsel.



- Submit annual budget to treasury.
- Determine disputes for classified employees.
- Conduct hearings on appeals under higher education law.
- Approve facilities construction.
- Approve programs within mission.
- Create a public annual financial statement on government relations, public relations, and legal costs.
- Submit annual report on institutional condition.
- Submit annual independent audit and management letter.
- Adopt and use a corporate seal.
- Determine policies for the organization, administration, and development of the university.
- Direct and control expenditures and transfers of funds appropriated to the university.
- Appoint and fix the compensation of the president of the university, the executive officer of the university.
- Upon the nomination of the president, appoint and fix the compensation of professional members of the academic, administrative, and teaching staff.
- Upon the nomination of the president, appoint, remove, promote, and transfer such officers, agents, employees as may be required.
- Grant diplomas, certificates, and degrees.
- Borrow money for the needs of the university.

Trustee appointments are for six (6) years. Each board member serves until [their] successor is appointed. Each year a student trustee and student-alternate trustee is elected by the student body. Board members serve without compensation but are entitled to be reimbursed for all reasonable and necessary expenses.

Current board officers are: Chair of the Board Steve Fastook, Vice Chair of the Board Linda Lewis, and Secretary of the Board Thomas Bistocchi.

Excerpted from Kean University, “Board of Trustees,” accessed October 3, 2025, <https://www.kean.edu/about/board-trustees>.



The Kean University Board of Trustees has nine standing committees, which report to the board “to aid it in carrying on the business of the University.” Although the business conducted by all the standing committees is vital to student success, the academic policy and programs committee has the primary responsibility for oversight and guidance of the university’s student success initiatives/efforts.¹¹⁵

Leaders and Contributors to this Case Study

This case study of Kean University’s support for student success had the generous support and cooperation of 11 board members and key administrators from the university and the Kean University Foundation, as well as their overall boards of trustees and directors:

Lamont O. Repollet, president

Felice Vazquez, senior vice president for planning and special counsel to the president

Steve Fastook, chair, board of trustees

Linda Lewis, vice chair, board of trustees

Thomas J. Bistocchi, secretary, board of trustees

Joseph Youngblood, senior vice president for external affairs

Katherine Gallagher, senior vice president for student success and retention, special counsel to the president

Michael Salvatore, vice president for administration

Mathew Caruso, chief advancement officer

William H. Miller, president and CEO, Kean University Foundation

Edward Ahart, chief development officer, Kean University Foundation

Description of the State

The governance of higher education in New Jersey is managed by a tripartite system established by the state’s Higher Education Restructuring Act of 1994. New Jersey has a dynamic higher education environment that is coordinated by the Office of the Secretary of Education, a Presidents’ Council, and individual trustee boards of colleges and universities.¹¹⁶

The State of New Jersey Office of the Secretary of Higher Education “leads



statewide planning and policy development, advocates for institutions' postsecondary issues, administers state and federal programs, produces data analysis and research reports, licenses institutions, and oversees accountability programs. The secretary of higher education, who is appointed by the governor with consent of the senate, advances statewide goals and submits recommendations on the higher education budget and student aid levels to the governor and legislature."¹¹⁷

The presidents' council consists of New Jersey college and university presidents, who focus on collaboration and shared goals. Individual trustee boards of universities and colleges provide institutional oversight and strategic direction. New Jersey has 11 public institution governing boards. State statute gives each one the authority to determine its board size as long it has between seven and 15 members, excluding the president.

In recent years, New Jersey has launched several initiatives to improve college affordability through the State Plan for Higher Education that have been designed to "enhance postsecondary opportunities while promoting equity and access for all through programs such as the state's Community College Opportunity Grant."¹¹⁸ Other programs and initiatives include **NJ STARS**, which provides free tuition for top high school graduates attending community colleges, and the **Edward J. Bloustein Distinguished Scholar Program** that awards scholarships to high-achieving students. The New Jersey Higher Education Student Assistance Authority administers state financial aid programs.

For more information, visit AGB's state profiles.



Strategic Plan Focused on Student Success

Kean University is in the final year of a five-year strategic plan, “Beyond 2020: Kean University Strategic Plan 2020–2025.” This strategic plan reflects Kean’s commitment to inclusive excellence and student success:

Goal 1: To position Kean University as an academic focal point of ongoing and transformational postsecondary educational opportunities that prepare students to meet the current and future challenges of our world.

Goal 2: To prepare students for an adaptable 21st century workforce in which the jobs of the future do not exist today.

Goal 3: To create a transformative student-centered university culture focused on student success from first encounter through graduation and beyond.

Goal 4: To position Kean University as a cultural, economic, and educational epicenter and resource for the entire community.

Goal 5: To establish Kean University as a national center of excellence in human rights and civic engagement that builds upon our institutional commitment to equity, inclusivity, and social justice, and models for our students their role as contributing citizens of the world.

Goal 6: To secure a financially sustainable university that can successfully face the challenges of the future.

Excerpted from Kean University, “Beyond 2020: Kean University Strategic Plan 2020–2025,” accessed October 3, 2025, 1–4, <https://www.kean.edu/media/strategic-plan>.



Kean University maintains its focus on ensuring the success of all students from enrollment through graduation and beyond in its new strategic plan, “Elevate 2030,” that was announced in September 2025. The plan builds on the accomplishments of Kean’s past five years, during which it has emerged as New Jersey’s first urban research university, a designation that was approved by the New Jersey legislature in November 2021. This classification recognizes Kean’s commitment to conducting research and finding solutions for issues that are specific to urban environments and the people who live there.¹¹⁹ Additionally, this status provides additional funding for and aligns with the university’s efforts to advance student success, drive economic growth, and foster innovation nationally.

Key Data, Metrics, and Dashboards

Kean University’s “Beyond 2020: Kean University Strategic Plan for 2020–2025” measured success using KPIs based on its stated objectives. The stated objectives and KPIs specific to student success are listed here.

Academic Excellence and Student Success

- **Student performance:**
 - Graduation rates;
 - Retention rates;
 - Student achievement in gateway courses; and
 - Use of advising and early-alert platforms.
- **Curriculum redesign:** Redesign of the curriculum that would enhance support for student success in and after college.
- **Hight-impact practices (HIP):** The implementation of HIPs in core curricula and assessment of results by tracking student-learning outcomes.
- **Student support services:** Enhancement and strengthening of student-support services and measurement of their usage (such as students accessing more academic support services and financial aid).
- **Wellness framework:** Development and implementation of a comprehensive wellness framework and measurement of students’ increased access to wellness resources, as well as surveys of campus climate assessing students’ sense of belonging.



Kean University Student Success Dashboards are one of the most exciting additions to the interactive resources offered by the Division of Strategic Analytics and Data Illumination. The dashboard provides Kean faculty and staff with an innovative set of analyses and graphics that strategically reframe student data and illuminate opportunities to help more students earn a high-quality college degree, while closing disparity gaps.

Highlights of the dashboards include salient information about:

- Students who leave the institution without a degree.
- Analyses of course GPA gaps between underserved students and peers.
- Predictive models that assess the relationship between meeting early academic milestones and completing a college degree.

Excerpted from Kean University, “Strategic Analytics & Data Illumination (SADI),” accessed October 3, 2025, <https://www.kean.edu/sadi>.

FIGURE 10: Kean University Dashboard



This dashboard of Kean's Enrollment Trends illustrates metrics used to measure performance.

Credit: Kean University

Kean improved four-year, five-year, and six-year student retention and graduation rates across cohorts (see figure 10). The fall 2020 freshman cohort achieved the highest four-year graduation rate in the past decade.

Barriers to Student Success

Kean University faced several associated challenges that hindered the success of its students. Early in his tenure, President Repollet recognized that Kean’s traditional approach to student success assumed that its structures, teaching methods, and support systems were fixed and had not been adapted to meet students’ needs, suggesting that much of the responsibility for student success rested with the students. Referencing Carol Dweck’s book, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*,¹²⁰ Repollet determined that a broader shift in the institutional mindset was needed—one that prompted the executive team, faculty, and other administrators to examine how institutional practices could evolve to better support students.

Another significant challenge was the issue of mental health and well-being. President Repollet began his tenure during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, a period when students, faculty, and staff experienced high levels of anxiety and isolation. Like many colleges, Kean lost the sense of community on campus and feelings of disconnection were heightened during the pandemic.

Academic structures also contributed to institutional challenges. An assessment of Kean’s general education curriculum described it as a “sprawling curriculum with a vast array of course choices” that creates “course chaos.” This lack of coherence increased costs and negatively impacted student outcomes.

The university’s enrollment pressures were intensified by the pandemic. A large proportion of Kean’s students—31.6 percent—receive Pell Grants, which underscores the financial vulnerability of the student body. As one administrator noted, “Many of our students are one flat tire away from having to drop out of school.” This reality draws attention to the fragile relationship between student persistence and attrition.

Finally, “data silos” were barriers to collaboration, transparency, and data-informed decision-making. Without integrated access to data, Kean struggled to generate insights that could guide strategic action, improve outcomes, and build accountability across the university.



Actions Taken That Made a Difference

Participants in this case study found that institutional leaders assessed emerging needs and responded by establishing new administrative units and programs designed to address the challenges and strengthen organizational capacity. Kean also leveraged a partnership to launch the Moonshot for Kean initiative which helped the institution “to accelerate the elimination of equity gaps and strengthen proactive advising, student navigation, and administrative reform to bolster retention and graduation rates,” said Michael Salvatore, vice president for administration. These actions required significant financial investment and were supported, in part, by resolutions passed by Kean’s board of trustees.

Division of Student Success and Retention (DSSR)

This was the first of the new administrative units established to advance student success. DSSR provides comprehensive services and support to all students as they matriculate at Kean University. DSSR staff use data-informed, high-impact practices to help students persist to graduation. Committed to every student’s success, the departments within the division work to help students feel a sense of belonging within the Kean community. Over the last five years, Kean expanded student-support systems, including call centers which improved the university’s outreach operations. DSSR consists of the following departments that are essential elements of Kean’s student success and retention strategies:

- **Dean of Students Office:** Provides strategic leadership and management for success programs and services.
- **Center for Advising, Persistence, and Success:** Provides culturally responsive advising, programming, and planning that support successful student transitions at Kean.
- **Educational Opportunity Fund:** Promotes access to financially disadvantaged students defined by the State of New Jersey, including support services, required workshops on skill development, and other strategies critical to academic success.
- **Office of Student Retention and Educational Innovation:** Coordinates support services Focus on First Gen (Resources), Pop Up Shop (Professional Wardrobe), 1/2 Way to Graduation Ceremony.



- **Office of Financial Aid and Scholarship Services:** Provides financial support.
- **SUPERA:** Provides educational access for Spanish-speaking students who are learning the English language.
- **Bridge to Success Program:** Provides access for students who do not fully meet admission requirements but show the potential to succeed at Kean.
- **Center for Veteran Student Success:** Provides guidance and support to students who are military veterans.¹²¹

Division of Strategic Analytics and Data Illumination (SADI)

This unit was established to foster data-driven decision-making. The division was established to lead the effort to “create a data-centric culture, moving from insight to action” and tell Kean University’s story. SADI serves as “a central hub for university data acquisition, reporting, analysis, governance, assessment, and accreditation.”¹²²

General Education Curriculum (GEC)

“The new GEC aims to recreate general education at Kean University so that we give our students a unique inquiry-based and place-based experiential-learning opportunity that will launch them into their major areas of study.”¹²³ Kean formed a GEC taskforce in 2022. Its charge was “to explore how to apply the vision of a more distinctive, legible, and linear General Education Program to Kean.”¹²⁴ The taskforce consisted of representatives from all colleges and members representing students’ interests.

The GEC taskforce has worked collaboratively to:

- Create a genuine, shared core.
- Support graduation in four years with a major and up to two minors.
- Have the [GEC] accepted by all majors with few or minor modifications.
- Craft an inquiry-based curriculum.
- Build the curriculum around concrete observations that will then back into theory.
- Derive as much of the curriculum as possible from place and community.
- Create multiple points of contact throughout the first year, in other words, an integrated curriculum.
- Emphasize throughout the values of equity, inclusion, analytical rigor, sustainability, and mutual respect.

Excerpted from Kean University, “Proposal to Revise General Education,” accessed October 5, 2025, 48–49, <https://www.kean.edu/media/proposal-revise-general-education-kean-summer-2025>.



The taskforce’s work culminated in summer 2025 with the “Proposal to Revise General Education” at Kean. According to the proposal, the revised “General Education Program will support a range of institutional needs and mandates” including fostering a sense of belonging, decreasing achievement gaps, support increased student persistence, retention, and completion rates, improve students’ preparedness for academic programs, and strengthen the sense of community at Kean.¹²⁵ In fall 2025, nearly half of the incoming freshmen are enrolled in the revised general education program pilot which consists of thematic learning communities and experiential-learning opportunities for students. Opening hearings in collaboration with the university senate to solicit feedback on the proposal will also be held during fall 2025. This feedback along with the findings from pilot faculty and student surveys will be used to inform revisions to the proposal. After the review and approval process, which includes the university senate, office of the provost, president, and board of trustees, the General Education Implementation Committee will develop plan to enroll 2000 freshmen in the program for fall 2026.

Board Engagement

The study found that the active engagement of the university’s board of trustees, especially through its committees, has been essential to advancing student success at Kean University. Board members demonstrate a clear understanding of governance and their fiduciary responsibilities. Board leaders and cabinet executives consistently attributed Kean’s success toward improving student outcomes to President Repollet’s leadership. The trust Repollet established as a board member carried over to his presidency. Remarkd Steve Fastook, chair of Kean’s board, “President Repollet’s combination of charisma and ability” inspires action and drives success. The board of trustees’ commitment to supporting the mission of the institution and the vision for student success is evident and clearly articulated in **Goal 3** of Kean University’s 2020–2025 Strategic Plan.



Goal 3: To create a transformative student-centered university culture focused on student success from first encounter through graduation and beyond.

1. Provide students with the support needed so that they may experience academic success and achieve their dreams.
 - Redesign curriculum to support student success at Kean University (for example, redesign developmental remedial programs to utilize co-requisite and credit-bearing coursework) and beyond graduation from Kean University.
 - Utilize student-performance indices and advanced predictive analytics to make data-driven programmatic changes in student support services.
2. Develop and promote university expectations for standards of student service for faculty and staff, including division-specific guidelines for those standards.
3. Provide faculty and staff with a broad range of professional development opportunities to continuously improve pedagogical practices and research skills and implement best practices to enhance the delivery of student support in and out of the classroom.
 - Establish a Teaching and Learning Center to reinforce and expand opportunities to learn and share new and innovative teaching technologies.
4. Create academic paths that meet student needs to insure timely and successful completion of their academic programs.
 - Expand year-round learning opportunities to maximize flexibility and improve program completion rates.
 - Strategically expand online course offerings to enhance flexibility and speed graduation.
 - Develop programs that support the unique needs of nontraditional and special-needs students.
 - Identify funding sources, scholarships, grants, and financial aid resources to enable students to use the path best suited for them.
5. Create attractive and engaging retention campaigns, treating current students much like prospective students and ensuring that their financial aid, housing issues, and other needs are addressed on an ongoing basis.
6. Promote and provide opportunities for students to live a healthy lifestyle and enjoy optimal wellness.
7. Promote learning communities and provide all students with the opportunity to participate in at least one learning community before they graduate.
8. Reduce students' financial burden and help prepare students to take advantage of all available resources to support their learning by expanding the use of open educational resources.

Excerpted from Kean University, "Beyond 2020: Kean University Strategic Plan 2020–2025, Goal 3," accessed October 3, 2025, 2–3, <https://www.kean.edu/media/strategic-plan>.



President Repollet plays a crucial role in maintaining this goal's focus and ensuring that the leadership team and the board are aligned. Board Chair Steve Fastook praised President Repollet for his ability to build and lead a high-performing executive team that integrates new professionals recruited to Kean and leaders from the prior administration.

Board members at Kean understand the difference between the board's oversight role and wading into the murky waters of operations, which is the role of administrators. Board members have been successful, said Fastook, at "resisting the natural tendency to get into institutional operations." Instead, he said, "the board focuses on asking the right questions, taking a practical approach to decision-making that is informed by information provided to them by the president and other administrators." Kean's board of trustees, he continued, is guided by its vision of "what the university should be like and feel like." When asked about the board's role in advancing student success, Linda Lewis, board vice chair, commented that its focus on students "has been consistent over the years" and that the board "works with the leadership team to pinpoint challenges and determine direction toward improving retention and success."

Led by Repollet, the leadership team has built and nurtures strong relationships with board members, creating a climate of mutual trust and accountability. Administrators consistently highlighted their appreciation for board members' preparation for committee meetings and for challenging them to expand the scope of their thinking. When asked about his time commitment to "board work," Tom Bistocchi, secretary of the board and chair of the academic policy and programs committee, said he sometimes spends five hours or more to prepare for a committee meeting. "I read everything," said Bistocchi. "I take and review notes, draft questions, and can't wait to praise the team on the work they're doing." Bistocchi is a former public-school superintendent and recognized that he likely spends more time on preparation than is typical for board members but added that fellow board members are also well-prepared for committee meetings. "We are loaded with information and no one on our board ever says, 'I wasn't aware of it,'" regarding university business.

Fastook commented that regular engagement with AGB resources and a sustained focus on trustee education and development have contributed to the effectiveness of Kean's board. These practices ensure that trustees remain informed about national trends, governance best practices, and their own performance. Kean has built a highly engaged model of governance. Their committees provide a strong foundation for progress and offer support to Kean's president and executive



team. This has been a key driver in the institution's ability to remove barriers to change, implement new initiatives effectively, and improve outcomes aligned with the university's mission.

Fundraising and Philanthropy

Fundraising and philanthropy support student success at Kean University by creating financial access to higher education through scholarships. Philanthropic gifts fund merit-based and need-based scholarships for students, which reduce the costs for students and their families for such items as tuition, housing, books, and other fees. The staff at the Kean University Foundation lead the fundraising and philanthropic efforts. The foundation has become an important partner in advancing student success through its mission to pursue private support to benefit Kean's students, faculty, programs, and facilities at the university. Kean's compelling, student-focused story as told by President Repollet has "opened the donor pool," reported Fastook. The foundation's efforts complement the broader institutionwide strategies to improve student outcomes. For example, private scholarships for Kean students such as the Climb to Success Scholarship and the Climb Higher Scholarship support Kean's student success initiatives. Kean has increased scholarships by 22 percent in one year to remove financial barriers for students and expand access to the university, noted Salvatore.





CASE STUDY:

Prairie View A&M University and The Texas A&M University System



The following case study is based on interviews and information collected in 2025, unless noted otherwise.

Description of the Institution

Prairie View A&M University [PVAMU], the second oldest public institution of higher education in Texas, originated in the Texas Constitution of 1876. On August 14, 1876, the Texas Legislature established the 'Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas for Colored Youths,' and placed responsibility for its management with the Board of Directors of the Agricultural and Mechanical College at Bryan. The A&M College of Texas for Colored Youths opened at Prairie View, Texas, on March 11, 1878.

The university's original curriculum was designated by the Texas Legislature in 1879 to be that of a 'Normal School' for the preparation and training of teachers. This curriculum was expanded to include the arts and sciences, home economics, agriculture, mechanical arts, and nursing after the university was established as a branch of the Agricultural Experiment Station (Hatch Act, 1887) and as a Land Grant College (Morrill Act, 1890). Thus began the tradition of agricultural research and community service, which continues today.

The university's enrollment now exceeds 9,000, including more than 2,000 graduate students. Students come from throughout the United States as well as many foreign countries. In the last five years, more than 10,000 degrees were awarded, including more than 2,000 graduate degrees. During the university's 149-year history, some 84,000 academic degrees have been awarded.

Excerpted from Prairie View A&M University, "College History," accessed October 6, 2025, https://www.pvamu.edu/about_pvamu/college-history/.



Mission, Purpose, Students Served

PVAMU is “a state-assisted, public, comprehensive land grant institution of higher education. The university was designated in a 1984 amendment to the Texas Constitution as an ‘institution of the first class.’ It is dedicated to achieving excellence and relevance in teaching, research, and service. It seeks to invest in programs and services that address issues and challenges affecting the diverse ethnic and socioeconomic population of Texas and the larger society, including the global arena. The university seeks to provide a high-quality educational experience for students who, upon completion of bachelor’s, master’s, or doctorate degrees, possess self-sufficiency and professional competence.”¹²⁶

Description of the Board and System

Institutions in the A&M System are governed by one board of regents, which consists of:

Nine regular voting members and one student nonvoting member who are appointed by the governor. The nine voting members are confirmed by the senate and their terms are scheduled for six years and staggered so three members’ terms usually expire on February 1 of odd-numbered years. At that time, regents scheduled to go off the board serve until the governor selects their replacements.

The student member is chosen through an application process and is appointed June 1 of each year and serves a one-year term. Student members must be enrolled as an undergraduate or graduate student in either a general academic teaching institution or a medical or dental unit in the university system at the time of appointment and throughout [their] term. The Texas Legislature passed the bill establishing student regents for all public university systems in 2005, and the first student regents were appointed by the governor in February 2006.

Excerpted from the A&M System, “History—Office of The Board of Regents,” accessed October 6, 2025, <https://www.tamus.edu/regents/history/>.



The Texas A&M University System Board of Regents:

Oversee the administration and set policy direction for the system's 12 universities, a comprehensive health science center, eight state agencies, and the RELLIS [an acronym of Texas A&M's core values of respect, excellence, leadership, loyalty, integrity, and selfless service¹²⁷] Campus:

- Ensure a quality undergraduate and graduate education experience for all students.
- Promote academic research and technology to benefit the state of Texas and the nation.
- Disseminate programs of the A&M System across the state through outreach and public service efforts.
- Support the state legislative and higher education leadership to position Texas at the forefront of higher education nationally.

Excerpted from the A&M System, "Board of Regents—Office of The Board of Regents," accessed October 6, 2025, <https://www.tamus.edu/regents/>.

Description of the Governance Structure for Higher Education in the State

"Texas has [seven] system governing boards that oversee 37 academic institutions and 12 health science centers, and one technical college board which oversees 10 technical colleges. Four public universities have independent governing boards. Also, each of the state's 50 community college districts is overseen by an elected governing board."¹²⁸

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board [THECB] serves as a single statewide coordinating board for public postsecondary education and authorizes and monitors accredited degree-granting private postsecondary institutions. The board appoints the commissioner of higher education. The affiliated agency administers federal and state academic programs, provides data analysis and reports on higher education-related issues, administers student financial aid programs, conducts research and analysis, and determines programs of study, among other responsibilities. Governing boards oversee several four-year postsecondary systems and multi-campus institutions and the Texas State University System, which includes four-year and two-year institutions. The community colleges in Texas are not part of a system and are governed by local district boards, and several have multiple campuses. A board of regents oversees the Texas State Technical College System, which operates as a single statewide institution with multiple campuses.

Excerpted from "Texas State Profile," Education Commission of the States, accessed October 6, 2025, <https://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/TexasPSG2020.pdf>.



A&M System

The A&M System is one of the largest systems of higher education in the nation, with a budget of \$8.1 billion. Through a statewide network of 12 universities, a comprehensive health science center, eight state agencies, Texas A&M-Fort Worth and Texas A&M-RELLIS, the A&M System educates more than 165,000 students and makes more than 25.3 million additional educational contacts through service and outreach programs each year. Systemwide research and development expenditures exceed \$1.5 billion and help drive the state's economy.¹²⁹

In addition, the A&M System has established an array of advisory councils, committees, and communities of practice that address the shared needs and interests of its member institutions. These bodies play a vital role in advancing priorities and initiatives by leveraging the collective expertise and vast experience of faculty, staff, and students in the A&M university community.

Leadership

PVAMU, located approximately 57 miles from downtown Houston, is led by Tomikia P. LeGrande, EdD, the ninth president of the university. Before assuming the role of president at PVAMU on June 1, 2023, LeGrande served in other prominent leadership roles in higher education, including vice president for strategy, enrollment management, and student success at Virginia Commonwealth University; vice president for student affairs and enrollment management at the University of Houston-Downtown; and associate vice chancellor for enrollment management at Winston-Salem State University. LeGrande is known as a champion for student-focused innovation and is nationally recognized as a leading voice for strategic planning and leadership, and an unwavering commitment to expanding student access and success. After LeGrande was announced as the sole finalist to lead PVAMU, A&M System Chancellor John Sharp referred to her background in enrollment management and student success as “exactly what PVAMU needs at this juncture.”¹³⁰

Since her arrival at PVAMU, LeGrande has led transformative initiatives and worked collaboratively with the A&M System Board of Regents and system office to advance student success and the value of a degree from PVAMU.



Leaders and Contributors to this Case Study

This case study had the support and cooperation of eight board members and key administrators from PVAMU, the A&M System, and the A&M System Board of Regents:

PVAMU

Tomikia LeGrande, president

Aashir Nasim, provost and senior vice president for academic affairs

Michael McFrazier, senior vice president for strategy and transformation

Sarina Willis, vice president for enrollment management

John P. Gardner, assistant vice president for student success

Ed Willis, vice president for student affairs

A&M System

Shonda Gibson, senior associate vice chancellor and chief transformation officer

Jaquavous S. Doucette, student regent



A&M System Board of Regents Strategic Plan Focused on Student Success

A&M System member institutions have been directed by its board of regents to fulfill the “Strategic Plan 2016–2021” that was launched in September of 2016. Under the leadership of Chair Cliff Thomas and Chancellor John Sharp, a 14-member strategic planning committee comprised of the board of regents, institutional leaders, and A&M System office staff participated in the planning process. The strategic plan is guided by three core principles: excellence, impact, and access and affordability.

The plan outlines six strategic imperatives:

1. All qualified students will find a place in the A&M System and will have an array of pathways to pursue their ambitions and interests.
2. The A&M System will remain affordable and accessible.
3. Our students will leave the A&M System as responsible and engaged citizens prepared for successful careers in an increasingly global economy.
4. The A&M System will increase its prominence by building a robust and targeted research portfolio.
5. The A&M System will provide services that respond to the needs of the people of Texas and contribute to the strength of the state’s economy.
6. The A&M System, in adhering to the high standard of excellence and growth required in this strategic plan, will display prudent financial stewardship and sustainability.

Excerpted from the A&M System, “Board of Regents Strategic Plan 2016–2021,” September 1, 2016, 4, https://assets.system.tamus.edu/files/strategicplan/pdf/2016-2021-TAMUS_Long_FINAL.pdf.



Throughout the plan, the language reflects the board of regents' strong focus on and commitment to student success with objectives established to guide member institutions in their efforts to design and implement strategies that align with the board and system's strategic imperatives. Selected objectives that target student success include:

1. Ensure that cost does not become a barrier for Texans to access the A&M System.
2. Provide differentiated support services for student bodies that are increasingly more diverse.
3. Develop educational experiences and experiential opportunities that provide improved immediate and long-term employment outcomes.¹³¹

Shonda Gibson, senior associate vice chancellor and chief transformation officer in the Office of Academic Affairs, leads many of the system's student success initiatives. When asked about these initiatives under the new leader of the A&M System, Chancellor Glenn Hegar, Gibson maintained that Hegar considers students to be the top priority for the A&M System. She added that Hegar has emphasized a focus on student success, the college-going pipeline, and postgraduate outcomes. At the beginning of his tenure, Hegar commenced a statewide tour to visit the system's campuses and agencies. His conversations with students through the Chancellor's Student Advisory Council underscore the value he places on student voices and his focus on their academic journey. With the transition of leadership to Hegar, the board is set to resume its next strategic plan for the system.¹³²

The board has increasingly prioritized student success through dedicated structures like the Council for Academic and Student Affairs which is "all about student success," commented Gibson, reporting that time is allocated at each board meeting to focus on student success issues to ensure that leadership strategy and institutional strategies are aligned. The system's Office of Academic Affairs provides leadership and support for academic programs and educational initiatives, including those that advance student success. The system office fosters and coordinates several systemwide initiatives and projects that promote collaboration on best practices across the institutions within the A&M System. The system is positioned to take initiatives to scale by leveraging the talent across institutions and using its policymaking authority. Gibson explained that James Hallmark, PhD, vice chancellor for academic affairs, is a respected and trusted leader and helps the board and institutional leaders maintain their strategic focus on student success.¹³³



A&M System Student Success Initiatives

Quotations in this section are excerpted from the A&M System website.

ASSOCIATION OF COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY EDUCATORS—SCALING INSTRUCTIONAL EXCELLENCE FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

This is a transformative effort aimed at improving student outcomes by enhancing teaching practices across the system's member institutions.

"The collaboration provides faculty the opportunity to participate in the highest-quality online faculty development experiences that lead to the only nationally recognized collegiate teaching credential (endorsed by the American Council on Education). A variety of course offerings are available to faculty across the A&M System. These include 25-week courses in effective teaching practices and effective online teaching practices, and several 6–8-week stackable short courses."¹³⁴

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF STATE COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES (AASCU)—STUDENT SUCCESS INITIATIVE

The system participates in this "comprehensive student success initiative in partnership with AASCU to implement data-informed strategies that improve academic outcomes for students. By promoting institutional innovation and sharing best practices across the system, the initiative seeks to enhance support structures that help students reach their full potential."¹³⁵

CHANCELLOR'S STUDENT ADVISORY COUNCIL (CSAC)

"CSAC was created in 1982 to provide an avenue for all student leaders to address student issues common to all campuses within the A&M System. Membership consists of two student representatives from each institution."¹³⁶

PUBLIC POLICY SCHOLARS PROGRAM

The A&M System, in partnership with the Bush School of Government and Public Service, offers this unique, semester-long opportunity in Washington, D.C., for undergraduate students from every university in the system. Students



earn academic credit while interning three days a week in a policy-focused office and attending two days of in-person classes at the Bush School DC Teaching Site, just blocks from the White House. This unique program blends rigorous coursework with real-world policy experience, preparing students with the skills, insight, and connections needed for future careers in public service.¹³⁷

A&M SYSTEM STUDENT REGENT

“In 2005, the 79th Texas Legislature authorized the governor to appoint a non-voting student regent for a university system board of regents. Section 51.355 of the *Texas Education Code* provides for the annual appointment of one student regent to a university system board of regents. This statute defines the powers and duties of a student regent, establishes the appointment and application procedure, and provides qualifications to be appointed and to remain a student regent throughout the term.”¹³⁸

THECB NONVOTING STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE

“Section 61.0225 of the *Texas Education Code* provides for the annual appointment of one nonvoting student representative to the THECB by the governor of the state of Texas. This statute defines the powers and duties of a student representative, establishes the appointment and application procedure, and provides qualifications to be appointed and to remain a nonvoting student representative throughout the term.”¹³⁹

PVAMU Strategic Plan’s Student Success Goals

PVAMU is in the second year of a ten-year strategic plan, “Journey to Eminence 2035.” The strategic plan offers a vision of PVAMU through creation of an institutional infrastructure that supports student success, and **Goal 3** focuses on the programs and supports that have a direct impact on student outcomes.

Goal 1: Invest in PVAMU’s People and Performance Excellence

Promote comprehensive growth through strategic investments in the professional development, resources, processes, and physical infrastructure crucial for advancing the capabilities and opportunities of PVAMU’s community members and university goals.



Goal 2: Advance Teaching Excellence and Academic Relevance

Guarantee a steadfast dedication to excellence in instruction by equipping faculty with the necessary resources and support to effectively engage students at all levels and develop cutting-edge interdisciplinary programs that align with evolving market needs.

Goal 3: Enrich Student Success and Holistic Student Development

Enhance persistence to graduation by providing comprehensive support services, cultivating a culture of care, pride, and collaboration, and promoting initiatives that enhance academic achievement, personal well-being, and career readiness.

Goal 4: Drive Strategic Advancement of Research

Accelerate the university's research capacity, grow graduate programs and PhD completions, and develop and invest in research-intensive faculty, thereby elevating the university's research profile and national and international impact.

Goal 5: Foster Social Responsibility Within Prairie View and Beyond

Engage in initiatives that contribute solutions to societal needs, promote equity, deepen industry and alumni connections, and foster economic and community development within Prairie View and greater Houston, while extending our impact through regional, national, and global outreach efforts.

Excerpted from Prairie View A&M University, "Journey to Eminence 2035," accessed October 6, 2025, 8–9, <https://www.pvamu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Strategic-Plan-2024-.pdf>.



Key Data, Metrics, and Dashboards

Over a decade ago, the A&M System launched EmpowerU, a systemwide initiative focused on student completion, affordability, access, and educator preparation. Through EmpowerU, the A&M System provides the public with information about the programs, projects, and initiatives that A&M System institutions offer or plan to provide that will “increase the number and quality of graduates” that are prepared for the workforce. A public dashboard on the “Analytics” page of the EmpowerU website contains student success data such as retention and persistence rates, graduation rates, degrees awarded, and financial metrics for all universities with the A&M System.¹⁴⁰ These data and metrics not only help the board of regents and A&M System leaders hold member institutions accountable for effectively and efficiently fulfilling its mission but also are essential to informing institutional change efforts needed to enhance student success.

STUDENT SUCCESS DATA

DEFINITIONS

- Common Attributes
- Student Success
- Enrollment
- Degrees Conferred
- Financial Metrics

ENROLLMENT DATA

- Enrollment (by Year)
- Most Recent Fall
- Rate of Change
- Incoming Student Characteristics

PERSISTENCE AND GRADUATION RATES

- Total Cohort



DEGREES CONFERRED

- Degrees Conferred
- Degrees Conferred by Level—STEM Degrees
- Degrees Conferred by Major

FRESHMAN COHORT—SAME INSTITUTION

- Graduation & Persistence Rates
- First Year Persistence Rates
- Second Year Persistence Rates
- Third Year Persistence Rates
- Four Year Graduation Rates
- Six Year Graduation Rates

TRANSFER COHORT

- Transfer Cohort—Persistence Rates
- Transfer Cohort—First Year Persistence Rates
- Transfer Cohort—Four Year Graduation Rates
- Transfer Cohort—Six Year Graduation Rates

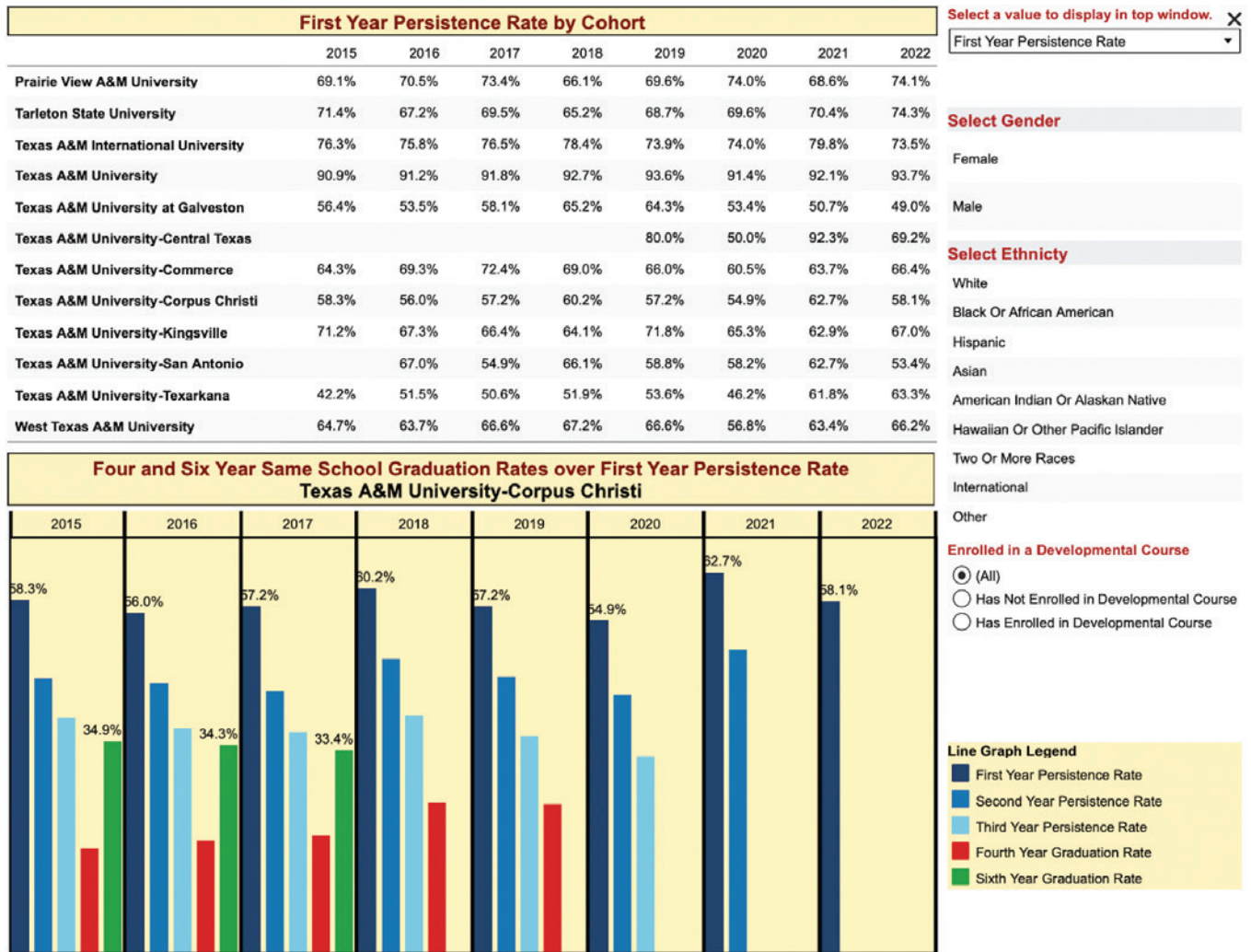
GOVERNANCE DATA

- Degrees Conferred
- Critical Workforce Needs—Degrees Awarded to STEM Majors
- Student Success in Selected Ethnicities
- Student Success Analysis
- Total Undergraduate Degrees Conferred

Excerpted from the A&M System, “Analytics,” accessed October 6, 2025, <https://empoweru.tamus.edu/analytics/>.



FIGURE 11: EmpowerU First-Year Persistence



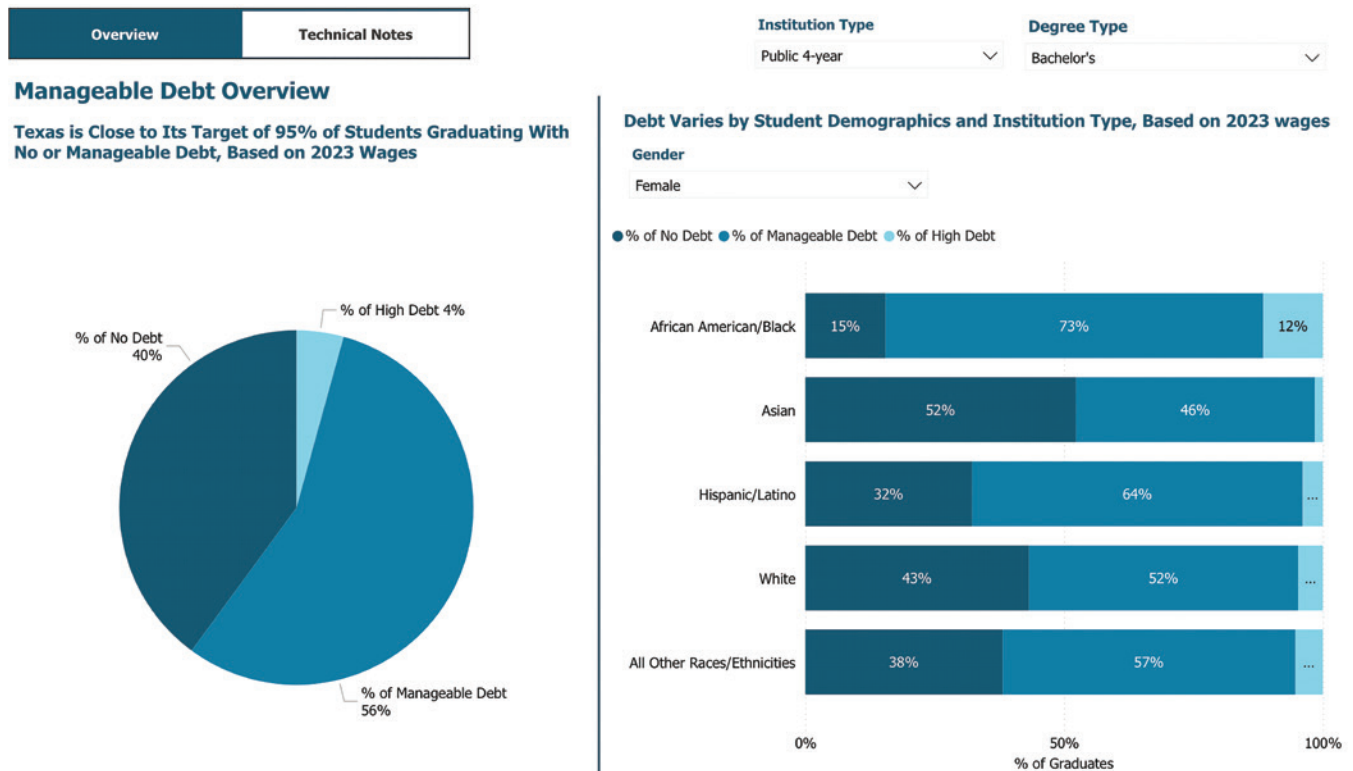
This EmpowerU chart shows the first-year persistence rate of students by A&M System member institution.

Credit: A&M System



THECB manages a robust data platform, “DataBridge,” that is the state’s main source of data and statistics for higher education. This interactive platform enables higher education leaders to gain insights from performance metrics related to state higher education and institutional goals. For example, tracking student debt and earnings is a critical part of Texas’s efforts to show a positive return on investment of a college degree and improving economic mobility for students from historically underserved populations.

FIGURE 12: Manageable Student Debt



This DataBridge chart provides an overview of manageable debt for graduating students and how the debt varies across student demographics and institutional type.

Credit: THECB



Prairie View Student Success KPIs

PVAMU's Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness "provides management information and centralized reporting services to clients both within and external to the university. The information provided assists with decision-making, policy development, and the implementation of alternative solutions through a variety of analytic activities, data gathering, interpretation, assessment, and research projects."¹⁴¹ Institutional data and dashboards are available online. PVAMU collects and reports on faculty data, faculty workload, and student enrollment. The Institutional Research and Effectiveness team also creates and maintains *current dashboards* that capture information ranging from enrollment by major, grade distribution in courses, to student-retention rates (see figure 13).

PVAMU has also identified the following metrics as KPIs of the campus's progress toward improving student outcomes:

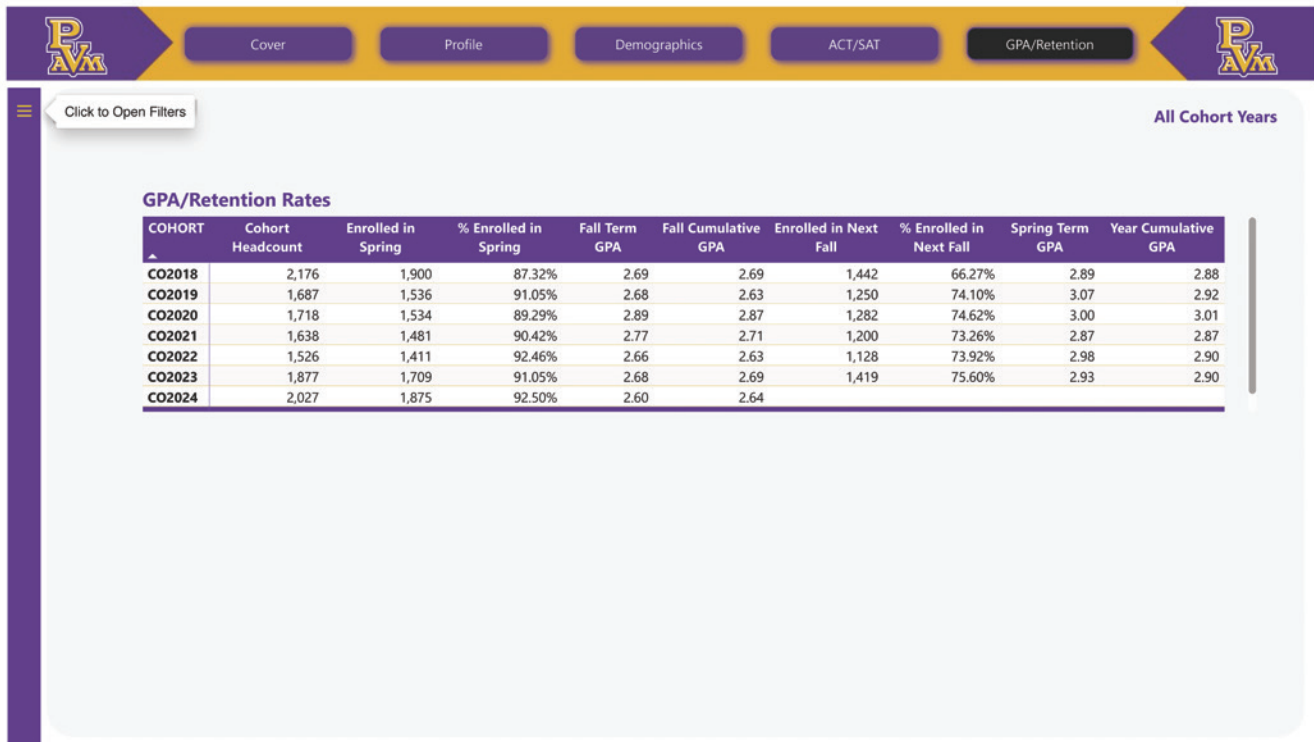
TABLE 4: PVAMU KPIs

Enrich Student Success and Holistic Student Development	Baseline	Good	Better	Best
Undergraduate	38.3%	40%	42%	44%
4-YR Graduation Rate	21%	25%	28%	32%
6-YR Graduation Rate	41%	45%	48%	52%
YR 1 Retention Rate	73%	75%	78%	80%
Manageable student debt	\$30,058	\$27,000	\$24,000	\$21,000
• Avg. Debt Per Student (TX) \$24,562	81.6%	70%	60%	50%
• Percent with Debt (TX-Avg): 56.5%	TBD	70%	78%	80%
6-month postgraduate success rate	TBD	70%	78%	80%

Excerpted from Prairie View A&M University, "Journey to Eminence 2035," 20, <https://www.pvamu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Strategic-Plan-2024-.pdf>.



FIGURE 13: PVAMU Cohort Data
Cohort



This chart shows semester-to-semester and fall-to-fall persistence rates and GPAs for PVAMU students by cohort.

Credit: PVAMU¹⁴²

Barriers to Student Success at Prairie View

Several persistent barriers have been identified by PVAMU leaders as constraining student success and limiting PVAMU's progress toward achieving its overall goals of improving affordability, economic mobility, and career outcomes for its students. A significant percentage of the student body are economically disadvantaged, with more than two-thirds of them being Pell-eligible. These financial realities heighten the barriers to persistence and college completion.

Students also struggle with the transition to college. Many students find it difficult to manage the academic workload and struggle to find a sense of belonging in the new academic and social environment of the institution. Like many college and university leaders nationwide, PVAMU administrators believe that a residual impact of COVID is the declining level of academic preparedness of entering students.



Additionally, structural barriers such as limited course availability and scheduling issues create registration challenges that often delay students' academic progress.

High student DFWI rates in key courses highlight broader concerns about curriculum alignment and instructional effectiveness, which might suggest a need to enhance instructional and academic support services for both faculty and students.

Actions Taken That Made a Difference

System and Board Action

Under the leadership of the immediate past president of the A&M System, John Sharp, and the guidance of the system's board of regents, the A&M System prioritized student success, allocated resources to support this priority, and implemented accountability measures to monitor progress. Over the last 15 years, approximately \$340 million has been invested in Prairie A&M University's infrastructure and buildings. In addition, PVAMU has benefited from funding increases provided by the Texas Legislature in 2023 and 2025. In 2023, the system received a record \$1.19 billion in new funding, which enabled a freeze on undergraduate tuition and fees, and full funding of a state match needed for Prairie View to qualify for federal funding for 1890 (historically Black) land grant universities.

Recruitment and Admission of Transfer Students and Consideration of Prior and External Learning Experiences

Through this policy the A&M System Board of Regents “endorses the recruitment and admission of transfer students from community colleges and other academic institutions to the universities (academic institutions) within the system, and the consideration of all documented learning experiences acquired in settings external to the institution.” Importantly, this policy expresses the board's commitment to “admission policies and practices that are impartial and provide equitable access” for all students.¹⁴³

Prairie View Actions

In 2024, PVAMU launched its new strategic plan, “Journey to Eminence 2035,” which not only reflects the institution's strategic priorities, but also aligns with the A&M System regents' goals focusing on academic excellence, strategic growth,



resource stewardship, and student success. The broad mission of the A&M System guides all its member institutions, and PVAMU's new strategic plan outlines how it will contribute to that mission. PVAMU's strong relationship with the A&M System Office is integral to advancing its priorities.

The university has secured a significant increase in financial support which Gibson attributed to President LeGrande's leadership. "She [LeGrande] is always prepared and presents clear strategic requests that are supported by data and tied to measurable outcomes." The Prairie View plan was designed through a data-informed collaborative process with university stakeholders. The plan places student success at the center of the institution's priorities and reflects President LeGrande's vision of establishing PVAMU as a national model for student success. The strategic plan and its goals, especially **Goal 3**, bring the vision into sharp focus. The objectives tied to this goal and related actions and initiatives outlined here are tangible expressions of LeGrande's vision. The student success initiatives stem from and are aligned with the "Journey to Eminence 2035" framework and ensure connections between institutional priorities and long-term strategic goals.

President LeGrande emphasized collaboration and shared accountability by requiring each member of her cabinet responsible for core functional areas to develop divisional strategic plans that also align with the university's mission and strategic priorities. Additionally, each functional area was assigned primary or secondary responsibility for advancing specific goals and objectives outlined in the plan. The senior vice president for strategy and transformation led and managed this collaborative process. Although still in the early stages of implementation, PVAMU expects to see tangible results from leveraging new or enhanced administrative structures, innovative initiatives, and strategic partnerships. The Office of Student Success, formerly known as the Office of Academic Engagement and Student Success, was created in the fall of 2016. In the fall of 2023, the unit merged with the Division of Enrollment Management to create the Division of Enrollment Management and Student Success. The division is designed to help increase and sustain enrollment by making the student experience more supportive, appealing, and outcomes-oriented.



Goal 3: Established Student Success and Holistic Development as a Strategic Priority.

Goal Statement: Enhance persistence to graduation by providing comprehensive support services, cultivating a culture of care, pride, and collaboration, and promoting initiatives that enhance academic achievement, personal well-being, and career readiness.

3.1 Enhance recruitment and onboarding of students (5–6 years).

- Implement targeted recruitment strategies to attract a diverse student body.
- Expand participation in bridge programs.
- Strengthen student advisement services.
- Equip students with essential financial responsibility skills.

3.2 Enhance communication and integration of student services (2–3 years).

- Promote awareness of student resources.
- Bolster technology systems needed to build personalized student communications.
- Foster unity among university services by aligning the goals and activities of [enrollment management and student success], student affairs, business affairs, and academic affairs.
- Establish systematic data centralization and a comprehensive data warehouse.

3.3 Prioritize holistic student care (8–10 years).

- Ensure housing options for 1st and 2nd year students.
- Support development of CARE team.
- Establish a childcare center on campus to support parents.
- Invest in support services to meet the distinct needs of select student populations such as international students and student athletes.
- Help keep costs under control and prioritize affordability.
- Support student mental health and well-being services and initiatives.

3.4 Foster enhanced student outcomes (2–3 years).

- Implement robust career counseling and coaching programs.
- Maintain responsiveness to evolving workforce needs.
- Expand opportunities for field experiences and career development initiatives.

Excerpted from Prairie View A&M University, “Journey to Eminence 2035,” 14, <https://www.pvamu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Strategic-Plan-2024-.pdf>.



Holistic and Proactive Advising

The PV Cares Student Success Model provides Prairie View students with a dedicated team of professional advisers and career coaches to support their academic and career journeys. The program assigns a three-person care team to every undergraduate student to help navigate university processes and foster a sense of belonging within PVAMU. The care team includes an academic adviser, a financial counselor, and a career coach. Graduate students are assigned a financial counselor. It is important to note that given the urgency of the challenges and the extensive body of research demonstrating that advising is one of the most effective strategies for advancing student success, PV Cares was launched at scale across the university in fall 2024. PVAMU has invested over \$2 million in the PV Cares initiative, so far. The institution has hired 20 new academic advisers, 11 new career coaches, and 11 new financial counselors, according to John P. Gardner, assistant vice president for student success.

Faculty mentors were added to the team in fall 2025 to enhance academic and professional growth. This program required a substantial financial investment to hire professional advisers, provide the administrative and technological infrastructure needed to support them effectively, and shift institutional culture. Faculty and administrators use Panther Navigate, a student success platform, to monitor students' progress, identify risk factors, and coordinate support services. In a press release, Gardner explained, "This holistic model equips our students not only to succeed academically, but also thrive financially and professionally long after they leave Prairie A&M University. PV Cares reflects our deep commitment to building productive Panthers who are prepared to lead, serve, and excel in every arena of life."¹⁴⁴

Investment in Technology, Data Analysis, Data-Informed Decision-Making

The institution has also made significant investment in its technology infrastructure. The leadership team has made a commitment to use data analysis and technology to help students and staff make informed decisions about early interventions and ongoing support. This can be seen in the strategic allocation of resources toward PVAMU's student success platform, which staff use to help students stay on track for graduation and provide them with timely guidance and support throughout their academic journey. Co-branded by PVAMU, Panther Navigate,



the platform tracks data across the students' time at the institution, which provides faculty and staff with a holistic understanding of students' needs and facilitates interventions specific to those needs. University administrators commented that the system has helped to “power” communication and collaboration within and beyond the PV Cares team. Additionally, students can use Panther Navigate to create degree plans, schedule appointments with advisers, and access information about university resources, thus empowering them to better manage their experience at PVAMU.

Gardner noted that the Acadeum Course-Sharing Consortium also aids students in staying on track for graduation by allowing them to enroll in degree-applicable courses at partner universities. This option is especially valuable when required courses at PVAMU are either unavailable or at capacity during a given semester.

Student Success Scholarships

These scholarships provide targeted financial support to students at various stages of their matriculation. The scholarships are designed to meet immediate needs, alleviate stress in emergency situations, and remove financial barriers that might otherwise disrupt their enrollment. This support plays a critical role in fostering persistence and degree completion.

Summer Bridge Programs

PVAMU offers a variety of Summer Bridge Programs (13 in all) designed to support incoming freshmen with the transition to college. These programs provide students with a strong support network to build personal responsibility and encourage them to become involved in campus life. Summer Bridge Programs are an important component of PVAMU's student success portfolio. The programs focus on helping students develop academic skills, engage in campus activities that promote independence and confidence, and learn about resources that will equip them with the tools they need to succeed.

Program for System Admission

“The Program for System Admission (PSA) is an alternative admission program for selected students not offered freshman admission to Texas A&M University. PSA provides students the opportunity to attend an [A&M System] institution



with the goal of enrolling at Texas A&M in College Station after the successful completion of the first year.”¹⁴⁵

Campus Involvement and Student Engagement

PVAMU has begun to emphasize the importance of students’ campus involvement, student health and well-being, and a transformative curricular experience. President LeGrande has highlighted the institution’s history of student success and its significant contribution to the Black middle class in Texas. The Office of Student Engagement at PVAMU is an intentional, student-focused resource that fosters meaningful involvement, leadership development, and community engagement. Engagement staff support students through purposeful programming and services that enhance success and enrich campus life. The new emerging leaders program is a student success initiative that is aligned with the goals of the university’s strategic plan. “The purpose of the Emerging Leaders Academy (ELA) is to provide students with the opportunity to develop or increase their leadership knowledge and skills. Students who participate in the [ELA] will attend a series of workshops, engage in community service projects, and create a portfolio documenting their journey of leadership growth throughout the program.”¹⁴⁶

Fundraising and Philanthropy

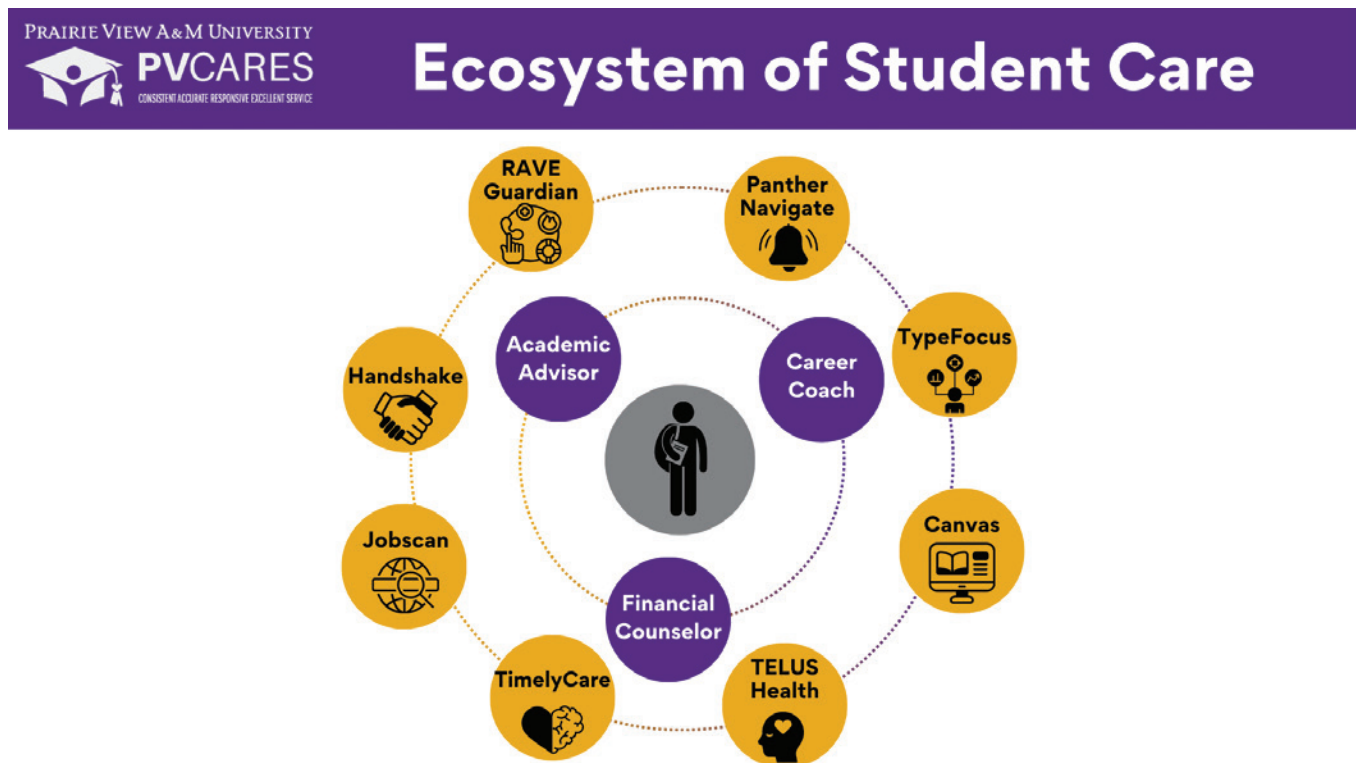
Before President LeGrande’s appointment, Prairie View’s fundraising efforts were strengthened by an unrestricted \$50 million gift from MacKenzie Scott, the largest in the university’s history. The gift has been used for scholarships, improvements to academic programs, and the creation of the Panther Success Grant program to assist students with financial challenges due to the COVID pandemic.¹⁴⁷ Shortly after her arrival, President LeGrande established the Division of University Advancement because she recognized the need for and important role of fundraising and external partnerships in advancing the strategic priorities of the university. In June 2025, PVAMU and the Prairie View A&M Foundation announced the launch of a “reimagined partnership” designed to strengthen the university’s fundraising infrastructure and empower it to “invest more deeply in student success, faculty excellence, and innovative programs.”¹⁴⁸ This partnership works within the framework of the Division of University Advancement and centralizes the management of all charitable gifts (from individual donors, alumni groups, corporations, and other foundations) through the foundation. This change streamlines



the donation process, enhances stewardship, and ensures that every gift aligns with the university's strategic goals. According to President LeGrande, the integrated approach is about more than fundraising—it “accelerates [PVAMU’s] path toward becoming a model 21st-century institution of excellence, innovation, and service outlined in our strategic plan, ‘Journey to Eminence 2035.’”

These changes and a sharpened focus on building PVAMU’s fundraising infrastructure have positioned it well to grow philanthropy to support its student success initiatives. Since 2023, the PVAMU Division of Advancement has driven growth through increased fundraising and major grants, which has supported historic enrollment growth. In 2024, the university received a \$2.1 million gift for student scholarships, and the inaugural PVAMU Presidential Scholarship Gala raised over \$600,000 to support students that year. An analysis by *HBCU Money* highlighted PVAMU’s long history of loyal alumni and vital mission, citing them as strengths upon which to build its capacity and strategy for increased fundraising.¹⁴⁹

FIGURE 14: Ecosystem of Student Care



Gardner noted that this “outlines the human and technological resources available to students.”

Credit: PVAMU





NEXT STEPS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This study focused on how four institutions are advancing student success through effective collaboration between governing boards and campus administrators. Important aspects of institutional success are the board's composition and the variety of perspectives of board members. Unlike other board members, student trustees offer a firsthand student perspective but typically have shorter terms and limited voting power. An important area for future study is the examination of the experiences of student members serving on higher education governing boards, boards of institutionally related foundations, and board committees. Understanding the conditions that enable student trustees to enhance their ability to inform and influence decision-making can offer insights into strengthening collaborative governance practices.

Future research should focus on documenting and analyzing the governance practices of governing boards of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) that have successfully navigated institutional crises and leveraged opportunities for growth to improve student outcomes. Although recent philanthropic investments and heightened national attention have strengthened the position of many HBCUs, persistent governance challenges remain, more often at private HBCUs and those that are not members of a state system. Additionally, limited institutional resources creates a barrier for board members to access advanced higher education governance training and preparation. No comprehensive studies have captured both board-level failures and long-term successes, limiting board members' ability to learn from institutional experience and produce a corpus that supports stronger governance and advances student success across HBCUs.

An area of interest for future research includes exploring the characteristics of successful leaders in creating student-centric colleges and understanding more



about how those leaders are selected and developed. Why are some presidents and board members able to change cultures and practices to make colleges better for today's students? How are those individuals recruited and selected? What board education and development practices contribute to improvements in oversight of student success and related policies and practices? What gives them staying power to see change through? What inspires their colleagues to join them in these efforts? We found the ability of presidents and board leaders at our case-study institutions to generate collaboration and commitment to shared goals around student success impressive. We think colleges and universities need more leaders like these. How can they be cultivated, found, and supported?

Another area for future research concerns institutions' slowness in adopting practices that should be widespread in higher education and that, as we say in this report, are well understood approaches to student success, not a mystery. What is inhibiting higher education from being more successful in enrolling, advancing, and graduating the students needed for a thriving nation?

Finally, in the current governmental environment opposing past practices for achieving inclusive excellence on college campuses, along with changing and unclear laws and regulations and threats to funding, how do boards understand their responsibilities for student success? What do boards need to effectively fulfill their fiduciary responsibilities, support the mission of their institutions, and advance success for all students? What concerns do board chairs and presidents have about leading boards in advancing student success? How do boards address gaps in advancing student success? What support and resources would boards and presidents most value from AGB? What are the lessons learned in advancing student success that they would share with their peers? How do circumstances vary for institutions in different states and for institutions designated as minority-serving institutions or HBCUs or that serve other specific populations? How can we develop a national dialogue and strategy for advancing student success?

AGB is uniquely positioned to lead this research and has been providing higher education governing boards with support and guidance for over 100 years. Scaling this effort to impact higher education more broadly will benefit this country and help meet the civic and workforce requirements of the future.





ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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