

# Postsecondary Access and Achievement At CSUs

## Executive Summary

In the spring of 2017, the California State Universities (CSU) Office of the Chancellor publicly released data from their High School Academic Performance Reports. The California Charter Schools Association (CCSA) analyzed college acceptance rates, enrollment rates, retention rates, and college academic performance of charter school graduates and traditional public school graduates in the CSU system. The results indicate that charter school graduates, specifically graduates from historically disadvantaged subgroups, were more successful in accessing the CSU system than their traditional public school (TPS) peers between 2015 and 2017.

Specifically, this report finds:

- 1 Charter schools in California send a larger proportion of their students to California State Universities (CSU) than do traditional public schools (TPS) with a total of 8% of charter graduates attending CSUs compared to 6% of TPS graduates.
- 2 A larger proportion of historically disadvantaged students attending CSUs come from charter schools than from TPS. Almost 60% of charter graduates enrolled in CSUs are Latino compared to 48% of TPS enrollees.
- 3 At CSUs, despite success in college access, charter graduates slightly underperform their TPS peers, with a lower grade point average (GPA) (2.85 vs 2.97) and lower retention rate (73% vs 83%) between the first and second year of college.

# Introduction

Charter schools in California are sending a greater and more diverse proportion of their students to California State Universities (CSUs) than traditional public schools (TPS). However, these positive results are tempered by charter students' outcomes once they are enrolled in CSUs. Charter students tend to have slightly lower grade point averages (GPAs) and persistence rates in CSUs than TPS students.

The CSU system is comprised of 23 four-year universities in California. According to [materials](#) produced by the CSU system, CSU is “the largest, most diverse and one of the most affordable university systems in the nation.”<sup>i</sup> The CSU Office of the Chancellor shared data files from their High School Academic Performance Reports from 2015 to 2017 with the California Charter School Association (CCSA).<sup>ii</sup> The data from these reports tie student performance to the high school they graduated from. Over 50,000 California high school senior students (10% of all seniors) are accounted for in this analysis. This paper examines charter schools' performance in terms of student access to CSUs (“Access”) and the achievement of those students within the CSU system (“Achievement”).

## Access

Proportionally, charters are giving graduates better access to CSUs than are TPS. From the high school graduating class of 2016, 8% of charter graduates enrolled in the CSU system in fall 2017, compared to only 6% of TPS graduates.

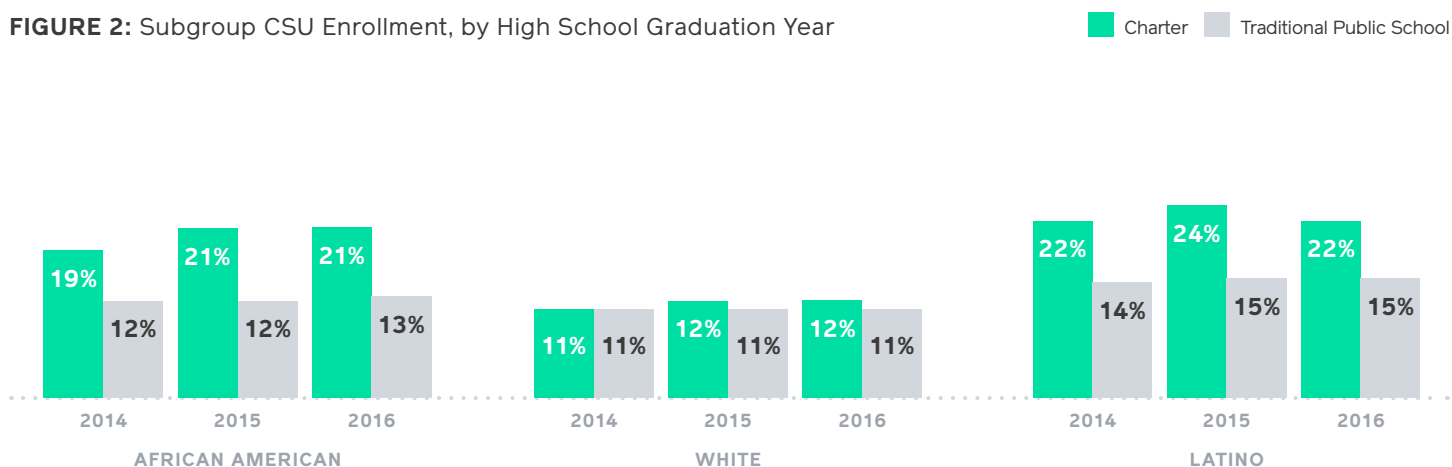
This finding also holds for historically underserved groups as well, with charter graduates accessing CSUs at a higher rate than TPS graduates. As shown in Figure 1, nearly 60% of charter graduates enrolled in CSUs are Latino compared to only 48% of TPS enrollees (See Appendix for counts of schools and students included in this analysis across three years). African American students make up 7% of the CSU charter enrollees, nearly double the 4% from TPS. Overall, the enrolling cohort from charter schools is more diverse than the cohort from traditional public schools.

**FIGURE 1:** CSU Enrollment in Fall 2017 from California Public High Schools

		African American	Asian	Latino	White	Other	Total
Charter	#	247	203	2,227	519	589	3,785
	%	7%	5%	59%	14%	16%	
Traditional Public Schools	#	1,871	5,395	22,626	9,263	7,828	46,983
	%	4%	11%	48%	20%	17%	

**Charter graduates of color are consistently enrolling in the CSU system at much higher rates than are TPS graduates of color.** The fact that a greater proportion of African American and Latino charter graduates attend CSUs is not a just reflection of differences between the graduating classes. Statewide, charter high schools serve very similar demographics to TPS. Indeed, a bigger proportion of charters' graduating Latino and African American seniors enroll in CSUs compared to the proportions in TPS. Figure 2 shows that within these subgroups, charter schools send a larger proportion of their students to CSUs than TPS. Over 20% of African American charter graduates from the classes of 2015 and 2016 enrolled in a CSU, notably higher than the 13% of African American TPS students who enroll in a CSU. The same pattern holds true for Latino students.

**FIGURE 2:** Subgroup CSU Enrollment, by High School Graduation Year

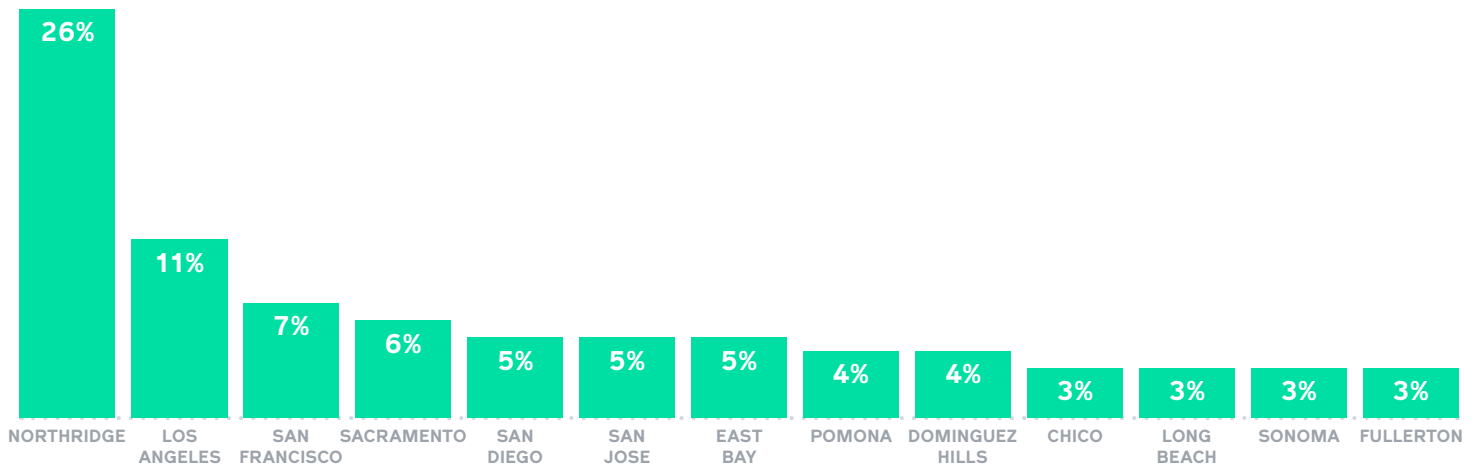


To further understand access for students from all subgroups, we also analyzed which CSU campuses charter graduates were more likely to attend. While the CSU system is made up of 23 separate campuses, attendance at these schools is not equally distributed (Figure 3). Over a quarter of charter graduates attending a CSU attend Cal State Northridge, which may largely be a result of where charter students are located within the state. For example, in California, 54 percent of charter graduates come from the greater Los Angeles area. With this large proportion of graduates concentrated in one area, it is not surprising that they would remain local. **One study** revealed that 33% of graduates nationwide attend higher education institutions within 50 miles of their home, while **another study** indicated that this may be even more prevalent amongst Latino graduates due to do pressures to live at home.<sup>iii</sup> Given the increased numbers of TPS students statewide, it makes sense that traditional public school graduates are distributed much more evenly amongst CSUs than are charter graduates.

**FIGURE 3:** Percent of Charter Graduate CSU Enrollment, by Campus

*\*10 remaining CSUs reflect less than 3% each of charter student CSU enrollment.*

■ Charter ■ Traditional Public School



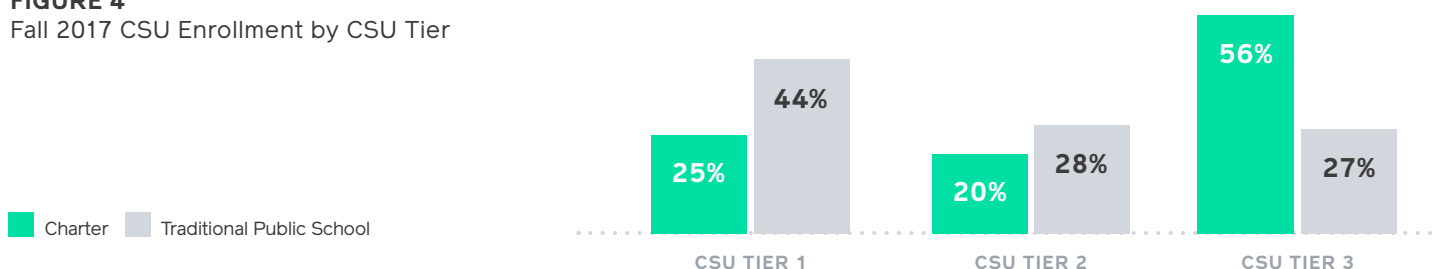
Taken together, these data provide evidence that charter students are finding success accessing the CSU system. However, getting to a four-year college is only a portion of the story. We now turn to the achievement of students within the CSU system, as defined by GPA scores and retention rates.

# Achievement

Once attending a California State University, charter students achieve lower average grade point averages (GPAs) than do TPS students. The mean CSU GPA for students from charter schools is 2.85 while the mean GPA for TPS students is 2.97. The data in the previous section documented the higher proportion of students of color attending CSUs and existing research has documented the hurdles and barriers students of color face on college campuses. Setting that aside, there are several possible explanations for this discrepancy at the secondary school level which should be explored<sup>iv</sup>. For example, more students in charters with a wide variation of high school performance may be encouraged to apply to 4-year colleges (such as a CSU). In TPS, these students may have enrolled in a 2-year college or not attended college at all. CCSA's **"A Step Up"** report released in 2016<sup>v</sup>, suggested that charter students enrolled at more exclusive institutions than they would have as traditional public high school students. These students may be pursuing an option they otherwise would not have perceived as possible, but consequently they may then struggle more once enrolled in a CSU.

A second explanation may relate to which tier of CSU charter students are attending. Using **US News and World Reports college rankings**,<sup>vi</sup> the CSU campuses can be roughly divided into three performance tiers (for the list of schools in each tier, see Appendix) "1" being the highest tier and "3" being the lowest. Only a quarter of charter graduates in CSUs attended a top tier (Tier 1) CSU, while over half attended a Tier 3 CSU (Figure 4). The average GPA at the Tier 3 CSUs may be lower than the Tier 1 CSUs, which then would lower charter graduates' average GPA. More analysis is needed to fully understand the reasons behind the GPA disparity. A dataset including average GPAs by student subgroup at individual CSUs might lend a greater understanding to GPA differences.

**FIGURE 4**  
Fall 2017 CSU Enrollment by CSU Tier

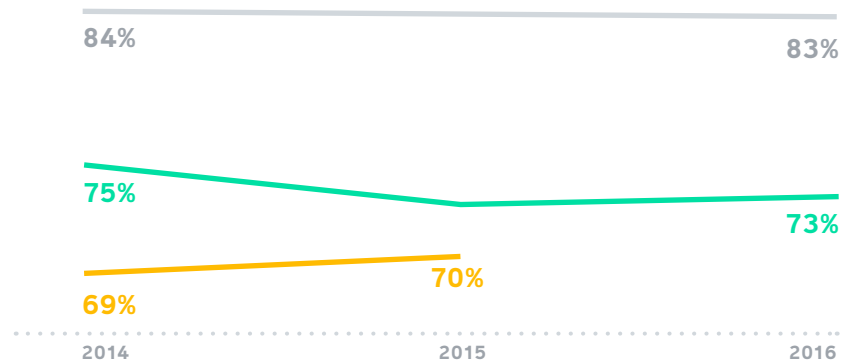


In addition to lower GPAs, a discrepancy exists between CSU students from charter and traditional public schools in rates of reenrollment for a second year at the same college. For the class of students who first enrolled fall of 2016, 73% of charter students reenrolled in fall 2017, compared to 83% of TPS students. This retention gap persisted between 2014 to 2016 (Figure 5). While higher than the national average retention rate for students who started in four-year public institutions in 2015 (just under 70%), California charter students had lower retention rates than TPS students at CSUs. This issue is worthy of further study and action to address this challenge.<sup>vii</sup> It is important to note that these students are not necessarily dropping out. Since retention rates measure reenrollment at the same institution, it is possible that some of these students reenrolled at a different institution. Nevertheless, the factors explaining this phenomenon are unclear. Like the GPA discrepancy, some of the reasons may again have to do with the higher rate of CSU access for charter students or the tier of CSU attended.

**FIGURE 5**  
CSU Retention Rates by High  
School Graduation Year

- Charter
- Traditional Public School
- National Average

*\*National average retention rates were unavailable for the 2016 school year.*



Although the discussion on CSU achievement showed charter graduates falling somewhat behind attendees from traditional public schools, the high rates of access for California charter students are a benefit to the group. Figure 6 emphasizes the benefits of high enrollment rates. Since the charter graduate enrollment rate is so much higher than TPS enrollment (22% vs 15%) a larger percentage of students remain enrolled for a second year compared to their TPS counterparts, despite lower retention rates (75% vs 84%). At the beginning of the second year of college, 16% of charter graduates remain enrolled, compared to only 12% of TPS graduates (Figure 6).

**FIGURE 6**  
High School Class of 2016,  
First Year Enrollment and  
Second Year Re-Enrollment

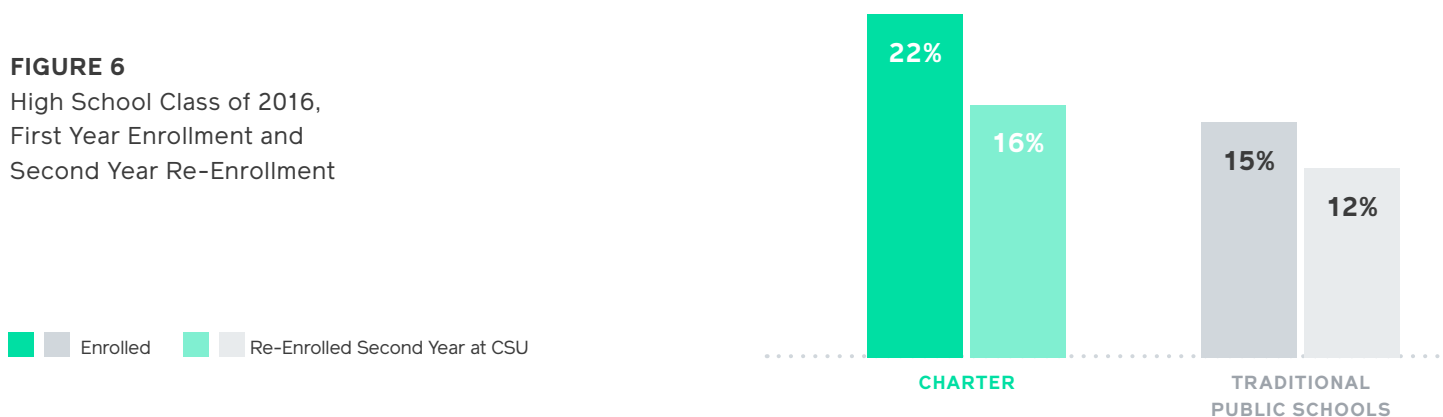


Figure 6 may shed light on the relationship between college access and college achievement, not for individual students, but for whole populations. The high-access charter schools produced a higher proportion of retained students in the CSU system than traditional public schools. This likely points to charter schools giving historically underserved students a greater chance, or “A Step Up”,<sup>viii</sup> for CSU enrollment when compared to traditional public school students. These promising metrics showing greater enrollment and access for historically disadvantaged students need to be paired with an ongoing joint commitment from postsecondary institutions to ensure all students persist and succeed in attaining a college degree.



## Conclusion

California charter schools show success in improving access to college for all students and particularly for traditionally underserved populations, opening doors that were previously closed. Improving access deserves to be celebrated but secondary charter and traditional public schools need to work together with higher education institutions to ensure that all students can succeed and persevere in their postsecondary education. Further research should be carried out to understanding the true cause of the underperformance in reenrollment between the first and second year of education at CSU, and to uncover barriers that may be unique to charter students. Charter schools are up to the challenge of helping proportionally more students (and a greater diversity of students) access CSUs. The next frontier will be continuing to find supports and strategies to help them achieve ever greater levels of success once in college.





## California State University Campuses in Three Tiers as ranked by US News and World Report

Relevant to Figure 3

Tier 1	Tier 2	Tier 3
San Luis Obispo	Sonoma	Stanislaus
San Diego	Maritime Academy	Channel Islands
Pomona	Fresno	Northridge
San Jose	Humboldt	Sacramento
Fullerton	Monterey Bay	San Marcos
Long Beach	Los Angeles	Dominguez Hills
Chico	San Bernardino	East Bay
		San Francisco

## Counts of Schools Included in CSU Analysis

Relevant to Figures 2,4,5, and 6

	Traditional Public Schools	Charter Schools
2015	911	130
2016	924	124
2017	924	141

## Counts of Students Included in CSU Analysis

Relevant to Figures 2,4,5, and 6

	Charter Status	Total CSU Enrollment	African American CSU Enrollment	Latino CSU Enrollment
2015	Charter	3,169	212	1,805
	Traditional Public School	47,360	1,852	20,972
2016	Charter	3,565	261	2,069
	Traditional Public School	48,042	1,908	22,375
2017	Charter	3,785	247	2,227
	Traditional Public School	46,983	1,871	22,626

- <sup>i</sup> The California State University “About the CSU” From: [www2.calstate.edu/csu-system/about-the-csu](http://www2.calstate.edu/csu-system/about-the-csu)
- <sup>ii</sup> The California State University “California High School Academic Performance Reports by County, Fall 2014” From: [asd.calstate.edu/performance/apr/1415/index.shtml](http://asd.calstate.edu/performance/apr/1415/index.shtml)
- <sup>iii</sup> The Chronicle of Higher Education “Where Does Your Freshman Class Come From?” From [www.chronicle.com/interactives/where-does-your-freshman-class-come-from?cid=at&elq=2d](http://www.chronicle.com/interactives/where-does-your-freshman-class-come-from?cid=at&elq=2d)
- Social Problems, Vol. 56, Issue 2, pp. 311–334, “The Role of Familism in Explaining the Hispanic-White College Application Gap” From: [scholar.harvard.edu/files/mdesmond/files/sp5602\\_05.pdf](http://scholar.harvard.edu/files/mdesmond/files/sp5602_05.pdf)
- <sup>iv</sup> Journal of Counseling and Development, Vol.78, Issue 2, pp 180-185, “Student Perceptions of Campus Cultural Climate by Race.”
- Carter, Deborah F. New Directions for Institutional Research, no 130, Summer 2006, “Key Issues in the Persistence of Underrepresented Minority Students. From: [semanticscholar.org/paper/Key-issues-in-the-persistence-of-underrepresented-Carter/327a0cb55b2aa94861d2b727f33fc7de32d9c14e](http://semanticscholar.org/paper/Key-issues-in-the-persistence-of-underrepresented-Carter/327a0cb55b2aa94861d2b727f33fc7de32d9c14e)
- <sup>v</sup> CCSA’s “A Step Up: How Charter Schools Provide Higher Levels of California Public University Access” From: [www.ccsa.org/CollegeReadiness\\_Web\\_Single\\_FNL.pdf](http://www.ccsa.org/CollegeReadiness_Web_Single_FNL.pdf)
- <sup>vi</sup> The California State University “CSU Campuses Ranked Top Public Universities by U.S. News and World Report” From: [www2.calstate.edu/csu-system/news/Pages/CSU-Campuses-Ranked-Top-Public-Universities-by-U.S.-News-and-World-Report.aspx](http://www2.calstate.edu/csu-system/news/Pages/CSU-Campuses-Ranked-Top-Public-Universities-by-U.S.-News-and-World-Report.aspx)
- <sup>vii</sup> See National Student Clearinghouse “Snapshot Report—First-Year Persistence and Retention”, Figure 4. From: [nscresearchcenter.org/snapshotreport28-first-year-persistence-and-retention/](http://nscresearchcenter.org/snapshotreport28-first-year-persistence-and-retention/)
- <sup>viii</sup> CCSA’s “A Step Up: How Charter Schools Provide Higher Levels of California Public University Access” From: [www.ccsa.org/CollegeReadiness\\_Web\\_Single\\_FNL](http://www.ccsa.org/CollegeReadiness_Web_Single_FNL).