Invited Commentary

Championing Social Mobility

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Introduction

When I became president of California State University San Marcos (CSUSM) during the summer of 2019, I was excited to launch a listening and learning tour to get to know the campus community, which includes just over 16,000 students and nearly 60,000 alumni. As a former vice president for Student Engagement and Enrollment Services at Old Dominion University (ODU), I was drawn to CSUSM because of its diverse and multicultural community as well as its established track record of student success. I was eager to meet our students and hear their stories – why did they choose CSUSM? What has their educational journey been like? What are their hopes and dreams for the future?

Of course, no two students provided the same answer. Some told me about the pride of being first in their families to go to college but the uncertainty that went along with that as they navigated the financial aid and admissions applications without parental support. Others told me about the challenges of going to school while juggling part-time or full-time jobs and/or parenting responsibilities. And still, others shared stories from their previous military experience or their desire to make a career change/enhance their career trajectory. While almost universally, our students share their excitement to make progress toward their degrees, many also imparted complex combinations of family responsibilities, employment, and financial pressures which required constant time and energy to navigate.

As leaders in CUMU institutions, you know these stories – the individual details are different, but themes of students striving to overcome financial, geographic, and socioeconomic challenges are surely familiar. Institutions like ours proudly embrace our regional role to serve as strongholds of the American Dream, serving an outsized share of historically underserved

populations (such as low-income, minority and first-generation students) and offering programs and services that meet them where they are, fitting into the reality of their lives with opportunities to engage in real-world learning that will launch them into meaningful careers and a lifetime of success.

Now, as we emerge from the depths of the COVID-19 pandemic - the effects of which we will surely feel for years to come – coupled with rising income inequality and economic recession, our role as elevators of social mobility for the students and communities we serve is more important than ever.

But what is social mobility? When I began sponsoring conversations on this topic at my former institution, where I co-founded a National Center on Social Mobility, I noted that there was not always a clear understanding of the definition. At its core, social mobility is the movement of individuals from one socioeconomic status to another, and higher education is one of the most important drivers of an individual's upward mobility in society. At CSUSM, we recognize that the education we provide helps our students transcend barriers faced by earlier generations, unlocking their potential for lifelong success. This isn't only key for individuals and families but organizations, industries and society which benefit from a broadened talent pipeline, innovation, greater social equity and economic mobility across all sectors.

However, historically, higher education in the United States has contributed to the socioeconomic divide rather than solved it. National college rankings have exasperated the situation further, lauding exclusivity in admissions rather than scrutinizing the ways colleges actually create broad access. While organizations like CollegeNet have published a Social Mobility Index (on which CSUSM was proud to rank No. 1 in fall 2022) for about a decade, it was only in 2018 that *US News* added a social mobility factor its rankings – a direct outcome of those early conversations I just mentioned. Another exciting and promising marker – a new Carnegie classification will measure how institutions contribute to social and economic mobility while serving a diverse student population.

Today, I am so proud to be a part of CUMU, an organization that recognizes not only that "Place Does Matter" but that we are uniquely positioned to impact social mobility and inclusive regional growth – economic growth that is distributed fairly across society and creates opportunities for all. Collectively, we represent over 52 metropolitan areas; and 33% of our institutions are designated minority-serving institutions. At CSUSM, 55% of our students are first generation, about 50% are Hispanic/Latinx, 40% are 23 years or older, 40% are Pell-eligible, and over 10% are veterans or military affiliated. Because of all these factors, the majority of our

students are considered "nontraditional" – although I would argue that nontraditional IS the new tradition.

As we look to the immediate future, as leaders and practitioners in our respective organizations, it's an economic and social imperative that we develop and share new strategies which can fuel social mobility and inclusive regional growth. Providing access in an affordable way, broadening the educational pipeline, committing to student success, and graduating students into high-quality jobs will have a transformational ripple effect in our communities. Individually and collectively, we can leverage these practices to support our students and communities by:

- Promoting Integrative & Hands On-Learning
- Expanding Access & Prioritizing Student Success
- Eliminating Barriers and Advocating for Affordability

Promoting Integrative and Hands-On Learning

By intentionally connecting our work on campus with the local community, we can help students integrate their learning and ultimately prepare them to be future leaders who are able to address the complex and novel challenges of society. Integration of learning is how students learn across contexts and is a skill that will aid in career success throughout their lifetimes. This ability to integrate learning has practical, real-world applications, for example:

- Coordinating what students are doing in internship or work experience with what they are learning in their major.
- Aligning educational opportunities in the local urban and metro area with curriculum on-campus.
- Linking current learning with prior knowledge, work experiences, and skills.

Creating connections across experiences and knowledge can aid students as they prepare to enter the 21st century economy (Barber, 2020). CUMU leaders can help make college a set of connected experiences, which requires a level of intentionality. Pairing hands-on experiential learning on top of in-class curriculum has been proven to be more effective for students' learning (Selznick, Dahl, Youngerman, & Mayhew, 2022).

At CSUSM our 10-week Summer Scholars program provides undergraduate scholars firsthand experience in faculty science research labs. This integrative learning opportunity acknowledges that while science is both communal and diverse, even today women and people of color still make up a minority of the STEM workforce. Through hands-on research experience, networking opportunities and enrichment opportunities such as career panels, workshops aimed at soft skills such as scientific communication, and field trips to local employers, the program promotes a sense of community and exposes students to future opportunities. In fact, more than 40% of our

Summer Scholars alumni go on to earn advanced degrees. Taking this a step further, we have partnered with donors and grant funders to ensure participating students receive a stipend to help cover their living expenses because we never want a student to have to opt out of a transformative learning experience because of lack of funds.

Another hands-on learning example at CSUSM is our Innovation Hub which serves as a conduit to connect the local region with the campus community and provides opportunities for partnerships. Uniquely, our Hub asks our students and partners to consider innovation and entrepreneurship at the intersection of diversity and social change. This is key as we know that preparing students for current and future industry needs means fostering their innovation and entrepreneurship capacities (Selznick, Dahl, Youngerman, & Mayhew, 2022). Partnering with faculty and industry leaders to provide hands-on learning and research opportunities as well as mentorship for our students has a lasting positive impact. For example, each semester, the hub hosts a "Quick Pitch" competition where students from all disciplines are invited to pitch their ideas for a business. Multiple successful student-run business ventures have resulted.

Just as important as getting students into the educational pipeline is creating educational experiences that prepare them for future careers. As educators, it is critical that we know what skills employers believe our graduates need when they enter the workforce. The 2021 Report *Employer Views on What Matters Most* from the American Association of Colleges and Universities in partnership with Hanover Research, asserts that over half of employers (56%) view application of knowledge/skills in real-world settings and (53%) view creative thinking as very important (Finley, 2021). Thus, intentionality in preparing our students for post-graduation success is imperative.

Expanding Access and Prioritizing Student Success

Social mobility requires a commitment to making a college education attainable for more students. This specifically includes efforts to expand access to higher education for students who may not have previously considered college as an option. One way to expand access is through innovative partnerships. Building on an initiative that CSUSM forged with over a dozen K-12 school districts to offer guaranteed admission to qualifying students, we created a new partnership with the Coalition of Black and African American Education – a group of about a dozen leaders that serve and are a part of our regional Black and African American community.

An outcome of our Black Student Success initiative, the MOU with the Coalition further aligns our efforts related to enrollment, retention, and bolstering our campus climate that support students of all backgrounds. However, we know that access to an institution is not enough. Providing holistic wrap around student resources and support are additional elements of a multipronged approach designed to unlock the potential of youth in our service area.

For example, student success coaching is another social mobility student success initiative, which has transformed how we support our diverse and talented students in reaching the finish line. In my experience at ODU and now at CSUSM, I have witnessed how student success coaching can support students' successful transition to the university. What is most remarkable are the positive outcomes for coached students including increased retention and higher GPAs. Success coaches help students learning how to network, connect, as well as identify obstacles (e.g., finances, time-management, etc.) and persistence strategies.

This isn't just important for our individual students and their families, but for our entire regional economy! In San Diego County where CSUSM is situated, 100% of job growth in the past five years was in careers that required either a degree or higher education credential (San Diego Regional EDC, 2022). Our urban and metropolitan areas have unique assets, and it is critical that our institutions produce graduates to meet the current and future needs of our regional economies. At CSUSM, 75% of graduates remain in the region and these graduates fuel our local economy and fill many high need areas including engineering and STEM. However, in my metro area there are many STEM and engineering jobs that remain unfilled.

Finding ways to increase the talent pipeline by closing equity gaps is of utmost importance. Data from the Pew Research Center illuminates that Black and Latinx workers remain underrepresented in STEM jobs (Kennedy, Fry, & Funk, 2021). To address this challenge, we must start before college, by exposing K-12 students to STEM and inviting them on-campus to experience hands-on learning, we can positively impact the higher education pipeline. We must think big and apply a futurist lens which includes partnerships between K-12 and higher education to meet the economic needs of our service region.

Eliminating Barriers and Advocating for Affordability

CUMU leaders are uniquely placed to be the champions of the social mobility initiatives and can take the lead on their campuses in student success initiatives that dismantle barriers and work to close opportunity gaps. As we go about this work, it is imperative that we look internally at our own policies, practices and even communications to see how we may be unintentionally contributing to equity gaps by our own doing.

For example, we must look at our higher ed lingo, acronyms and language with fresh eyes and a student audience in mind. We also need to turn a critical eye to some of our long-standing processes and policies to see if the end-users – our students – can be better served by them. For example, we often create deadlines that are, in actuality, quite arbitrary. And what's worse, because of dense, jargony communications, students are surprised to learn when they have missed deadlines – and sometimes the impact is devastating to their academic career. If we step back and look critically at all our "business as usual" policies and practices across the student life

cycle – from first point of contact to graduation day – we may see improvement across the board on student access, retention and graduation. In addition, we recently launched a workgroup that is reviewing our institutional policies with a diversity, equity and inclusion lens.

One of the largest barriers for students is affordability, and the rising cost of living is a significant financial hurdle for many students, particularly those who have children or dependents. In fact, in CSUSM's region, it has been estimated that to be self-sufficient, a family of four needs to earn a minimum of $118,000 (San Diego Childcare and Development Planning Council, 2022). And yet via self-reported data, we know that 52% of our student population have family incomes below $60,000.

As just one example of how we are striving to address financial barriers, at CSUSM we examined the fee structure of our on-campus childcare center. Although initially established in 2007 to support our student parents, we've learned that even the discounted student rate can be too costly for many student parents who are also juggling the costs of tuition, fees, transportation, housing, and other basic needs. To that end, we were glad to create a grant-funded Child Care Access Program that will increase utilization of our childcare center, covering the associated fees on a sliding scale based on their financial aid eligibility.

Advancing social mobility also means intentional university efforts to reengage students, specifically creating pathways for degree completers and providing the needed support. A commitment to student success requires identifying and providing needed wraparound services (e.g., tutoring, childcare, transportation, etc.) as students re-enroll. This recommitment to our students is a must if we are going to support them to the finish line and prepare them to flourish in careers in the twenty-first-century economy.

To colleagues in my home state of California, as well as Texas, New York, and Illinois, we account for approximately one-third of stop-outs, and the time is now to make strides for the students and communities we serve. To meet the demands of companies in our urban and metropolitan areas, CUMU institutions need to ensure that first-in-family, traditionally underserved, active-duty military and veterans, working adults, transfer students, and degree completers are in the equation to meet the demand.

Since we know that affordability is a large concern for students, our current discussions of doubling Pell Grants are timely; projections show that the Pell Grant may cover as little as 20% of attendance cost in 2028 (Reich, 2018). This is a drastic drop from the 1980s when the maximum Pell grant covered nearly 75% of costs at a 4-year public higher education institution. There is great social and economic benefit if we collectively advocate for Pell funding increases with legislative officials in our region. This year, we celebrate 50 years since the creation of the Pell Grant, and closing the gap between the cost of college attendance and Pell Grant award is a

tangible way to advocate for our students who need it most. For many of our first-in-first family and low-income students, the ability to finance higher education is as important as academic ability in college persistence.

The Finish Line

CUMU is committed to empowering students to reach the finish line, and we are proud of the work we do to champion social mobility and inclusive economic growth. I challenge you to strategize ways to advocate for the role our institutions play in social mobility. Now is the time to embrace unexplored approaches that can benefit our students and the surrounding urban and metropolitan areas. In today's evolving environment, we must support student social mobility and the inclusive economic growth of the communities we serve.

Our collective work matters, and together we will chart a course that will positively impact our students and our service communities. Social mobility and inclusive economic growth are important topics worthy of intense discussion, and I know, individually and collectively, CUMU can do amazing things!

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