

Tips and Strategies from the Network

Beyond Designation: Thinking Intentionally about Servingness in the CSU

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On November 5, 2025, over 110 individuals from all 22 California State University (CSU) campuses gathered for a two-session virtual convening focused on building servingness within the System. Titled “[Beyond Designation: Thinking Intentionally about Servingness in the CSU](#),” the convening pushed participants to think about the strategies, data, and collaborations they can use to make minority-serving designations more intentional, sustainable, and meaningful.

The day opened with an overview of minority-serving institution (MSI) designations and the concept of servingness. MSI status indicates that an institution enrolls a significant percentage of students from a particular background or set of background characteristics; this status has historically come with additional federal funding. Although such status is presently the result of enrollment patterns, there is increasing focus on ensuring that it is an indicator of how well students are served—that is, the extent to which institutions are meeting the educational needs of the students they enroll. This movement builds heavily on the work of scholar Gina Ann Garcia, who introduced the concept of servingness within the context of Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs).

In the introduction to the session, Network Convenings Director and Professor of Women’s Studies at Fresno State Larissa Mercado-Lopez emphasized that MSI status and funding helps advance the CSU’s mission and reflects the System’s values of inclusive excellence and social mobility. The introduction of the state’s Black Serving Institution (BSI) designation has created a new opportunity to think intentionally about efforts to serve students—moving beyond enrollment numbers to purpose—particularly in this new context where federal funding for HSIs and Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs)

[The CSU Student Success Network](#) (Network) is facilitated by the [Education Insights Center](#) (EdInsights) at Sacramento State. EdInsights is devoted to student success and the public benefits of education. Its purpose is to conduct research, provide evaluation services, and create collaborative professional learning spaces that inform and advance anti-racist approaches to policymaking and practice so that minoritized student populations have equitable opportunities and outcomes in their public education and career journeys.



has been removed. Dr. Mercado-Lopez reminded the group that Dr. Garcia's work, though developed for HSIs, provides an evidence-based framework for thinking about servingness in all types of MSIs.

Across morning and afternoon sessions, participants heard from [multiple panels](#) and engaged in breakout sessions that allowed them to reflect and consider next steps on their own campuses. The panels provided opportunities to deepen understanding of servingness and its operationalization. A final panel examined the role of data in supporting servingness.

Across the sessions, a number of themes emerged.

“Servingness” means moving beyond numbers to intentional support.

Enrolling is not the same as serving. At many MSIs, opportunity gaps in metrics like completion exist. Moving away from counting enrollments to thinking about intentional, holistic support for the whole student across the institution is critical for building a true serving institution. Servingness requires a continual interrogation of and commitment to integrating MSI efforts into how everyone across campus does their work, every day. Dr. Snowden emphasized that intentionality means that “at every instance, when you're in a room, and decisions are being made...that we center how is this going to impact our ability to serve our students.”

This shift can be accomplished by:

- building systems that promote belonging and identity by embedding key populations explicitly into institutional missions, grant activities, and decision-making processes;
- centering student voice in all decisions;
- centralizing and coordinating efforts (even as work is distributed and grassroots, someone needs to be responsible for coordination and building identity); and
- building budgets that ask and affirmatively answer, “how will this help students?”

Student Nailah DuBose summed up the shift from enrolling to serving by saying,

“You know that you've done servingness right when you don't have to tell students that they belong; they'll feel it. They'll see it, and they'll hear it.”



MSIs are challenged in this sociopolitical moment, but we can turn challenges into opportunities.

Reductions in MSI-specific funding (particularly funding tied to enrollment) can create short-term challenges for institutions. Panelists pointed out, however, that by shifting from an enrollment and programming mindset to a servingness and institutionalization mindset, the work can continue and perhaps even be enhanced. In this framing, MSI status becomes a quality improvement and academic strategy, deeply tied to institutional mission. Institutions should think about broadening the spaces where servingness is discussed, focusing on professional learning, and building serving cultures across campus.

Strategies to do this include the following:

- Focus on values-alignment and shared problems to build coalitions and institutionalize the work.
- Focus on policies and practices—get to the base of the work—to break barriers for groups of students, rather than building boutique programs. This is more scalable and sustainable, and supports culture change.
- Adapt how you use the money you do have to address the needs of students, in addition to exploring new funding sources.
- Include students, but use your proximity to power as leaders to influence action. Middle leaders are the bridge between students and those making decisions. Use that to advocate for this work as critical and authentic mission-building/mission-alignment.

DuBose offered a powerful reminder with regards to the current context:

“This work isn’t just political, it’s personal. Our sense of safety, belonging, and future all depends on it, and sustaining servingness right now means choosing courage.”

Data use is critical—and multi-faceted.

“Data” take many shapes and forms, from quantitative outcome metrics to program participation measures to qualitative perceptions of the student experience. Panelists noted that data can be used to support the intentionality necessary for servingness. Data can help prioritize resources towards efforts that have the largest influence. In the words of Dr. Franklin, they help us “do better, not less.” They also help illustrate the ways that efforts will support specific student populations. This is a particular emphasis for the BSI application, but panelists noted that data use for ensuring student success should be a hallmark of servingness across MSI types.



Participants cautioned that data use should reflect the complexity of student experiences. They should not “flatten” or oversimplify the student experience; this once again speaks to the many types of data inherent in building institutional servingness.

When thinking about data use, panelists noted the following:

- Data are often in silos. Leaders at all levels need to think about how to share the data, with whom, for what purpose.
- When thinking about outcomes, look beyond traditional metrics to those that assess servingness. And, examine progress measures to assess improvement and areas for additional intervention.
- Think about which questions you want to answer, and when you need to answer them. Identify the data that will help you answer those specific questions.
- Partner with Institutional Research offices as well as faculty to support access to and use of data. They can help you ask good questions, understand what data are available, and engage in data exploration. Make sure you bring them to the table early and approach this work as a collaboration.

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