

2025 National Social Mobility Symposium

Plenary Welcome Address

Chancellor Mildred García

February 20, 2025

Good morning, everyone! *Buenos dias!*

Thank you, President Neufeldt, for your kind introduction...and let me join in welcoming all of you to the 2025 National Social Mobility Symposium. I am deeply honored to be speaking with you at what has become one of the California State University's signature events.

Thank you, everyone, for joining us – and thank you Cal State San Marcos, President Neufeldt – and your entire team – for organizing and presenting this vitally important national convening.

At the CSU and at our peer institutions represented here today, social mobility is our greatest strength, our immense source of pride...and it's our reason for being.

The CSU is the nation's preeminent university system for welcoming students from all walks of life – including low-income students, students of color, first-generation students and adult learners seeking new opportunity – the students who make up America's new majority – and helping them achieve the life of their dreams...the life they so richly deserve. Lives of security, well-being and meaningful contributions to their communities. Lives that will enrich and inspire the generations who follow, creating a profound ripple effect that I know will one day touch every corner of the earth.

And this mission – the one that all of us share – has never been more vital.

The Pew Research Center released a report last month documenting global concerns about income inequality – the growing gap between the rich and the poor. Eighty-four percent of respondents from 36 nations cited income inequality as a significant and growing problem. We know that our nation's middle class has been diminished over the past five decades – from nearly two-thirds of American households to about half today. So, it's no surprise that nearly three quarters of the Americans who participated in the survey feel that today's children will be worse off financially than their parents. And 60% of the

respondents from around the globe worry that the growth of these income gaps will accelerate as the very wealthy wield more influence over our society and its governance.

And that, my friends and allies, is where we come in.

When we talk about social mobility, there's no doubt that a college degree is a prudent and strong investment toward a higher income, as we work to elevate lives and often break generational cycles of poverty. At commencement ceremonies across our state, I've watched parents and grandparents beam with immense pride and relief knowing that their children – now college graduates – will be better off than they were.

But an even greater source of pride and optimism is that their graduates will be empowered: equipped with the power to teach and lead, the power to heal and protect, the power to create and invent, and the power to build – partnerships, communities, knowledge... and our democracy. Make no mistake: We are creating a strong and stabilizing force for good and delivering a talented and powerful workforce that reflects our country's rich and growing diversity.

We are stewards of place. At the CSU, almost 80% of our graduates continue to live, work and serve within a 50-mile radius of their alma mater, enriching the communities they love in myriad ways.

To sustain that "force for good," the CSU recently embarked upon the largest and most comprehensive collaborative effort in our university's history – and I know that many of you have already participated.

Through our Year of Engagement, we are seeking the input of more than a million stakeholders – not only from across our 23 universities, but also from our global alumni base, now well over 4 million strong, as well as from our philanthropic, industry and intersegmental partners – all to create a visionary new student success framework by this summer.

One theme is already crystal clear: student success doesn't end with graduation. To advance social mobility, institutions like ours must raise the bar and ensure that every student is career-ready and connected with graduate school or a first job in their chosen profession.

This is not only expected by our students and their families, it's expected by – and vital to – our state and nation. In California, one in 10 employees holds a CSU degree, and we add nearly 130,000 degree-holders to the state's workforce every year. The CSU is the pipeline that powers the highly educated and dynamically diverse workforce that is California's greatest competitive advantage. And I know that our peer institutions in attendance today share that power – that responsibility.

But it's an advantage that no one should take for granted.

Our nation's colleges and universities are facing the real threat of significant cuts in state and federal funding. I'm sure my CSU peers are aware that the governor's budget for 2025-26 proposes a nearly 8% cut to the CSU's state General Fund appropriation. This would be a 375-million-dollar ongoing reduction to the CSU's state support. Anticipating a rough road ahead, our Chancellor's Office and 23 universities are already taking painful measures to address budget gaps – measures I know you are beginning to see and feel. Our campuses are reducing academic programs and student services, eliminating certain degree programs, and reducing faculty and staff positions.

Cuts have consequences – and with a proposed cut of this magnitude, those consequences will be stark, and they will take a human toll. For our valued employees – members of the Cal State family who have dedicated their professional lives to the CSU mission – it could be the loss of their livelihood. For students, it could mean additional time to graduation, earnings delayed and dreams deferred.

Both are simply unacceptable.

While advocacy in Sacramento is important every year, this year, it is mission-critical. We must tell the CSU story with many voices and one unified, powerful voice – and demonstrate to our elected officials that fiscal resources entrusted to the CSU aren't an expenditure, they are an investment in the public good. I call upon all of you to join this vitally important effort. If you're unsure of how to get involved or where to start, I recommend the CSU Advocacy Week at the state capitol next month.

We must also maintain a steady eye on our nation's capital. The recent change in administration has brought with it an unprecedented number of executive orders and other actions – some announced and currently being implemented, others signaled. In the wake of these unparalleled policy shifts, the CSU finds itself in a moment of uncertainty and change never before seen in our 64-year history. This moment is understandably unsettling and unnerving for all of us here today.

As we face our future together, we must remain keenly focused on the domains that are within our control. Our priority – again, our mission and reason for being – is to support all students in their ability to enroll, persist, complete their degree, and then contribute their talents to our world. That will not change. That will never change. In particular, we remain mindful of extending continued support to those students and staff who may be the most vulnerable, including the LGBTQIA+ community as well as international students and staff, and those who are undocumented or from mixed-status families.

Please be assured that we are working tirelessly with state and federal leaders and with peer institutions and educational advocacy groups to anticipate any and all potential impacts. At the CSU, if an executive order or federal action is taken that negatively impacts our community, we will be prepared, and we will respond quickly and appropriately.

And while we monitor the state and federal landscapes, it's up to all of us to be creative in our use of limited resources, to build connections and partnerships across the regions we serve, and to think differently about how we approach our mission. How can we do more to develop career pathways and introduce students to the myriad of career options that exist for every major and field of study? How can we recognize that the students we serve may not have the advantage of coming from families and communities with the social capital that provides the awareness of, say, the blue-green economy or biotech or cybersecurity?

The answer lies in revitalizing our career centers, expanding internships and experiential learning opportunities, and scaling the incredible array of truly innovative career development programs already in action. Allow me to share just a few examples from across the CSU's 23 universities.

Many of our institutions are well ahead of the game in preparing students for future-focused fields.

- Our hosts here at San Marcos have partnered across education segments to create a dual-enrollment program for high school and community college students that awards accelerated three-year bachelor's degrees in software engineering. Four jobs are waiting for every one graduate.
- Cal State San Bernardino has partnered with five area community colleges to create an innovative apprenticeship program – now a state leader and model – that has already helped hundreds of students, many of whom are economically disadvantaged and first-generation students of color, launch careers in cybersecurity with top national firms.

Our world-class faculty are also deeply involved in adapting their curriculum to illuminate career opportunities across fields of study.

- San José State has created a cornerstone course as part of its K-16 Collaborative Tech Pathway that empowers students to collaborate, problem-solve and tackle real-world challenges presented by industry partners.
- Faculty at East Bay regularly update curriculum for the Master of Science in Environmental Geosciences program based on feedback from environmental consultants and regulatory agencies so that graduates are prepared to meet evolving industry needs.
- And more than 30 faculty at Cal Poly Humboldt have participated in the Career Curriculum Integration Program, weaving career and professional development activities into the coursework of 75% of the university's majors.

Beyond the classroom, our faculty and staff are creating hundreds of high-impact, experiential learning opportunities to equip students with career-ready skills.

- Among their long list of career development programs, CSU Dominguez Hills offers aspiring law students hands-on experience working alongside attorneys and paralegals through its Justice Corps program. While they serve underrepresented communities, students can also take part in workshops and mentorships, brown bag lunches with legal professionals, and coaching on law school admissions.
- And through a program called SPROUT, undergraduates at Cal State LA engage in intensive summer research training that prepares them for competitive placement in top graduate research programs in biomedical science, behavioral science, and health and human services.

And all of our universities continue to build strong alliances with community, governmental and industry partners to address their regions' most pressing challenges and to create vital pipelines of diverse and talented graduates who intimately understand the needs of their communities.

- Cal State Long Beach, who we'll hear from this morning, secures paid internships at businesses and nonprofit organizations across the community; connects sports management students with professional sports teams, from the LA Kings to the Anaheim Ducks; partners with the Port of Long Beach to offer scholarships in global logistics; trains students in event planning and hospitality management aboard the Queen Mary; and so much more.
- Chico State students provide critical speech and hearing services, and vital support for children with autism spectrum disorder and their families through free community clinics.
- Exemplifying the university's "Learn by Doing" ethos, the College of Agriculture, Food and Environmental Sciences at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo operates 18 specialized food and agricultural production plants – including the Cal Poly Creamery – powered by students. Two university-owned ranches provide a living laboratory for students to learn how to manage forestry, rangeland and orchards, preparing the next generation of stewards for this vital farming region.
- And with six regional hubs across the CSU, the California Medicine Scholars Program is preparing students from underserved communities for medical school. In partnership with our community colleges, the University of California and major healthcare



employers, the program has created a seamless and supportive pipeline for aspiring doctors who reflect our richly diverse state.

- And perhaps most exciting, working together with industry leaders and the State of California, we recently announced that the CSU is providing every student and faculty and staff member with equal access – at no cost – to the latest tools and training in artificial intelligence, preparing students across all fields of study for the increasingly AI-driven workforce, while safeguarding and enhancing academic integrity. Students will also be able to work in collaboration with CSU faculty and leaders in the AI space to develop solutions to some of the state’s most complex, real-world challenges –including projects to address transportation issues and others in the health and human services realm.

AI aside, the work that we do – that you do – is uniquely and powerfully human, measured in lives transformed and the deeply personal fulfillment of leaving the world a better place for those who follow.

Allow me to share the story of just one of our remarkable alumni. After his father died when he was a very young boy, Juan Carlos Arredondo spent hours away from school helping his mother with her food truck that catered to farm workers. After a decade of low pay and high-pressure work, Juan was impressed by an agency at the U.S./Mexico border that served migrants who had been separated from their families. That experience convinced him to pursue a bachelor’s degree in social work so that he could, and I quote, “be a role model and catalyst for change.” Juan graduated from San Francisco State University last year with a 4.0 grade-point average and is now pursuing his master’s degree. He has been

honored with the Trustees' Award for Outstanding Achievement, the highest recognition granted by the CSU. And he has won the highly competitive Willie L. Brown Jr. Fellowship, through which he landed an internship with the San Francisco Human Services Agency to help communities in need.

"Education radically transformed my life," Juan says. "It has not only given me meaning and hope for the future, but it is also healing old wounds. It has made me aware that I am capable, and that I've always been capable."

Juan's story is the story of social mobility... it's the story of thousands of CSU students – inspired, empowered and transformed by education. And it's a story that illustrates the CSU's vast impact – higher education's impact – across communities, across generations and into the future. Thank you all for educating our students and helping them discover – as Juan did – their own limitless capabilities.

Please enjoy the symposium!

And now, it is my great pleasure to turn the program over to an extraordinarily principled and compassionate leader – and an untiring champion of the CSU, its mission and the students we are so proud and honored to serve. Please join me in welcoming the Chair of the CSU Board of Trustees, Jack Clarke!