Leading Change

Increasing Graduation Rates at CSU-Northridge

The Education Trust

TO THE POINT

▶ In 10 years, graduation rates at California State University-Northridge almost doubled. What's behind the story of that increase?

> ▶ Sustained leadership
>
> ▶ Clear vision and goals
>
> ▶ Strong coalitions and teams
>
> ▶ Effective use of data

In Jolene Koester's 11 years at the helm, CSUN accomplished what higher education practitioners all over the country are working to do: improve student success on their campuses and give traditionally excluded students a real chance by way of a college degree.

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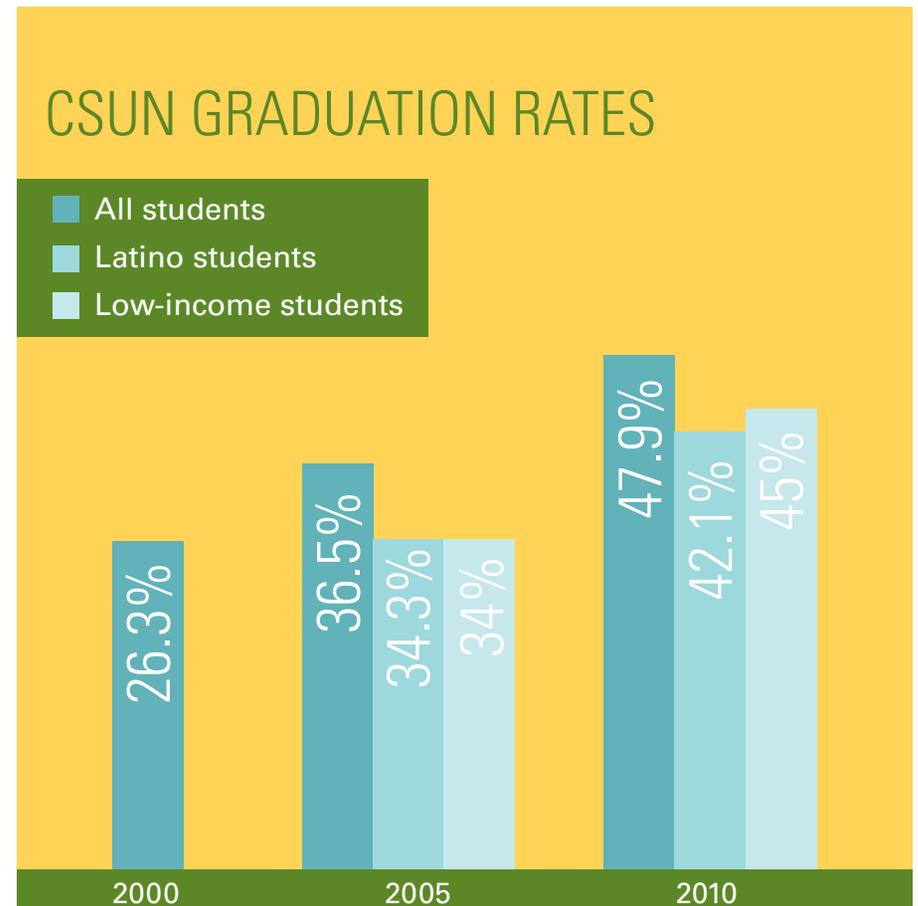
BY RIMA BRUSI

When Jolene Koester arrived as California State University, Northridge's (CSUN) new president in 2000, student graduation rates stood at a dismal 26.3 percent. But just five years later, they were up to 36.5 percent, and by 2010, they had almost doubled. The success was not just confined to overall numbers: Latino students saw their rates increase from 34.3 percent in 2005 to 42.1 percent in 2010, and rates among low-income students rose from 34 percent to 45 percent in that same time period. In Koester's 11 years at the helm, CSUN accomplished what higher education practitioners all over the country are working to do: improve student success on their campuses and give traditionally excluded students a real chance by way of a college degree.

HOW DID SHE DO IT?

The short answer is this: She took time to understand the campus and its culture; transitioned that culture to one of high expectations for students and institutional responsibility for outcomes; provided sustained leadership; held visibly and firmly to the goal of student success; built strong coalitions around that goal; and encouraged the frequent use of data to monitor progress.

This answer is brief, and although accurate, it does not provide the detail that is necessary to fully explain a change process that other leaders and academic practitioners can reflect on and think about in relation to their own work. Such is the goal of this brief: to answer the question of "how" academic leaders can work to increase graduation rates on their campus in some depth, in the context of Northridge's example.

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CSUN GRADUATION RATES

- All students
- Latino students
- Low-income students

2000: 26.3%

2005: 36.5% | 34.3% | 34%

2010: 47.9% | 42.1% | 45%

Source: California State University-Northridge provided data from 2000. Other data are from College Results Online and Education Trust analysis of the Access to Success database.

Jolene Koester with CSUN students.

THE ROAD TO THE PRESIDENCY

Jolene Koester is not your typical college president. First of all, she's female, in a field where nearly three-fourths of her peers are male.[1] She has a doctorate in communications, not education, which is the typical degree held by higher education's top leaders. She was 51 when she accepted the job as president of CSUN, a full decade younger than the average college president. And she stayed at the helm of CSUN for 11 years, defying workplace trends. Most college presidents serve only seven years.

In fact, Koester would likely say she has more in common with the students her campus serves than with her presidential peers. It's a connection she cites when asked about the origins of the unwavering, visible, and outspoken commitment to student success that ultimately defined her career as CSUN: "I share the profile, the socioeconomic profile, not the racial or ethnic profile, of the students who have the most difficulty graduating and staying in college," Koester says.

She grew up the oldest of five siblings in Plato, Minn., a small town with a population of about 300 people. Her mother was a stay-at-home mom, her father an auto mechanic, and neither completed high school. They did, however, believe in the value of college and instilled a college-going aspiration in Koester. She lived up to those expectations and graduated from the University of Minnesota with a bachelor's degree. After finishing, however, she says she had no clear career aspirations. So, after a few years of "wandering around," she went back to school to get a doctorate in speech-communication at Minnesota with the intention of being a director of an international education office.

Since then, Koester has remained in higher education, first as a faculty member and then moving on to leadership roles. After earning her doctorate, she accepted a tenure-track position at the University of Missouri in Columbia, a Carnegie "very high research" public campus. It seemed like the ideal place to start a career. She could engage in research and writing, amass a respectable body of published work, win grants, and work her way up to the much coveted "full professor" status. But Koester felt uneasy with that path, acknowledging that the typical research route is at odds with her personality. "I'm too much of a — in the most positive sense of the word — dilettante," she says. "I would never have been happy just pursuing one research project, building on knowledge that I gained, and then sticking with some line of research over a period of time and letting that evolve."
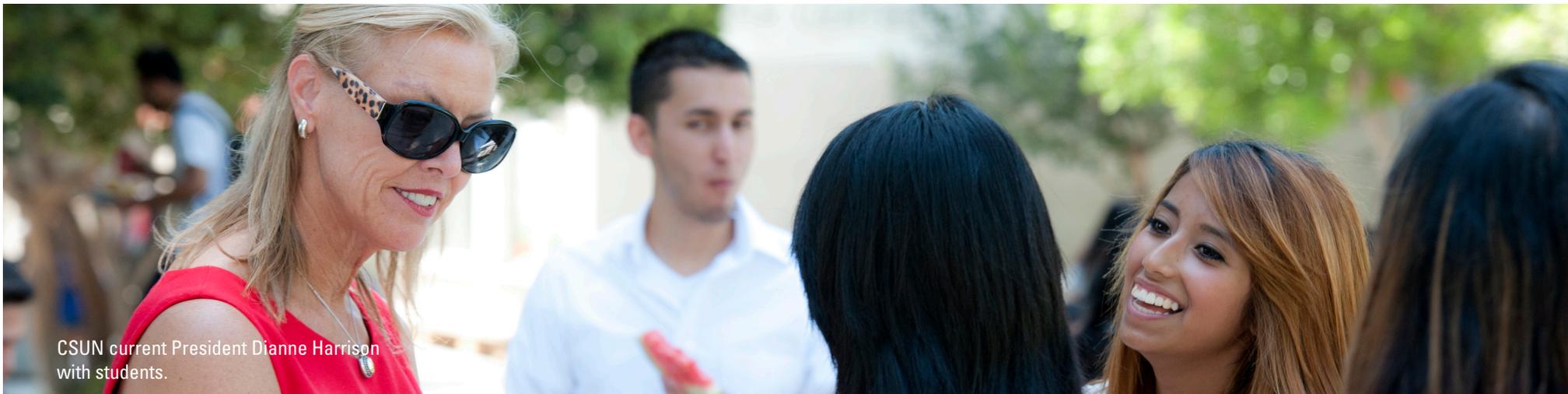
After just three years at Mizzou, she applied and accepted a position at California State University, Sacramento (CSUS), a comprehensive, regional institution with a Carnegie classification of "master's large." CSUS was very different from Mizzou. Close to half of Sacramento's students, for example, are low-income and 27 percent come from traditionally underrepresented groups. At Mizzou, in contrast, 22 percent of the students today are low-income and 10 percent belong to underrepresented minority groups. CSUS also has a strong mission in terms of serving its region's students, something that Koester, coming from a more selective, research-intensive institution, initially had difficulty grasping. "I took the position at Cal State Sacramento … never having had any experience in a regional comprehensive university, and not fully understanding that mission. In fact, I struggled in terms of trying to understand it," she says.

But it did not take long for Koester to fit in, begin to "enjoy" the mission, and settle into a satisfying 11-year-long stint, moving from assistant professor to department chair, interim assistant vice president for academic affairs, associate vice president, and finally, vice president and provost. "There was a sense of an obligation, stewardship, stewardship to the place, that was very compelling to me. ... It resonated with who I was," she says.

CSUS both shaped and deepened Koester's understanding of issues related to college access and success for disadvantaged students. "There were people there who — it was a place for second and third and fourth chances," she says. Still, Koester explains that during her tenure, there was little conversation about student success rates: The CSU mission was very much framed in terms of admissions and institutional commitment to local area students. "It was through access that the CSU [system] sort of conceived and enacted its unique mission in California," she explains.

But during her last year as provost, the issue of student success started to get more national attention. Policymakers, in particular, shifted their lens from college-going to college completion. Thus, when Koester left Sacramento to become president of CSUN in 1999, she says she was "ripe for recognizing the saliency of Northridge's poor graduation rates. … It was clear to me, and I think to others in leadership positions at Northridge, that it was going to become more of an issue nationally and that it would also affect us."

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1. Brian Cook and Young Kim, "The American College President-2012," (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 2012), http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Pages/ACPS-Release-2012.aspx

CSUN current President Dianne Harrison with students.

FIRST STEPS: SETTING A VISION AND BUILDING COALITIONS

One of the first things Koester did when she arrived at CSUN was to engage the campus leaders in a conversation about the school's dismal graduation rates. At that time, the rates stood at 26.3 percent for students overall. Even before she was officially sworn in, Koester recalls having frequent meetings on the topic with campus leaders, especially with Louanne Kennedy, Northridge's provost and interim president, and the academic affairs team. All agreed that the rates were unacceptable.

When Koester addressed the campus at her first opening convocation in August 2000, it would surprise very few, especially among campus leaders, that increasing graduation rates would be a top priority for her presidency. She was kind, but direct, as she highlighted the topic for the campus community:

I will tell you quite honestly that we lag far behind comparable institutions in our graduation rates. Students who come here as first-time freshmen and those who come here as transfer students do not graduate in a timely way. In fact, more than half of our entering freshmen never graduate from CSUN … I hope you would agree with me that this is not an acceptable record. Especially given the quality of the program and the excellence of the faculty and the staff on this campus. We might want to believe that students leave us because they cannot do the work that we require of them. The facts do not support such an interpretation.

It was the first time she talked about the importance of graduation rates in a public speech, but it would not be the last. Moving forward, she addressed the subject at every convocation, in every address, and in every speech, ensuring that student success remained a visible, insistent priority throughout her leadership.

The leadership team at CSUN quickly started working together to develop a process to tackle the low graduation rates. This process, which would become a sort of template for years to come, was far from a top-down directive. A data working group formed, including both administrators and faculty. Also, recognizing the key role that student affairs has in reaching out to students, and wary of higher education's infamous silos, the group included leaders from both student affairs and academic affairs. The effort was co-chaired by Kennedy and then faculty senate president, Diane Schwartz.

The group looked carefully at the data on student success, both retention and graduation, to understand the scope of the problem and identify Northridge's issues. Then they took their findings to a diverse group of campus stakeholders. They shared the information at faculty retreats, at various colleges, at counselors' gatherings, the senate, and at meetings where department chairs were present. "It was analytical, but also persuasive in helping to bring more people to the same understanding ... about our need to improve graduation rates," Koester says.

Faculty and staff were often surprised, many of them appalled, by the low graduation rates. But, Koester says, they gradually began to accept the interpretation the work group was suggesting: that it was to some extent the institution's responsibility. "Perhaps, not complete, 100-percent institutional responsibility," she says, "but that we had some shared responsibility with students to change what we could change."

CHANGING PRACTICES AND PLUGGING HOLES

Koester had made student success a top priority, and soon enough her team was doing the same. The working group presentations continued, and Koester added other discussion forums, such as group and one-on-one conversations over coffee with faculty members to address concerns and resistance to the idea of institutional responsibility. Open dialogue and conversations were opportunities to air issues and include everyone in determining the path forward.

Another group was also created, this time with a more direct mandate: a graduation rates task force. Koester had spent a long time studying her new campus and knew that shared governance and participation in decision-making were important campus values. The task force, like the earlier working group, therefore, was co-chaired by provost Kennedy and faculty president, Schwartz. (Later, when Schwartz stepped down as faculty president, the new faculty president, Michael Neubauer, took her place.)

The group met monthly for a year, providing periodic progress reports to the faculty senate. At the end of the year, members produced a report and, like the earlier data working group, presented their findings to campus stakeholders for feedback. This feedback was then treated like data. "The idea was, and we still do this, to find the holes where we lose students, to do the kind of thing that [can] make this place less difficult to be successful in, and when we see a hole, we try to figure out a way we can plug the hole so that people are not falling out," explains Cynthia Rawitch, vice provost.

Two of the holes that the group recommended "plugging" were simplifying general education requirements and rethinking academic advising on campus. Both were areas that spoke to what was becoming a standard practice and value at CSUN — looking at the role the institution played in student retention and success. Describing institutional practices that held students back was one of the main tools that Koester and her team used to communicate the need to focus not only on letting students in (something CSUN had been doing successfully for many years) but also on assuming some responsibility, on the part of the institution, to get them all the way to graduation. "I pointed to ways in which our policies and practices trip students up," Koester says. "And we had some very glaring examples of that at Northridge."

The general education (GE) program was "pretty much incomprehensible," says Koester. "Faculty themselves knew they could not explain the general education program and all of its various waivers... ." Michael Neubauer, faculty president

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— Cynthia Rawitch,
CSUN Vice Provost

Provost Harry Hellenbrand with student.

and co-chair of the task force, agreed. "We had a very cumbersome GE program of 58 units, and then you added on the majors, which were often also 50 units. There was almost no flexibility for students to have electives, and if they switched majors, they duplicated lots of work."

The task force created a subcommittee to take on general education and involved folks from all over campus — advisers, financial aid officers, faculty, and staff. The group created a new model, where the total number of credits typical of each baccalaureate degree remained the same (about 120), but GE requirements were reduced to a 48-unit program that was less prescriptive and had more flexibility. The model was taken to the senate and won 56 votes to 8. It was a clear victory for the task force, but also bolstered the collaborative process as a way of doing things at CSUN. It may take longer than issuing a direct order from above, but on a campus with a strong tradition of shared governance and faculty concerns over academic rigor and curricula, it proved effective.

The approach to revising and modifying advising practices was similar. A subcommittee was put together, spearheaded by leaders collaborating across divisions, and charged with recommending changes to the advising process. Before the committee started its work, the advising process at CSUN was highly decentralized. Advising activities and resources had become closely tied with CSUN's Educational Opportunity Programs (EOP), which were designed to provide access and retention to highly motivated, historically low-income and first-generation students. (See sidebar on page 12.) As a result, starting in the 1990s, most advising activity happened at Student Service Center/EOP offices, a central one for students who had not decided on a major (the advising resource center) and others in college-based EOP satellite locations around campus. Lots of faculty were involved in the advising process to meet the needs of students.

The committee found the locus of the problem not in the structure of academic advising, which allowed for close alignment between student advising and academic departments, but rather in the unevenness of its content. There were multiple streams of information (and disinformation) from both official advisers and others, which resulted in conflicting information on policies and requirements being communicated to students, who would then pick their courses erroneously and fall behind on their path to graduation. At the same time, there was no clearly defined and publicly posted mission statement for academic advising, which contributed to the uneven experience. Some students were receiving support and guidance on how to manage college, while others received information on graduation and major requirements. The committee took on the mission issue first, making a recommendation to the university,

getting it adopted, and making it public. And to solve the problem of conflicting information, instead of asking non-advisers who were providing academic advising to stop, the committee found a way to inform them better. They started holding "academic advising community meetings" twice a year, to keep advising in different majors and colleges connected and on the same page.

Shelly Thompson, associate director of undergraduate studies, worked on the subcommittee and recalls the overall influence the task force's work had on campus: "It really helped us have a more consistent, uniform experience for the students entering the different areas," she says. Previously, a student might go to one center and have one experience and go to another center and have a completely different experience, she says. Thompson also recalls advising becoming a higher priority across campus. "More attention was paid to it. When annual reports were submitted to the provost, information about the advising areas were included. We were able to participate in more professional development opportunities across campus, in terms of going to conferences and things like that, resources were dedicated to it. And I really think it provided some direction for the advisers."

Since the early 2000s, CSUN has continued to build on its work in this area and others, revising products, measuring successes or failures, and modifying practices to achieve better results. Thompson points to a recent example, where they improved the communication between the advising community and campus policymakers. In 2010, CSUN piloted a new system, AdvisorTrac, which allows advisers to schedule appointments for students for academic advising, and to log and record visits, including notes for students. It also allows advisers to produce reports. Prior to implementing the program, "everybody was kind of using their own system," Thompson says. "And so, this provides us now with a uniform system for accomplishing all of these tasks."

USING DATA: INFORMATION, PROCESS, GOALS

Koester's drive to put the issue of student success front and center stemmed in part from her commitment to the CSU mission, but also from those "indefensible numbers" that defined the beginning of her leadership at Northridge. The work of her first coalition revolved around data: finding data, examining it, sharing it with others, studying their responses. The graduation task force's work was data-driven as well, and some of their recommendations specifically focused on increased data use: for example, establishing mechanisms to provide data to deans and department chairs, so that they were aware of what was going on with their students.

Physics professor Nick Kioussis working with a student.

Today, using data effectively involves CSUN's leadership working very closely with the institutional research office. Provost Harry Hellenbrand, for instance, is known as a "data wonk," using data to measure outcomes, to make decisions, to start conversations on campus, and to persuade others of the need to act. "All decisions are based on data," says vice provost Rawitch. Bettina Huber, CSUN's director of institutional research, points to Hellenbrand's use of data as a way of doing things at CSUN: "[F]irst of all, he uses it himself, so it's very hard to keep up with him. But he [also] insists on people using it. ... [E]verybody on campus, they're interested in data and they accept data and they use it." And Huber's office uploads new data to its website often, as part of a section called "CSUN by the Numbers," so that everybody on campus can look at and reflect on objective numbers.

Huber's office also helps leaders at all levels (from deans to department chairs and program directors) to look at the impact of different interventions. In so doing, campus officials have found that there are some "high-impact practices" that have more influence than others on student persistence and retention, and that some practices do better in particular combinations. They learned that, for example, the introductory freshman seminar (University 100) does not make much difference on its own, but when taken together with another linked course, as students do in the Freshman Connection learning community, it has a measurable impact on retention.

While using data constantly and carefully often drives large-scale work like the reforms and evaluations described above, data analysis has also highlighted the need for small tweaks and changes that yield big benefits for student success. One of Huber's favorite examples of effective data use involves the writing proficiency exam that students have to take in order to graduate. "There was some sense that [students] were having trouble passing it, and they couldn't do it," she says. But when she looked closely at the connection between the exam and the institution's graduation rates, she found a different answer. It wasn't that they couldn't pass the exam, but that they weren't taking it. Students were putting off taking the exam, and even though they could take it a second time, if they waited until the semester they were planning to graduate, they found themselves "in a mess." The solution was straightforward: A policy was put in place to make students take the exam at the end of their first 70 units. Thus, if they did not pass it the first time, they had plenty of time to prepare and take it again.

STRETCHING TO HIGHER EXPECTATIONS: A LEARNING-CENTERED CAMPUS

At some point in the process, Koester says, the push to increase student success evolved toward an emphasis on student learning, not just getting students to graduation. But she says that had really been the idea all along: "[W]e talk very explicitly around graduation being the goal. And that's our shorthand way of saying we want students to learn to the level that's specified by the faculty to achieve a baccalaureate degree. Graduation as a term then subsumes the learning, the critical thinking, the knowledge, the ability to analyze information from the student, the ability to continue to learn." However, it was important to make that explicit and talk about student learning outcomes in program areas to guard against taking the easy way out and relaxing standards to ensure students graduate.

Today, Vice President for Student Affairs William Watkins agrees with Koester's view. "Most people on campus recognize that, like Tinto says, no student rises to low expectations," he says, referencing Professor Vincent Tinto and his seminal work on student engagement and retention. "It's a powerful way of thinking about how we can inspire students with an appropriate challenge but also a great dose of support. I think we are able to do that here."

Ultimately, leaders and staff working all over campus became involved in implementing practices to increase student learning. The shift from thinking about students as "underprepared" to exhibiting "high potential" was critical to this change. (See sidebar page 12.) Expectations of students increased, yes, but at the same time, expectations related to the institutional role in student learning also rose. For example, CSUN's leadership did not stop looking at general education once they had "fixed" its most obvious failings. More recently, explains vice provost Rawitch, they decided to make general education even more clear and focused on students by creating "pathways" within general education. Students can opt into a theme-based GE, such as sustainability or social justice. Here, the courses in a path are linked. A student can pick a number of courses in different sections of GE that meet various requirements, but faculty work together so the classes are related to the theme.

The shift from low to high expectations and from viewing underprepared students as "remedial" to "high potential" can be seen both in the way CSUN strengthened its "developmental" programs and the name associated with those programs. For example, a new freshman writing course sequence is called STRETCH, and it now targets students' needs better. Under the old developmental system, students who tested below a certain point were placed into one or two remedial writing classes, which did not carry baccalaureate credit. Now, students take one of three different course sequences: a three-unit, a six-unit, or an eight-unit version, "stretching" the study time for those who need it. Those who need a lot of additional preparation before facing their first semester on campus have the opportunity to complete these units over the summer, living on campus, and participating in a learning community. The STRETCH name is also symbolic of the institutional culture. It sends a message: Students will stretch to reach higher expectations and reach their full potential; and the institution is prepared to stretch with them, becoming more student and learning-centered, supporting them in their academic career.

Students are not the only individuals "stretching" to learn and increase the quality of their work. New faculty are expected to be and become good teachers. Even as expectations of faculty research increase, teaching is always at the center of what CSUN (and its personnel committees) expect from its faculty. The new

faculty orientation, explains Daisy Lemus, director of faculty development, emphasizes the need for new professors to know and understand the student population they serve. To this end, they are showed data on campus ethnic and socioeconomic diversity. Representatives from student affairs participate in the orientation, and, together with some students, are invited to share their experiences with new faculty.

Lemus' office also provides a series of workshops on the teaching and learning process during the year. The resources at her center, she explained, are reinforced at the department level: Teaching weighs the same or more as research and service, and if research is predominant in a faculty member's portfolio, the extra weight comes out of service, not out of teaching. Researchers are encouraged to incorporate undergraduate students in their research process, and the resulting mentoring relationship counts as part of their teaching activity. Members of the personnel committee visit classrooms to evaluate teaching, and together with students' evaluations, their reports constitute a big part of promotion and tenure decisions. "There's no escaping ... teaching," says Lemus. "You have to be a good teacher."

It hardly, however, ever gets to that point, adds Lemus. New faculty are hired in great part because of their potential as teachers. When faculty are struggling, her office is ready to provide some of the same kinds of support that have proved useful in supporting students: one-on-one work for faculty wishing to improve their teaching, and learning communities created around issues faculty are interested in working on, such as helping students read and write in their courses. Lemus says the learning communities are about getting faculty to talk about what they do: What are their strategies? What are their techniques? Her office then posts the findings on the website for greater dissemination and change.

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Students in class discussion.

CSUN's Educational Opportunity Programs

Moving Students From 'High Risk' to 'High Potential'

When CSUN leaders set out to revise and modify advising practices, it put the work of the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) front and center. Most advising activity happens at EOP centers, designed to provide access and retention to highly motivated, historically low-income and first-generation students. Ultimately, the renewed attention to student success campuswide, combined with the push to make sure students got the right information, helped strengthen the good work already underway in the EOP office.

Led by José Luis Vargas, the EOP office admits between 500 and 600 first-time, low-income freshmen, some of whom would not be routinely eligible for admission because they are underprepared. Vargas and his team, however, don't see these low-income students with "remedial" needs like most do. "Most literature will suggest to us that the students are considered to be high risk because they are first-generation, they are low-income, and they're underrepresented in higher education," he says. "[But] we decided some years ago to treat the students as 'high potential' instead, meaning that they're smart kids, they just don't have the background necessary."

A Mexico-born, first-generation student himself, Vargas never thought he would go to college. At the insistence of one of his teachers, he applied and was admitted to CSUN. As it turns out, he never left. As he was finishing his master's and working for the EOP and the newly formed retention services unit on campus in the late 1980s, he participated in the transition to the decentralized advising model and in the move of EOP to academic affairs. Then he became director of EOP, where he had a central role in the evolution of freshman orientation. Today his office coordinates three summer transition programs, designed to help bring these high-potential students "up to speed."

The first and most intensive program serves about 127 students (first-generation, with financial and remedial needs, and some not eligible under the university's regular admission standards) who start in the summer and are housed together in a single dorm, so that they can start building a community of peers. The students take six credits during the summer, including an intensive writing course and a freshman seminar that introduces students to the university and how to navigate the system. Students are grouped into small learning communities that stay in place for their first three semesters. The data shows the program has been a success: Between 74 percent and 82 percent of the students are still enrolled by the end of their third semester.

EOP students who come in with better preparation participate in a summer bridge program with similar content and a similar three-semester learning community format, but without the residential component. These students, Vargas says, have the same retention rate as higher income students.

Those EOP students who cannot attend one of the longer summer bridge programs participate in a shorter version called "Fresh Start," a three-day,

on-campus residential program with workshops to help facilitate students' transition to campus life, culture, and expectations. Specifically, it introduces students to the variety of available support services on campus. Once the fall semester starts, the EOP office tries to make sure the students are placed in a learning community and that they have access to an academic peer mentor in at least one of their courses. They also offer 10 EOP success workshops every year.

Thomas, now in his junior year at CSUN, is one of the many students to benefit from the EOP. He came to CSUN with a 2.1 GPA, admitting that in high school, he used to "slack off, a lot." But his hard work in the summer bridge program paid off. By the end of the summer, he received an academic achievement award, given to students who show the most progress during the summer. He remembers being surprised when Koester announced the award-winners at the ceremony. "I didn't even tell my mom, and she was so happy," he says.

Thomas also remembers the learning community experience as extremely useful. "It means you don't feel like a freshman, because you know so many people. You have people to set up study sessions with that you're comfortable with because you went through the same struggles or you both just went through the summer bridge program and know each other," he says. "If I ever needed help with something, I would feel comfortable asking one of my peers because I know them from the summer bridge program. That's what we're here for is to help each other make it through."

Today, Thomas has mostly A's and B's on his college transcript.

CSUN students in class.

Students working in a lab.

CONCLUSION: SO HOW DID KOESTER DO IT?

The story behind CSUN's transformation suggests, first, that a more accurate question is not how she did it but how they did it. Yes, Koester provided sustained leadership, serving as the head of the institution for 11 years. And her focus was fixed. As she says, she gave 11 convocation addresses and in each one she talked about improving graduation rates. That clarity of vision comports with what the research says is necessary for colleges to improve. "Ultimately almost all the research on colleges and universities that have higher than expected graduation rates indicate that it happens with a president who has made himself or herself visibly supportive, consistently demanding, reliably expressive, and who has realigned institutional resources if necessary in order to make it happen," she says.

But one of Koester's most important first steps was encouraging and facilitating the formation of coalitions and teams. Leaders from all over campus — all divisions, colleges, and offices — also were laser focused on the goal of increasing graduation rates and worked collaboratively to reach success. One of the most important collaborations was between student affairs and academic affairs, which embodied, in real time and day-to-day thought and practice, the connection between caring for underprepared students and caring about academic rigor and student learning.

And let's not forgot the data; this was the guiding thread, the main tool of the coalitions and collaborations. Not confined to use in compliance reports, but rather generated to ask and answer questions about what was working, and what was not; what was already in place; and what was missing to achieve their student success goals.

"We had an institution where it wasn't just the president, wasn't just the president and a provost in student affairs," Koester says. "It was the information technology vice president, the advancement vice president, the finance vice president, the associate vice presidents in the various divisions, everybody understood and accepted that it was important and stayed with it." According to Koester, this is the key to leading change: "consistent agreement at the leadership level in both administration and in the faculty that we needed to change … It is the most important practice that a president and his or her leadership team can have among themselves and hope for and build with their faculty leadership."

In spite of Koester's retirement in 2011, CSUN's future looks bright. The campus still exhibits a cultural and practical focus on student success. Her successor, Dianne Harrison, comes from six years as president of CSU Monterey Bay and

20 years in different positions at another institution known for improving its graduation rates: Florida State University. At CSU Monterey Bay, Harrison focused on student success, and with her team, implemented many of the same practices Northridge has: clearing pathways to degree, early warning systems, learning communities, and restructuring advising. CSUN's provost is still Harry Hellenbrand, the "data wonk." In her first address to the campus community, Harrison unequivocally stated, as her first goal, "to continue the path that President Koester and others established with [their] student success initiatives for both full-time and part-time students. What do we need to do to ease the path to graduation and completion in our current environment?" She has worked to strengthen existing programs and support the creation of new ones. "Come back in a few years, and you'll see we'll be doing even better," says Rawitch. (After 40 years of working at CSUN, Rawitch retired in 2013, but will come back next year to lead the Graduation Initiative.)

Northridge does indeed seem poised to stay on the path of steadily increasing graduation rates. CSUN leaders, then and now, seize every opportunity they can to look at themselves, use data, and make changes: the WASC accreditation processes and reports; the systemwide student success initiatives; participation in national initiatives such as Ed Trust's Access to Success. Over time, different divisions and colleges have assumed collaborative work as the natural way of doing things. Consider the example of institutional research and information technologies. The latter has a faculty position that serves as a liaison to bring and optimize technology in the classroom. Or, witness how CSUN handles tasks like enrollment management and admissions that in other places are often siloed and work separately from one another. At CSUN, these two tasks are handled "by very hands-on committees, with representation from all over campus," says Rawitch.

This is a story, an exemplar, not a blueprint. Every campus is different. But to increase student success, every campus needs to work with some of the same ingredients: leadership committed to a single vision of success, a culture of high expectations, campuswide collaboration, and effective use of data.

The work is not easy. It involves working with the campus you have, helping the institution achieve its full potential while simultaneously helping students reach theirs. "You're not going to do this overnight," says Koester. "You're going to do this only by a sort of a laser focus over a long period of time and a willingness of people to work together to try different approaches, evaluate the data, and then make changes."

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