

California Community College Collaborative (C4)

What Does a Ten Percent Achievement Gap Really Mean? (And What Can We Do About It?)

The Complexity of Achievement and Opportunity at the California State
Universities

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What is an Achievement Gap?

For several decades, policymakers, the media, and the general public have leveled ethical and economic critiques at colleges and universities because of disparities in student outcomes, especially those related to graduation and degree attainment. And, indeed, some classes of university and college students persist and earn bachelor's degrees at greater rates than others. For example, in the United States there is a history of enduring university and college achievement differences related to race: Whites and East Asians have relatively high academic performance relative to African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and Southeast Asian subgroups. This differentiation in student achievement is characterized by the term "achievement gap." The most telling and overt disparity concerns the category of race, as if *race* signifies a condition or characteristic. On the one hand, race serves as an historical emblem of discrimination and leads to notions of social reparations in the form of a debt. On the other hand, race is merely a way of categorizing people into groups that signify certain cultural, familial, or geographic attachments (regardless of how much or little individual members of those groups identify with them).

Nevertheless, when educators, policymakers, and legislators ponder over differences and gaps in performance, they typically focus on a number of salient, if simple, questions. For example, in the matter of racial differences: "Why do only 40% of African Americans at this university graduate within six years when 60% of Asian students complete within the same period?" Or, "Why do 68% of Latino students at University A graduate within six years but only 48% of Latinos at University B?" Similarly, for gender differences: "Why is the graduation rate for women at this university 8 percentage points higher than that for men?" These are all reasonable questions, although they seldom have straightforward or easy answers.

What causes Achievement Gaps?

Scholars from a variety of disciplines have investigated possible explanations for the achievement gap. Some attribute it to social stratification within U.S. society.ⁱ Others point to inequality in K-12 educational opportunities such as exposure to quality teaching, availability of resources, academic rigor, and so forth.ⁱⁱ In particular, students from races and ethnicities traditionally underrepresented in college are less likely to be exposed to K-12 environments that are associated with college readiness and success, which frequently results in them being under-prepared for college-level work. And because students who are academically prepared for college (based upon their high school background and grade point average) tend to outperform their less well-prepared peers,ⁱⁱⁱ this can help to explain the achievement gap. However, this explanation is fraught with contingencies. For example, student motivation often determines whether or not similarly prepared students will graduate, and socioeconomic status has a higher correlation with persistence and graduation than student ability.^{iv}

Indeed, citing numerous examples of low-income students graduating at lower rates than their middle- and high-income peers, researchers have identified financial hardship as a primary reason for the achievement gap.^v However, this explanation can also be problematic. Although universities often rely on Pell-eligibility as a proxy for low-income status, the actual cutoff point between low- and middle-incomes is debatable and thus Pell and similar markers of socioeconomic status may not be optimal indicators.^{vi} Furthermore, regardless of how socioeconomic status is classified, it does not differentiate among students who live at home with their parents, those who are independent, and those who have children and/or other dependents of their own, despite the fact that these circumstances are relevant to students' ability to pay for college and other living expenses. As well, while some scholars argue that financial subsidies to low-income individuals are

one of the few measures that can lead to closure of the achievement gap,^{vii} efforts to bolster students' finances during college, while a rational choice, are likely paltry interventions as socioeconomic status is closely tied to other characteristics of capital (social, cultural, familial) over which institutions of higher education have little influence. Indeed, some researchers cite social and psychological factors such as cultural capital and stereotype threat—in which students feel themselves to be at risk of confirming negative stereotypes about their social group—as additional contributors to achievement gaps.^{viii}

How Can We Better Understand Achievement Gaps?

Clearly, the question of why some groups—Whites and East Asians, for example—often graduate at higher rates than their African American, Latino, and Native American peers is complex and not conducive to the type of one-sentence answers typically demanded by policymakers and the general public. To better understand—and to better explain—achievement gaps, university leaders might move beyond basic racial/ethnic classifications and examine variations in achievement among other natural identity groups such as gender, as well as *attributed* identity groups, such as those relating to socioeconomic status.^{ix} Furthermore, since racial categories are at best generalizations or proxies, university leaders might disaggregate them by breaking the race classification into types (e.g., disaggregating Asians into Chinese, Vietnamese, Indian, Filipino, Hmong, etc., as well as Latinos into those with Cuban origins and those with Mexican origins) or by combining various natural identities (i. e., bi-racial, multi-racial). Also useful would be examining achievement through different combinations of natural and attributed identities (e.g., low-income African American females), as scholars note that the intersections of various conceptualized classes advantage or disadvantage certain students, especially when it comes to baccalaureate attainment.^x

Disaggregating and examining various combinations of natural and attributed identity groups may be the first step in better understanding achievement gaps and, in the process, working to improve persistence and attainment for all students. But what about those institutions where there is no achievement gap, or where there is a *negative* gap? Take, for example, majority-minority institutions (those in which minority students outnumber Whites and Asians). Leaders of universities such as these might point out that Latino students, for example, graduate at rates similar to the general population. Yet depending upon the percentage of Latinos in the student body, this could indeed be a cause for celebration, or it might simply reflect that Latinos are, for the most part, being compared to themselves. Similarly, a university might advertise that its minority students graduate at rates similar to Whites and Asians but neglect to mention that completion rates for all groups are well below peer group averages. Still other universities appear to have made great strides in closing their achievement gap, but a close look at the numbers shows that the so-called “progress” is driven more by from diminishing graduation rates among White and Asian students than by improved performance among Latinos, African Americans, or other underrepresented groups.

As these three examples illustrate, the absence of an achievement gap does not necessarily indicate that a university is serving its students successfully. Indeed, regardless of the magnitude or direction of a university's gap, data-driven efforts to better understand the complexity of student achievement will be necessary if institutions are to provide the opportunities and necessary support for all students in attaining a bachelor's degree.

What is the Connection between Achievement and Opportunity?

The literature suggests that students' experiences are seminal in persistence and achievement. For example, students with negative experiences in college do not persist to the same degree as those with positive experiences. Students who are isolated, lonely, or out of their comfort zone, as well as those who are assaulted or bullied, are challenged to complete degrees.^{xi} Yet none of these factors are typically included in policy discussions about the achievement gap.

Furthermore, the term *achievement* is itself problematical, both for its connotations of merit and for its policy use in recent decades (e.g., the assumption that graduation is the only meaningful achievement).^{xii} Indeed, some critics suggest that *opportunity* is a more appropriate term.^{xiii} However, if opportunity is viewed as the development of individuals' capabilities,^{xiv} then outcomes such as attainment of baccalaureate degrees, advancement to further education, or preparation for employment are irrelevant. Yet, if opportunity refers to a future condition such as employability or possession of the skills necessary to participate meaningfully in society, then the lack of a baccalaureate degree is highly relevant and suggests a failure of opportunity to a number of possible futures (e.g., fulfilling employment, further education). In a more specific way, if opportunity refers to a future condition, then the quality of the university experience and the value of that experience (economically, socially, personally) are highly relevant. This suggests that within the university there are different experiences and outcomes—such as limited learning, low grades, and restricted student development—and that all of these experiences and outcomes (without regard to race, gender, or socioeconomic status) qualify opportunity.

In addition, while the term *achievement gap* necessarily focuses on students (pointing out which groups are performing better or worse than others), it is the *institution* that must modify its goals and practices, and the institution that is judged on its performance. Student learning, student development, and student experiences are seldom part of the achievement discourse.

How Can We Begin to Close Achievement Gaps?

Shifting from a rhetoric of achievement to one of opportunity is thus more consequential than it may seem, for if colleges and universities maintain a focus on achievement based on the graduation rates of various groups of students, history shows that there seems to be little that institutions can do to close the gap(s). Indeed, at many universities, achievement gaps have widened in recent years, despite improved graduation rates among all or most populations. And at universities where achievement gaps have begun to close, one can often point to increased selectivity at entry or drops in overall graduation rates as a primary cause.

The challenge, then, is for colleges and universities to contextualize student achievement and opportunity, without relying too much on the rhetoric of a "gap." Contextualization may require more nuanced characterizations of students and their various natural and attributed identity groups, including their native or domestic language, their academic backgrounds, their gender, and their socioeconomic status. It may also require characterization of the specific university—its selectivity, its mission and purposes, its history, its human and cultural geography (e.g., rural agricultural, suburban bedroom, or high tech community, as well as its immigration history), and its faculty (e.g., ethnic makeup, professional orientation toward teaching or research, and predominance of full-time, part-time, tenured, or non-tenure track faculty).

From contextualization, university leaders can make assertions about expectations and outcomes related to student achievement. For example, "Given the high level of research activity carried on at this university, the relatively high selectivity of students, and the history and reputation of this campus as strong in academics, even with a large Latino student population, our expectation is that

six-year graduation rates will be well-above the national average and that there will be minimal disparities in graduation rates among students, regardless of their race, gender, socioeconomic status, or level of prior academic preparation.” Or, for a very different type of institution, “Given that a vast and growing majority of our students have high levels of financial need, hail predominantly from underserved communities, and require remediation in Math and/or English, we are proud to announce that six-year graduation rates among all types of students have steadily improved over the last five years. Over the next five years we will work tirelessly to improve opportunity and achievement for all students, particularly those who face the greatest challenges in degree completion.”

The second matter for colleges and universities to examine relates to student experiences and outcomes within both the institution in general and in specific programs. At minimum, this might entail in-depth examinations of departmental conditions—such as faculty accessibility, frequency of faculty-student interactions, academic support, grading practices, and/or peer relations—that may have disproportionate effects on certain students. Taken further, this information might lead university leaders to consider the idea of “person-environment fit”^{xv} and the notion that persistence and degree attainment may be substantially improved if students with particular characteristics, interests, and abilities are encouraged to enroll in departments or programs that are compatible with those characteristics, interests, and abilities.^{xvi} While critics of “matching,” as this practice is known, argue that it could be a slippery slope leading to racial profiling and educational tracking, other scholars point to the fact that “departmental culture and climate [affect] student learning, satisfaction, and persistence,”^{xvii} and that without attention to the experiences and conditions that affect student opportunity, gaps in achievement may persist indefinitely.

Achievement gaps have thus far persisted at U.S. colleges and universities because of imperfect definitions of achievement, but also because of institutional habits and behaviors. For example, enrollment management practices continue to rely upon criteria that reflect academic potential but not probability for student persistence or graduation. Low-income students are required to work but pressured to carry a full load of courses. Students with academic deficiencies are expected to remediate in short order or be set adrift. Faculty and departmental demographics have not altered substantially over the decades. And where demographics have altered—for example in ethnicity or gender—these are typically in select areas (e.g., social sciences and humanities). Thus, efforts to close achievement gaps, defined in the traditional sense, have had little success.

Attention to a race-based achievement gap within the California State University (CSU) system is not likely to dissipate in the coming years. Indeed, the CSU Chancellor’s Office has set firm goals for 2025 related to closing achievement gaps, both at each university and across the system. To meet these goals, however, the universities will need to dig deeper into their persistence and graduation data and ask questions such as:

1. “Which identity groups (or combination of groups) are driving the achievement gap at my institution?”
2. “What demographic and/or enrollment shifts may be affecting the performance of various groups?”
3. “How do non-identity-based factors such as socioeconomic status and academic preparation factor into the achievement gap?”

4. “How might we move from a deficit model of thinking—where the social and cultural capital associated with non-White students is viewed as a challenge to their academic success—to one that focuses on and strengthens the assets these students bring to college?”
5. “Moving beyond individual determinants of college completion, which institutional programs and policies improve opportunity and achievement among various categories of lower-performing students, and which may perpetuate the achievement gap?”

Achievement and Opportunity at the California State University System¹

Despite decades of research on achievement gaps in higher education, as well as the implementation of numerous university programs and support systems designed to improve student persistence and completion, most public universities in the U.S. have not experienced substantial or sustained progress toward parity in student outcomes. Gaps in student achievement remain between students from certain races and ethnicities, income levels, levels of academic preparation, English language competency or fluency, and gender. Differences are also apparent across program areas within individual institutions. Policymakers have put pressure on universities to close gaps in student achievement, yet conditions outside of the universities are far more responsible for these gaps than the universities themselves. The quality and rigor of high school curricula, students’ neighborhoods and social groups, and family incomes and expectations, for example, all influence students’ academic persistence and achievement. So, too, do students’ obligations outside of college; for example, students who must work in excess of 30 hours a week to pay for college are substantially less likely to persist and attain a degree.^{xviii} Yet universities do have the capacity to modify policies, programs, and priorities in ways that better support and educate students; that improve the climate in which students learn; and that influence how students are placed into various courses and programs. In these ways, universities can work to improve graduation rates among all students—especially those who face the biggest barriers to degree completion—and at the same time, begin to close achievement gaps.

California State University, as a system of 23 distinct universities, defies definitive or overarching statements about graduation rates and achievement gaps. However, analyses of these trends suggest some commonalities among institutions. Perhaps the most pronounced commonality lies in demographics: each university is growing; much of this growth is driven by larger populations of Underrepresented Minorities (URMs), particularly Latinos; and many of these new students are low-income and/or demonstrate lower levels of academic preparedness than their White and Asian (Non-URM) peers. These demographic shifts bring intense challenges for institutions. That the vast majority of universities in the CSU system nonetheless demonstrate improved graduation rates is notable.

However, the causes of these improvements can be elusive and require careful and detailed explanations. For example, 13 universities in the CSU system demonstrated improved completion rates among all or most racial groups, yet had consistent or growing achievement gaps between URM and Non-URM students. What might explain this pattern? Perhaps these universities have instituted new or expanded existing academic support services or programs, and these efforts similarly affected all groups. Or perhaps they have paid greater attention to persistence and attainment in light of the 2015 Graduation Initiative, in turn improving completion across the board. But for roughly half of these 13 universities, substantial increases in the levels of academic

¹ This is an abridged version of the report; the original provided in-depth analyses of achievement and opportunity at each of the 23 California State Universities.

preparation among incoming students, particularly URMs, may have also played a role. Specifically, as program impaction allowed universities to be more selective in admissions, graduation rates improved. Yet because average SAT scores for URMs continue to lag behind those for Non-URMs, and because URMs are more likely to be from low-income backgrounds or require remedial education, the achievement gap persists.

Another set of universities in the CSU system demonstrates a different pattern. At these 6 institutions, URM graduation rates have either fallen, remained stagnant, or improved at a rate substantially lower than that for Non-URMs, leading in many cases to larger achievement gaps. Are these 6 universities failing to provide necessary levels of academic support for their URM students? Perhaps, but it may also be the case that demographic shifts toward more low-income and less-well-prepared students may also be factors. Persistent gender achievement gaps at many of these universities may also contribute to the pattern; indeed, many of the California State Universities would be well-served to investigate the intersection of race and gender as it relates to degree completion and, if necessary, focus their academic support and retention efforts on men of color.

Of the 3 universities in the CSU system that demonstrate substantially smaller achievement gaps, only two appear to have made any real progress toward ensuring that URMs graduate at rates similar to their Non-URM peers (at the third, falling graduation rates among Whites and Asians have driven the smaller achievement gap). Can these institutions serve as models of promising practices for other universities in the system? Possibly, but in comparison to most of the other universities, these institutions are relatively small, geographically isolated, or have specialized missions. What has helped them to narrow the achievement gap may or may not be relevant elsewhere. Indeed, as this white paper illustrates, context—not only the demographics of an institution, but also its selectivity, mission, purposes, history, and human and cultural geography—matters a great deal.

In the coming years, it is likely that most universities in the CSU system will demonstrate (or continue to demonstrate) higher graduation rates and, perhaps, smaller achievement gaps. In fact, because of the six-year delay between when a cohort starts college and when completion is measured, the effects of numerous programs and support systems put in place as part of the 2015 Graduation Initiative may become more apparent in completion rates for the 2009 and later cohorts.

Nevertheless, university leaders should not assume that higher graduation rates and/or smaller achievement gaps necessarily indicate equitable opportunities for all students. As this white paper contends, evaluating student achievement and opportunity is highly complex and ill-suited to simplistic explanations or direct comparisons among institutions. Improved graduation rates must be assessed in light of the educational preparedness and socioeconomic levels of incoming students; differences in achievement among various identity groups must be investigated across departments, programs, and corners of the university; and retention and academic support programs must be assessed continually for efficacy.

In other words, the work of improving *opportunity*, which takes into account students' experiences, development, and outcomes, must be continual, even once there is parity in *achievement* among various groups. By focusing on opportunity, university leaders may find it easier to identify the work that still needs to be done to improve student success, to redirect resources to better support those efforts, and ultimately, to improve the experiences of all students, especially those who face the greatest challenges in degree completion.

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