



Expert Spotlight

Autumn Alaniz-Wiggins

Autumn Alaniz-Wiggins is an aspiring social researcher and advocate with a profound commitment to public service and philanthropy, particularly in the realms of higher education and community advocacy. She graduated this year with a double B.A. degree in Sociology and Multicultural Gender Studies from California State University, Chico, through which she honed a deep understanding of societal inequities and multicultural dynamics. Autumn previously served as President of the Chico State Associated Student Government and Director of Social Justice and Equity, where she spearheaded initiatives to enhance inclusivity and address systemic challenges.

Autumn's road through higher education was not easy: a lack of support and feelings of isolation ultimately forced her to pause schooling. The Campaign for College Opportunity interviewed Autumn to learn how colleges and universities nationwide can affirm the belonging of diverse students in the aftermath of a SCOTUS decision that threatens to erode inclusion on campuses. Learn more in our related publication, [*How Universities Can Build and Sustain Welcoming and Equitable Campus Environments.*](#)

Roots of Empowerment: From Camp Mendocino to Chico State

As an Afro-Indigenous Latina and first-generation student, I have worked to uplift and empower student voices in university and systemwide committees in my home state of California. My story in higher education began at Camp Mendocino in 2018, where I was a Garden Specialist with the Boys and Girls Club of San Francisco for underprivileged youth. I built a modest garden program into a culturally responsive educational platform with transformative topics of food justice, nutrition access, and, of course, how to plant a potato. Cultural richness within nutrition pushed me to pursue a degree at Chico State University in Nutrition Communication.



Discovering Gaps in the Curriculum

I was excited to feel empowered studying nutrition, but as I started my classes, I uncovered a program that was not culturally responsive. The curriculum taught students about the benefits of kale and quinoa, rather than the intersectionality of systemic racism within food swamps and the nutritional inequities that characterized my experience with the children I worked with at Camp Mendocino.



Systemic Issues Across California State University

The absence of diverse identities in faculty and leadership positions hinders us from advancing campus inclusion and promoting equitable student success, causing ripple effects for holistic advocacy to address diverse student needs. This is not an issue affecting only my campus, but one that is prevalent across the California State University (CSU) system, our nation's largest university system comprised of 23 campuses. Today, student enrollment at the CSU is incredibly diverse, with over two-thirds of the student body identifying as Latinx, Black, Asian American, or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (NHPI).

Despite constituting 47% of the student body in 2021, Latinx representation in the CSU system remains low, except for the Chancellor's Office, where Latinx individuals hold 43% of the positions. Representation in other leadership bodies, such as the academic senate, has seen only slight improvement from 2% in 2017 to 11% in 2021, and 70% are still white. Black and Asian American leadership has seen some progress, as Black faculty now make up 9% of the academic senate and Asian American and NHPI trustees have increased to 19% of the body. White leaders remain overrepresented with at least half of all leadership roles held by white individuals, compared to 21% of the student population.

In contrast, gender representation has seen notable progress, with women now holding nearly half of the presidential and senior leadership roles, aligning more closely with their 57% representation among students. As a proud student leader, I am thrilled to see these gains, but I know it is not nearly adequate enough to make the systemic changes that reflect our students.

Need for Systemic Change

In my work as a student leader, I have noticed misguided efforts to enact systemic change. Transformative stories and ideas made to empower and uplift diversity are watered down, with the onus landing on the shoulders of tokenized Black and Brown students and campus leaders to follow through. The data clearly show we are not doing enough to combat decades of inequities in representation across the CSU system.

Strategic methods and targeted practices to recruit and, most importantly, retain diverse faculty and administrators must be a priority. And for our students, having faculty who reflect them is a necessary strategy to ensure their enrollment and persistence at the CSU and at every campus in America. For myself, a lack of belonging coupled with affordability issues took a toll on my mental health, and I decided to leave college for over a year.





Cultivating Support and Finding Belonging: A Journey of Academic and Personal Growth

When I returned, I met an incredible professor: Dr. Seth Klobodo, who was new and the first Black faculty member I had. He taught culturally relevant courses and even hired me as a research assistant, where I became published through a study on the nutritional knowledge of Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) students. For the first time, I was getting the support that I needed from the start.

I longed for more beyond Dr. Klobodo's unique support, so I switched majors to Multicultural Gender Studies and Sociology, where I experienced a different realm of student success. The diversity of the professors and the care that they brought to instruction was much more extensive, providing not just academic support, but a sense of well-being and a safe space. Their support inspired me to run for Director of Social Justice & Equity, which led me to more opportunities for advocacy.

As Student Body President, I represented almost 14,000 students as Student Body President and nearly half a million students through the Cal State Student Association. I have worked diligently to pave my path and find my sense of belonging in college, and I could not have done it without the support of professors that reflect the same experiences that I have in the classes they teach.

Moving Boldly Towards Inclusion

For the sake of our students, the future of California, and the future of America, we must remind ourselves why colleges/universities nationwide exist: to educate the new majority. We need that majority reflected in our educators and to pay them what they are worth. We must make faculty and leadership diversity a core priority in our work to advance student success and close equity gaps.

Policymakers and higher education leaders alike can and should be more intentional towards creating improved experiences for faculty, staff, and students. We must invest in strengthening diverse and equitable admissions, hiring, and retention practices to ensure that people who look like me are no longer systematically left out of higher education.

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**“Not everything faced
can be changed,
but nothing can be changed
until it is faced.”**

- James Baldwin

About Autumn Alaniz-Wiggins

Autumn Alaniz-Wiggins is an aspiring social researcher and advocate with a profound commitment to public service and philanthropy, particularly in the realms of higher education and community advocacy. She graduated this year with a double B.A. degree in Sociology and Multicultural Gender Studies from California State University, Chico, through which she honed a deep understanding of societal inequities and multicultural dynamics. Autumn's leadership was exemplified in her roles as President of the CSU Chico Associated Student Government and Director of Social Justice and Equity, where she spearheaded initiatives to enhance inclusivity and address systemic challenges. Her significant contributions include leading impactful policy campaigns like #StopTheHike, publishing research exploring the nutritional knowledge of EOP students, and her work on the 10% Initiative to solicit the stories of 1,400 students at her home campus. She was also awarded the California State Student Association's Student Advocate of the Year recognition. Autumn's work, driven by a passion for equitable education and community empowerment, reflects her unwavering dedication to creating meaningful change in society.

The Campaign for College Opportunity is a California non-profit bipartisan policy and research organization focused on a single mission: to ensure all Californians have an equal opportunity to attend and succeed in college in order to build a vibrant workforce, economy and democracy. In June 2023, the U.S. Supreme Court announced a decision to curtail the use of race in college and university admissions, a powerful tool that has been used to address the legacy of racial injustice and advance the inclusion and integration of Latinx, Black, Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (NHPI), and American Indian/Alaska Native (AIAN) students. In response, the Campaign for College Opportunity has launched a national initiative, [Affirming Equity, Ensuring Inclusion, Empowering Action](#), promoting evidence-based solutions through practice briefs and toolkits that advance more equitable strategies in college preparation, admission, affordability, and success to ensure those who have been historically excluded and underserved by our colleges and universities have a real opportunity to go to college and succeed.