

GOOD TIMING:

Sacramento State's New Effort to Improve Graduation Rates

By Robert S. Nelsen

In May, I had the honor of presiding over the largest spring commencement in Sacramento State's history, when more than 5,300 students received their degrees. But behind that joyous moment was an unfortunate truth: For too many of them, the path to graduation took far longer than they had anticipated.

The California State University System is a leader in providing access to quality, affordable higher education. But in an era of reduced public funding, our students continue to face barriers to timely graduation. To address this critical issue, Sacramento State last year launched the "Finish in Four" and "Through in Two" programs as part of the CSU's system-wide effort to improve graduation rates.

The idea is simple: If a student wants to graduate in four—or, for transfer students, two—years, then we will do all we can to support them. By 2025, the CSU has set goals for Sacramento State to increase the four-year graduation rate for first-time students from 8 to 30 percent; increase the two-year graduation rate for transfer students from 26 to 38 percent; and eliminate the achievement gap, bringing the graduation rate for underrepresented minority students to the same level as that of other students. We intend to meet and surpass those goals way before 2025.

These goals are lofty, but the benefits are clear. Students who graduate in four versus six years have up to \$11,000 less debt and earn an average of \$100,000 more in their

lifetimes. Because these full-time, 15-credit hour bearing students spend more time on campus, they make more connections and have a greater overall satisfaction with their college experience.

One of the most important things we have done is change the campus culture so students know that four-year graduation is possible, and the response has been inspiring. More than 2,300 first-year students signed the Finish in Four pledge last fall, committing to taking 30 units per year. The number of first-year students taking 15 units or more during fall semester has risen from 27.3 percent in 2013 to 84 percent this year. Students expect to graduate in four years, and it is now imperative that we meet that expectation.

We are doing this in a number of ways. First, we are working to eliminate the course bottlenecks that so often can delay timely graduation. During the past year, we added 658 new course sections and encouraged students to take advantage of Summer Session by offering pledgers priority registration and reduced tuition.

Second, we have prioritized academic advising to provide students the resources they need to stay on track. Pledgers are asked to meet once per semester with an advisor to review courses and degree progression, and advisors reached out proactively to more than 3,000 students last year.

Third, we are working with local school districts to ensure that high school students graduate fully college-ready. We have made great strides through our "College Ready:

Beyond the GPA" outreach campaign to high school students and their families, and the number of students in the incoming class who will require remedial math courses is expected to drop from 40 percent to 15 percent.

These efforts are already beginning to pay dividends. Our projections indicate the four-year and transfer graduation rates have increased to 12 percent and 32.2 percent, respectively. We have begun to narrow the achievement gap. Remarkably, nearly half of last fall's incoming students remain on track for timely graduation.

We have set our sights high, and our faculty and staff have answered the call. They have shown what is possible when a campus works together to honor its commitment to students. There is still much to do, but I am proud of what we have accomplished so far, and look forward to the work to come. **P**

Robert S. Nelsen is president of Sacramento State.