



## CASE STUDY

# California State University, Fullerton

Fullerton, California



## Growth Mindset for College Students

Eager to improve graduation rates and close equity gaps at California State University, Fullerton, two leaders of student success initiatives have rolled out the Growth Mindset for College Students program with encouraging early results.

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### Bolstering Student Success

In 2016, the California State University (CSU) system launched [Graduation Initiative 2025](#), an ambitious effort to boost 4-year graduation rates and eliminate opportunity and equity gaps for students of color, students from low-income backgrounds and first-generation college students.

At Cal State Fullerton (CSUF), the largest campus in the CSU system with roughly 40,000 students, Ioakim Boutakidis and Pam Oliver were both already looking for ways to improve graduation rates and close equity gaps, so the initiative added new urgency to their efforts.

Boutakidis is an Associate Professor of Child and Adolescent Studies and a Faculty Fellow for Student Success at CSUF. Oliver is the Associate Vice President for Academic Programs at CSUF and works closely with Boutakidis and other student success teams at the school.

Like many other universities CSUF provides a wide range of programs to support students, including financial assistance and academic advising. But CSUF – and particularly Boutakidis and Oliver -- also want to help students cultivate non-cognitive skills that can help them succeed, such as learning mindsets and a sense of belonging on campus.

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### Strong Evidence Base

While attending separate conferences in early 2017, Boutakidis and Oliver each heard about the Growth Mindset for College Students program developed by the Project for Education Research that Scales (PERTS) at Stanford University. The free 30-minute online program is designed to increase students' engagement, motivation, and ultimately success by laying the foundation for a growth mindset.

**“We were very drawn to the fact that the [PERTS] program had a strong evidence base behind it, and it looked like it would be relatively easy for the school and faculty to administer,” said Oliver.**

PERTS’ founders studied mindset science under Carol Dweck at Stanford University and continue to collaborate with scholars conducting pioneering research in the field. PERTS’ mission is to take what research has revealed about the best ways to help students’ cultivate a growth mindset and sense of belonging, and turn them into simple, affordable tools that can help thousands or millions of students. Nationally, nearly 200 colleges and universities in 44 states this year are offering PERTS’ growth mindset and social belonging programs to more than 100,000 higher ed students.



CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY  
**FULLERTON**

Total Enrollment  
Spring 2018

**39,343**  
Students

Ethnic Distribution  
of Students  
Fall 2017

<b>41%</b> Hispanic	<b>21%</b> Asian
<b>20%</b> White	<b>18%</b> Other*

*\*International, Multiple Race, Unknown, Black, Pacific Islander and Amer. Indian*

## CSU Graduation Initiative 2025

Goals

### For Freshmen

Increase 4-year graduation rate to 40% *up from 19% in 2015*

Increase 6-year graduation rate to 70% *up from 57% in 2015*

### For Transfer Students

Increase 4-year graduation rate to 85% *up from 73% in 2015*

Eliminate all equity gaps for under-represented minorities and PELL-eligible students



## Closing Equity Gaps

Boutakidis was familiar with the mindset research of Dweck and others from his own academic work with children and adolescents when he learned about PERTS.

**"I had been swimming in this space for a while," said Boutakidis. "There's definitely a through line here from, how does a student think about not just how their intelligence works, but the cause of their skill set and competency, and whether sustained effort in school rationally makes sense?"**

Boutakidis and Oliver were particularly attracted by the potential of the PERTS program to help students from marginalized communities.

**"Earlier research on growth mindset and belonging interventions seemed to indicate that you can improve outcomes for everybody, but that you can improve historically under-represented groups even more," Boutakidis said. "That was a big selling point."**

**"We've found that often when you institute student support interventions, what you do is raise and improve outcomes overall, but you don't reduce the gaps," he continued. "It's 'rising tides lifts all boats,' but if the boats begin at different heights above the waterline, you don't close gaps."**

## Encouraging Results

Boutakidis and Oliver had little difficulty selling the Growth Mindset program. The underlying science was already well known and appreciated by CSUF administrators and faculty.

**Instead, Boutakidis said, "the difficulty is always the pragmatic issues: How do we get students to take it, where do we fit it in, who's going to operationalize it, who's going to manage it?"**

CSUF is still trying to find the best answers to some of those questions. Implementation has gone smoothly, but in the first year offering the program the student participation rate was lower than anticipated. This year CSUF is offering the program earlier in the academic year to improve participation.

The results for the first cohort of students to go through the Growth Mindset program were encouraging. CSUF found a 4 percent improvement in the critical freshmen-to-sophomore retention rates among students who took the program, compared to a demographically and academically matched control group.

Boutakidis hopes the results will bolster his efforts to eventually make the program available to a much larger share of CSUF's student population.

**"I believe in the program," he said. "I'll absolutely continue advocating for it."**

**PERTS creates evidence-based programs for educators in K-12 and higher education settings.**

For more information, please visit:

**[www.perts.net](http://www.perts.net)**