

Transcription for

THE KEY WITH INSIDE HIGHER ED

EP. 31: CAL STATE'S NEXT CHANCELLOR

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PAUL FAIN

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Welcome to The Key with IHE, a podcast focused on the pandemic's impact on higher education. I'm Paul Fain, the show's host and a contributing editor at Inside Higher Ed. Joseph Castor was president of Fresno State University, one of 23 campuses in the California State University System. In January, Castro will become the chancellor of the Cal State System, replacing the retiring Tim White, who on the show in May to explain the system's early decision of remain mostly online this fall. We spoke with Castro about his top priorities as the next chancellor. They include continuing the push to improve student success and to close achievement gaps. Castro also talked about the need for state, federal, and philanthropic support to help Cal State students stay on track. He described why Fresno State and the system overall are seeing record enrollment levels and improved retention rates during this challenging fall.

JOSEPH CASTRO: And I think we're benefitting right now from being a place that is both accessible and focused on quality, and then taking a real close look at every dollar that we charge. I think our value, we saw the largest new class in our history this fall. I think that there were many students who normally might have gone to a higher priced university who instead said, you know, I'm going to stay home and be a Bulldog. And I think that that's been the case at many of the CSU campuses as well.

PAUL FAIN: Let's get to the conversation. I'm speaking with Dr. Joseph Castro. Dr. Castro, how are you?

JOSEPH CASTRO: I'm well. How are you, Paul?

PAUL FAIN: Doing well. Thanks for making time for me. So you are currently at Fresno state but I guess in six or seven weeks or so, you're going to start a new gig as the chancellor of the California State System. Congratulations.

JOSEPH CASTRO: Thank you. Yeah, I start January 4th. I'm excited about it.

PAUL FAIN: It's a big job in American higher ed, one of the biggest, and a lot going on, a challenging time. Can you talk what your real top priorities are coming into the role?

JOSEPH CASTRO: Sure. And thinking about this position, you know, I view it as the CSU as being probably the most important and consequential university system in the country. And during a time like this, I felt like my leadership skills would be a good match. And what I'm hoping to do as the next chancellor is to build on the strengths of the CSU. We've already been, as you know, you've already interviewed Chancellor White, we've been working very hard to increase graduation rates and decrease graduation gaps between groups. That will continue to be our highest priority in meeting our Graduation Initiative 2025 goals, which are pretty bold as they are. And then when we reach those, you know, I'd like to set bolder goals for 2030 and beyond.

One of the most challenging parts of those goals is the gap between Pell Grant students and other students. It's still very stubborn. It's about 9 percent, I think, system-wide, and that's pretty close to what it is here at Fresno State as well. And I'm very concerned about that and I want to do everything I can as chancellor to remove barriers for students, especially first generation college students and low-income students to help them to graduate. Some of them have a little bit longer path to travel, and so it's how do we support that them so that get a quality degree in a timely way and become part of the next generation of leaders in their communities, in California, and in the country. So that's the top priority.

The second priority I would say is to inspire greater investment of public and private funding in the CSU. We're probably the best value in the country, arguably one of the best values in the country. Here at

Fresno State, our tuition is about \$6500, our debt levels are very low, relatively speaking, about \$15,000 to \$17,000 on average for a graduate. But what I'd really like to do is to inspire greater investment by the governor and legislators, and then also looking to Washington, D.C., with the new administration. And then from a philanthropic perspective to inspire more private support. You know, we have 3.8 million alumni and I'd like to really mobilize them in a more significant way, and lots of friends out there that would want to see the CSU succeed. So that would be the second priority.

And then I'd like to leverage technology in a more strategic way. That whole space has changed dramatically during COVID. And I'd like to understand better as chancellor what we've learned during this period at 23 campuses, and then how can we position ourselves in the future to be even more accessible for students, because for some of them it's really hard for them to drive 20 to 30 miles to campus every day. So having a virtual option over the long term could actually be helpful to some students. And some faculty have said to me, hey, I'm teaching more effectively now than ever before. So that would be the third priority.

And then I'm also looking at faculty diversity. And I'd really like to inspire greater diversity among our faculty so that it better reflects the very diverse student body that we serve, almost 500,000 students. So those are the top priorities, Paul, for right now, and when I get in there I'll get a better understanding of the landscape, and there may be tweaks here and there, but those are really the top four for me.

PAUL FAIN: Thanks for that. Speaking about that 500,000 student body, you mentioned Pell-eligible students. For folks who don't know, at Fresno State and across the system, you all serve a large share of Pell-eligible, correct?

JOSEPH CASTRO: We do. We currently serve almost 70 percent of our students who, about 65 percent are Pell-eligible. Almost 70 percent are first-generation of college students. And it's a little bit higher than the CSU average. You know, each of the 23 campuses is slightly different, but as a whole we are, I believe, the most diverse system in the country.

PAUL FAIN: And as we all know, students who are the most vulnerable have taken the biggest toll in the pandemic, to their work, their families. How are students at Fresno State holding on? I mean, have you maintained your enrollment through this? I know there was a real concern out there about community college enrollments, but I gather things are pretty stable where you are.

JOSEPH CASTRO: Yeah, Paul. I have to say, more than stable. You know, we have the highest enrollment in our history, so this is a fabulous story of resilience. We've seen this across the CSU. Enrollment in the CSU is higher than it was last year, record levels, and here at Fresno State, 5 percent above last year. However, underneath that, I mean, it's resilience, sacrifice, stress, I'm seeing a lot of stress.

Every single dollar matters. I was invited, for example, to look at our fee structure for the spring and it looks like I'll be able to reduce one of our fees. It's going to be 40 bucks, but, you know, every single dollar matters. And I know the students are going to be happy to know that they can save a little bit of money. We've gone very deep on lending technology, over 8,500 devices. Anybody who said, you know, we can't connect or we need a hot spot or an iPad, we have provided that with CARES funding. We've used CARES funding for emergency grants as well.

Doing a lot of webinars, I do one tonight with all of our newly admitted students for the spring, just answering questions that they might have, lowering the stress level. I've very concerned even with all of this tremendous progress that there's a lot of stress and we're redoubling our efforts around mental health as well to address that. So financial and making sure the services are there for them. And I think that's the best we can do, because this pandemic is throwing us curve balls every single day.

PAUL FAIN: We're going to take a quick break. Don't go away.

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Chancellor White came on the show right after making the decision to remain remote in the fall. I'm wondering if there's in your mind there's any interplay between the solid enrollment, the gains, and making that call, you now, in Fresno State or beyond?

JOSEPH CASTRO: I think so. I've talked with Chancellor White about this, and he and I agree that providing our students and families that the information earlier was better for them on average. I know that for some it was deeply concerning and I was able to answer those questions. And then his framework, which will continue into the spring, allows each campus to flex according to local conditions. So, you know, here are Fresno State I have something like 70 in-person courses, focused on labs and

other hands-on courses that really can't be done virtually. And we're going to increase that next spring if we can do it safely. And we've coupled that with strategies around testing, COVID-testing on a regular basis and an app that, you know, where you have to answer questions. We have temperature checking. And the number of our cases has been quite low relatively speaking. I think, around 20 or so. And you've heard about examples of hundreds and thousands. CSU in general has done very well in this area, and I so think it's attributed to planning, and then the hard work of our faculty and staff at each of the campuses to serve our students.

PAUL FAIN: As you've cited, a growing body of research shows that anxiety and uncertainty are the big issues right now for students. And I can see kind of knowing where you're campus is headed early may have helped.

But, however, I was thinking, you mentioned the mental health, bulking up what you do there. It takes resources. It's a big institution, the system, even bigger. How do you do that in a kind of resource-constrained environment?

JOSEPH CASTRO: It's a great question. You know, we've used our CARES dollars to cover some of these unexpected expenses. We've also reduced operating costs. We're operating in a different mode now. Every university is for the most part, so our travel budget is almost zero. Our event cost budget is almost zero. We have had to lay off some folks, but, really, the layoffs have not affected the delivery of quality teaching and have not affected the support structure. It's really been about our administrative overhead. So we are looking at ways in which we can use our scarce dollars more strategically. And I think a lot of campuses are doing that, as we are here in Fresno. And then, fortunately, our students had adopted a fee increase about a year ago that just came into play around mental health. They believed that they needed that support, so we had those resources as well. Thank God that that happened a year ago, because that's really made a positive difference.

PAUL FAIN: That's really interesting that the students recognize that as well.

JOSEPH CASTRO: Absolutely.

PAUL FAIN: You know, you mentioned the state resource issue, but also the value that the CARES Act's

provided in terms of emergency aid and other benefits to students. Not going to ask you to comment on what might happen in Washington, but the question of how much another stimulus could help Fresno State and the system right now.

JOSEPH CASTRO: Boy, it would make a huge difference for the CSU and for Fresno State in particular. We've used every dollar very carefully and according to the guidelines. You know, half of it needed to be going to emergency grants. And we sent those to our students right before finals. And I think that made a very powerful difference. Our retention rates are higher all this year than they've been ever in the past. So that's despite the pandemic and I think these grants made a difference, the dollars that we're using for testing, for other support systems, enhancement of technology, providing laptops, hot spots. We've used those dollars for all those very important things. So I'm very hopeful that the federal government will do it again and I think it will help to kind of bridge to the new normal that I'm hoping we'll see by next fall. And we'll continue to advocate for the federal relief. And my hope is the Biden administration will also look at strategies over time to increase the Pell Grant. We talked about that gap a little bit earlier in the conversation. I think increasing the Pell Grant will make a big difference. And then support for DACA students so that they can get Pell Grants will also make a huge difference at campuses like Fresno State.

PAUL FAIN: You know, I knew that your enrollment numbers were solid, but I didn't know retention was up. I'm just totally floored by that. I mean, when you talk to students, what is their mood? I mean, how do you kind of make sense of that? I mean, I can see if you do everything right and students know that they need a degree or a credential more than ever, it could maybe hold steady, but go up, that surprises me.

JOSEPH CASTRO: Yeah. I wouldn't have predicted that in March. And I think it has a lot to do with their resilience and who they are, and also the value of a higher education that they've personally sensed and their families do as well. And I think we're benefitting right now from being a place that is both accessible and focused on quality, and then taking a really close look at every dollar that be charge. Our value, we say with the largest new class in our history this fall, I think that there were many students that might normally have gone to a higher priced university who instead said, you know, I'm going to stay home and be a Bulldog. And I think that that's been the case at many of the CSU campuses as well.

PAUL FAIN: That makes sense. One last question on the issue of uncertainty. Unquestionably, the value of a higher education is high right now, but the question of what happens with that credential when you enter the job market is a tough one, and we're seeing that in polling. What are hearing from students, and how do you all thread that needle? How do you kind of assuage their worries but also be realistic

that's going to be a tough job market?

JOSEPH CASTRO: Yeah, it's such a challenging time in that respect, and especially in an area like ours in the San Joaquin Valley. What we've focused on is asking our alumni, inspiring our alumni to mentor these students, to look for opportunities for them. And our Bulldog network is paying off. I mean, just yesterday I got a call, a Franklin Templeton wanted to have some Fresno State students, and what a great company for them to work in. So I get those calls and I know our deans are getting them. And we're really focused on trying to expand opportunities for our students. And many of them are already doing internships. And as you know, Paul, when that happens, if it's a good match, that company is generally wanting to snap them up. So we're really working on that and I'd like to scale that up across the CSU. And again, with 3.8 million alumni, what an asset for us to kind of mobilize them to think about how could we support these talented students and move them forward to the their degree and a great career.

PAUL FAIN: Well, we'll wrap up there. Dr. Castro, thanks so much for your time. And again, a very big role that you're stepping into. Good luck to you in that.

JOSEPH CASTRO: Thank you.

PAUL FAIN: And, obviously, a lot going ton, but you've given us reason for optimism here.

JOSEPH CASTRO: Well, thanks, Paul. I hope we can stay in touch.

PAUL FAIN: Absolutely. Please do. Thank you.

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That's it for this episode. Thanks very much for listening. I'll be back next week and I hope you'll join me.