

# A LASER-LIKE FOCUS

## on First-Generation Success

By Karen S. Haynes

In late May, just a week after wildfires forced the evacuation of our campus and the postponement of our commencement ceremony, I presided over the graduation of 2,794 students. Among them was Cipriano Vargas, a student member of the California State University board of trustees appointed by Governor Jerry Brown, who was receiving degrees in sociology and women's studies. And like more than 1,452 of his fellow graduates celebrating with him that day, he was a first-generation college student.

In total, 52 percent of our 2014 graduating class at CSU San Marcos comprised first-generation students. It's a fact of which I am incredibly proud, and it's no accident. Our success is the result of great intentionality, a true commitment to serving our region, and more than 10 years of work.

### Mission

When I came to CSU San Marcos 11 years ago, no institution in the area—including my own—had an exclusive focus on the needs of our region's population. Most of our sister institutions had—and in some cases had already achieved—national aspirations. But what the region needed was an institutional partner that prioritized educating the workforce, attracting and retaining jobs, contributing to the quality of life, and driving continued economic development.

Of course, this mission, in its broadest sense, was what led to the founding of CSU San Marcos nearly 25 years ago. But over the last decade, we have distilled it down to its most vital essence. Simply put, CSU San Marcos' mission is to significantly raise the educational attainment rate of all residents in our region.

To do that, we needed to understand and serve the residents of the surrounding area. This meant meeting our students where they were rather than recruiting only the elite and college-ready, understanding the barriers they faced, and then bulldozing those barriers out of their way. Some of our students statistically aren't as likely to graduate from college and need additional services and support to persist, but we haven't shied away from partnering with them because they are the heart of our institution.

The first step in our process to truly focus on the most at-risk student populations was to understand the demographics of our region, research whose educational needs weren't being met, and then focus on them as our prospective student targets. Two significant demographics in our region met these criteria. In 2013, the population of our region was 33 percent Hispanic and 65 percent non-degree holders—and of course those two populations overlapped significantly. Raising the educational attainment rate in the region would mean embracing those individuals as potential CSU San Marcos students and preparing



our institution to serve them well.

One of the most important first steps we took to signal our new laser-like focus on this goal was to pursue the U.S. Department of Education's Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) designation, which we set as a goal in 2005 and achieved, on schedule, in 2010. For the institution, being an HSI meant we would have access to additional resources to support these students during their time on campus. For our Hispanic students, the designation signified a promise to partner with them and accountability standards for this partnership.

## University Pathways

We also made reaching back to our community a top priority, sharing information with teachers, principals and guidance counselors; community college administrators and faculty; and parents about the role CSU San Marcos intended to play in the life and future of the region. We educated our community about the pathways to and through our university—and we needed the community's help to build new ones.

In 2005, the superintendent of the San Marcos Unified School District suggested the first step in building those new pathways—a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between CSU San Marcos and the school district. Not just a ceremonial piece of paper full of goodwill and little else, this MOU, with deliverables on both sides, offers high school graduates in the district guaranteed admission to CSU San Marcos provided that they met specific academic (and, in some cases, non-academic) qualifications. The MOU requires the district to expand its college-prep curriculum and culture beginning in middle school to increase the number of students who were college-ready at graduation. Without that MOU, the change it fostered in the local school district, and the subsequent MOUs signed with nine other school districts (now housed under our Alliance to Accelerate Excellence in Education) covering more than 200,000 students, there could not have been 1,453 first-generation graduates at our May ceremony.

## Student Support

Of course, creating a pipeline of well-qualified, diverse, first-generation students to our campus was only half of the equation. Once the students reached campus, we needed to be ready to help all of our students succeed.

When I arrived at CSU San Marcos, we had among the lowest retention and graduation rates of any institution in the CSU system. This simply wasn't acceptable, and I knew data held the key to making a change. We analyzed data to determine where we were losing students or seeing a slower pace to graduation. In 2007, we made a commitment to direct funds to the creation of a unit that focuses on identifying, adapting and

implementing best practices in the areas of retention and time-to-graduation.

This meant that in 2010, we began enrolling students from the first MOU class and concurrently implemented best practices that helped us not only attract but retain first-generation students. For example, we began to utilize roadmaps so that our students could see the path to their desired degree. They are no longer unaware of what would happen to their anticipated graduation date if they changed majors late in sophomore year or dropped from 14 credits per semester to 10, and conversely can see the benefits of taking a full course load and planning well in advance to meet their end goal of graduation.

We also shifted our advising system to make it more useful to and actionable for our students. While faculty are vital to attracting students to and advising them on career paths in their fields of academic inquiry, they are not always well-versed in the intricacies of the complex requirements necessary to navigate a university. In light of that, we moved to a system of full-time professional advisers who could master the nuances of the CSU San Marcos curriculum and milestones necessary to graduate—this also freed up time for faculty to make a difference in the classroom where they shine.

In short, we are illuminating the path to a degree, ensuring all students have what they need to excel inside and outside of the classroom and giving them the information they needed to own their progress.

## Future

We expect that our MOUs will bring more first-generation students to us in the short-term and, with the partnership between CSU San Marcos faculty and teachers in local schools, these students will be better and better prepared and more and more likely to succeed. We are seeking philanthropic support so that we can increase our outreach to parents, teachers and counselors, build stronger connections between our faculty and high school teachers to improve their efficacy in the classroom, and gather data on the successes of students from our region, whether they attend CSU San Marcos or another institution.

There's still so much more that can be done. We're not yet ready to say that a 52 percent first-generation graduation rate is as high as we can go. But long-term, our goal is to see the number of first-generation students we enroll drop to reflect our university's work to increase attainment in our community. And that number will drop as we enroll the siblings and children of our graduates, who will no longer carry the title of first-generation students. At that point, we will be able to say that we're truly living our mission and making generational, community-wide changes. **P**

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