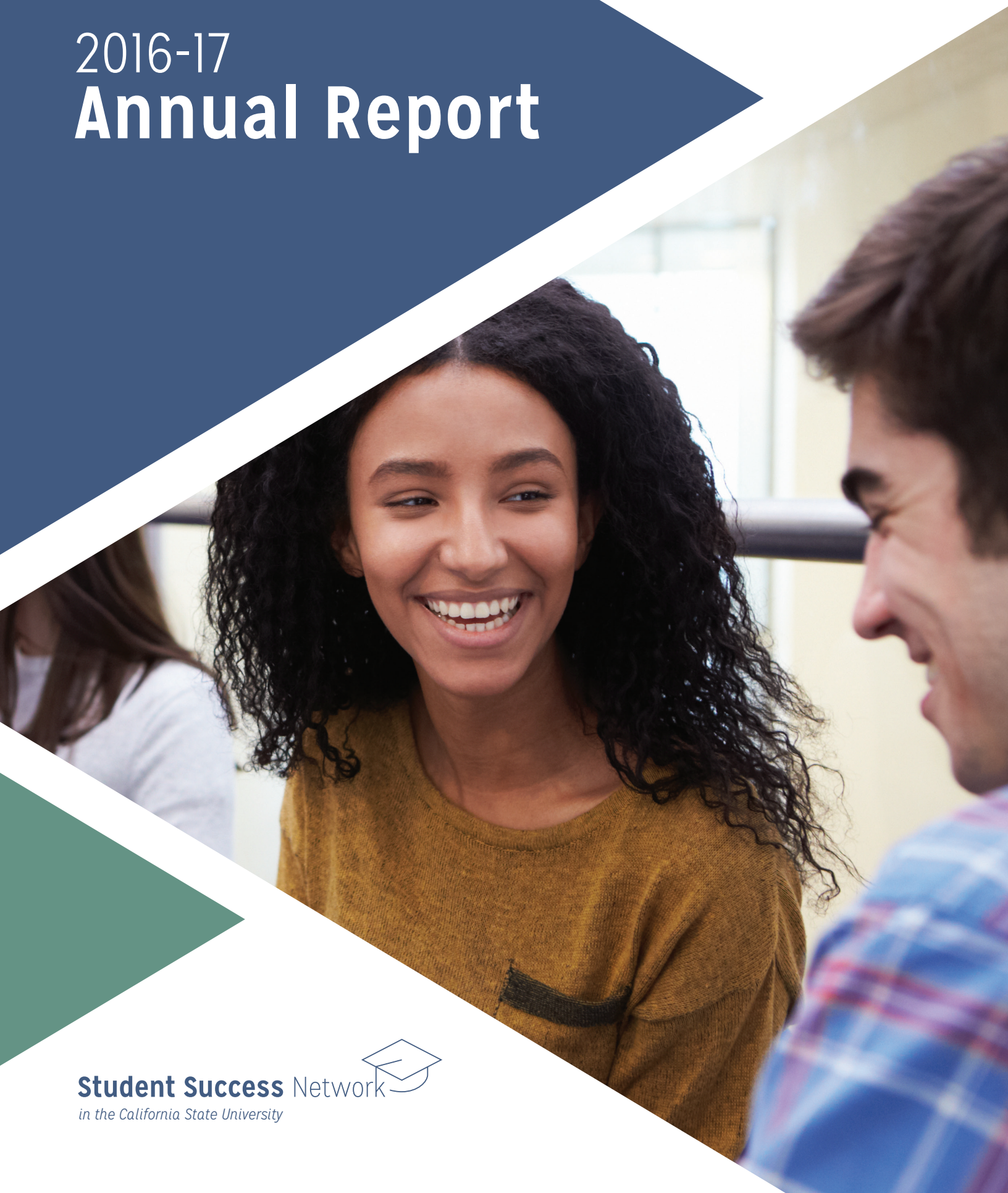
2016-17

Annual Report



Student Success Network

in the California State University

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Report Highlights

The CSU Student Success Network complements other student success efforts underway in the California State University (CSU) by offering a forum for sustained, cross-campus, cross-role, professional learning opportunities for "middle leaders"—faculty, staff, and administrators at the campus level who work closely with students.

The CSU Student Success Network completed its first year of operation as a state-supported effort (in addition to funding from the Kresge and College Futures Foundations). The main areas of focus for 2016-17 were to develop a sound infrastructure for the Network (such as building relationships, creating an appropriate staffing structure, and hiring an evaluator) and operationalizing each strand of work.

In its first year, the Network established an operational core including an Interim Advisory Board, financial systems, and a performance management system—and cultivated key relationships systemwide. The Network also made progress across all core work strands including communications, research, Student Success Labs, and convenings.

About the CSU Student Success Network

The California State University (CSU) is the largest four-year public university system in the world and the pathway to opportunity for many Californians, but far too many students who enter the CSU extend their time to degree or exit without completing a degree.

The obstacles to success in higher education are more pronounced for some, including low-income students, first-generation college-going students, and students of color—demographic groups that together represent a large proportion of CSU students and the state's population. There are many student success efforts underway at every level within the CSU. The CSU Graduation Initiative 2025, High Impact Practices, and the CSU Student Success Dashboard each provide a strong and clear emphasis on the need to improve college completion rates and time to degree, especially for historically underserved students. In addition to efforts at the system level, there are many campus-led student success efforts underway—some self-funded and others supported through foundations and government grants.

As a complement to these efforts, the CSU Student Success Network engages with people whose jobs focus directly on students, across campuses and roles—to use evidence and test strategies to close opportunity gaps and realize improved and more equitable outcomes. The Network is facilitated by the Education Insights Center (EdInsights) at Sacramento State. EdInsights is a research and policy center devoted to student success and the public benefits of education; its mission is to inform and improve policymaking and practice for K-12 education, community colleges, and public universities. Participants from 13 CSU campuses collaborated in a planning process from 2014 to 2016 to assess the need for and potential impact of a student success network within the system. With initial support from The Kresge Foundation and The Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Foundation, and with facilitation by EdInsights, they developed a strategic plan and established the CSU Student Success Network that launched in the 2016-17 academic year with generous support from the State of California. Additional funding is provided by the Kresge and College Futures Foundations.

Vision and Theory of Action

The vision—the big picture change Network members want to help create over the long-term—provides the "north star" for network design and provides clarity for faculty, staff, and administrators who wish to participate in the Network. The Network's vision is that **all students in California experience the highest possible quality undergraduate education, with a focus on closing opportunity gaps and achieving equitable outcomes.**[1]

This vision is ambitious and will require many changes, some of which are outside of the purview of the Network. For example, federal and state policies and funding would need to better align with student success objectives; better alignment and points of connection are needed across higher education institutions and all education systems in California; and, individual campuses would need to transform in a way that makes degree programs more accessible and supportive. The Network seeks to act as a complement to other student success efforts by developing and facilitating a cross-campus, cross-role set of gathering places—to provide spaces for "middle leaders" to engage in evidence-based learning, planning, experimentation, documentation, and dissemination of findings.[2]

The Network employs four primary strategies that operate as interconnected work strands:

- **Convenings.** The Network offers opportunities for middle leaders in the CSU to come together across institutions and roles around issues of practice that affect students, focus on core problems or challenges, discuss evidence-based strategies and opportunities for change, and take steps to create action plans. Convening events are opportunities to cultivate cross-campus, cross-role relationships and access resources that can strengthen individual student success efforts.

- **Student Success Labs.** The Labs are a structured, year-long, cross-functional, team-based, professional learning experience. Teams of CSU faculty, student affairs staff, researchers, and students from multiple CSU campuses commit to attending a series of intensive weekends in which they gain new knowledge, skills, and relationships; identify a common problem faced by students; analyze data to better understand the problem; identify possible solution(s) grounded in a rigorous understanding of the current evidence; create, implement, and iterate on a prototype solution; and document the work so that it can be understood and used by others in the CSU.

- **Research.** The Network fosters new learning about student success, focused on such issues as understanding core problems, and creating common understandings and definitions. Findings from this work and other Network activities will be shared broadly, giving educators, policymakers, and others the opportunity to learn and build on emerging evidence.

- **Communication.** Through targeted communications, the Network works to ensure effective communications about opportunities to participate in the Network, and about activities underway in the above work strands. Over the medium-to-long-term, the Network will create channels for engagement of Network members. The Network will also work to disseminate lessons learned through Network activities to a broader audience.

Cultivating leadership "in the middle"

The Network seeks to engage "middle leaders"—individuals with formal or informal leadership responsibilities who work closely with students, and whose tenure at the institutions is likely stable and continuous. The Network borrows this definition from the Research and Planning Group of the California Community Colleges, whose work developing leaders in the middle of that system informs this Network.

In 2016-17, the Network engaged with over 200 middle leaders in the CSU across all work strands. One participant of a Network-supported convening on college readiness in the CSU elaborated on the immediate impact that the meeting had for his campus team, "Some of our key faculty who are teaching developmental math were able to attend that meeting, and they got a lot out of the experience. After returning to our campus, they had some meaningful conversations about their developmental math program, and they've already created opportunities for students to prepare themselves better in developmental math. For example, they created a math boot camp during spring break, which was an idea they got at the meeting."

Asked to elaborate more generally on the value of the Network, this participant shared that, "It's affirming to know that some of the work that you're doing is on target and it's good to know that other people share your struggles and successes. It's wonderful to know that others are going through some of the same emotions and celebrations and challenges that you are."

Key Accomplishments

Established the Network's operational core

At the beginning of the year, the Network was a concept with limited operational infrastructure. The first priority was to set up systems that can help the Network function effectively over the long term.

Interim Advisory Board. The first priority was to solidify the Interim Advisory Board composed of committed leaders from across the CSU who could help shape the early implementation of the Network, and ask those members to serve for at least one year—to help the Network transition from an idea to a reality. The group met through in-person meetings, conference calls, and ad hoc conversations throughout the year. Next year, the Network will maintain and formalize the board structure so that efforts continue to benefit from cross-campus, cross-role perspectives.

Financial systems. The Network is developing a system for managing budgets across project work strands and enabling up-to-date reporting as needed. In 2016-17, the Network contracted with Sacramento State's College of Continuing Education (CCE) to provide administrative support. EdInsights is currently hiring a full-time administrative staff member to support fiscal and administrative needs of the Network.

Performance management system. The Network established priority year one outcomes by work strand and used these outcomes to guide efforts throughout the year. Staff developed and launched a contracting process for a developmental evaluator that will provide feedback to help the Network improve over the next year. Network staff members are currently reviewing proposals and hope to launch the developmental evaluation in the fall of 2017.

Cultivated key relationships systemwide

Network staff and board members provided informational briefings to the CSU statewide Academic Senate (twice), the Student Affairs Council, the Academic Council, the Provosts' Council, California State Student Association, Institutional Research Directors, a session at the CSU Program for Education & Research in Biotechnology (CSUPERB) conference, and individual campus leaders. In addition, Network staff has established regular communication with the CSU Chancellor's Office to ensure informed connection of efforts.

Convened two cross-campus, cross-role meetings around shared problems of practice

The Network convened a meeting on college readiness at San Francisco State in March 2017 and a meeting on data use and student success at Fresno State in May 2017 attended by a total of eighty-one registered participants from fourteen campuses. Across the two meetings, 96% of participants reported that the meeting helped them build relationships with colleagues from across the CSU, 96% reported that the meeting helped their team create a plan to strengthen ongoing improvement efforts on their home campus, and 98% reported that they would attend another meeting convened by the Network.

Developed the Student Success Labs concept and recruited the first cohort of participants

Curriculum development and planning for the inaugural year of the Labs (2017-18) is underway, and plans for the first intensive weekend (November 2017) will be completed this summer. The recruitment process yielded a total of twelve applications from campus teams; eleven will participate.

Conducted and disseminated research to help build a shared base of knowledge

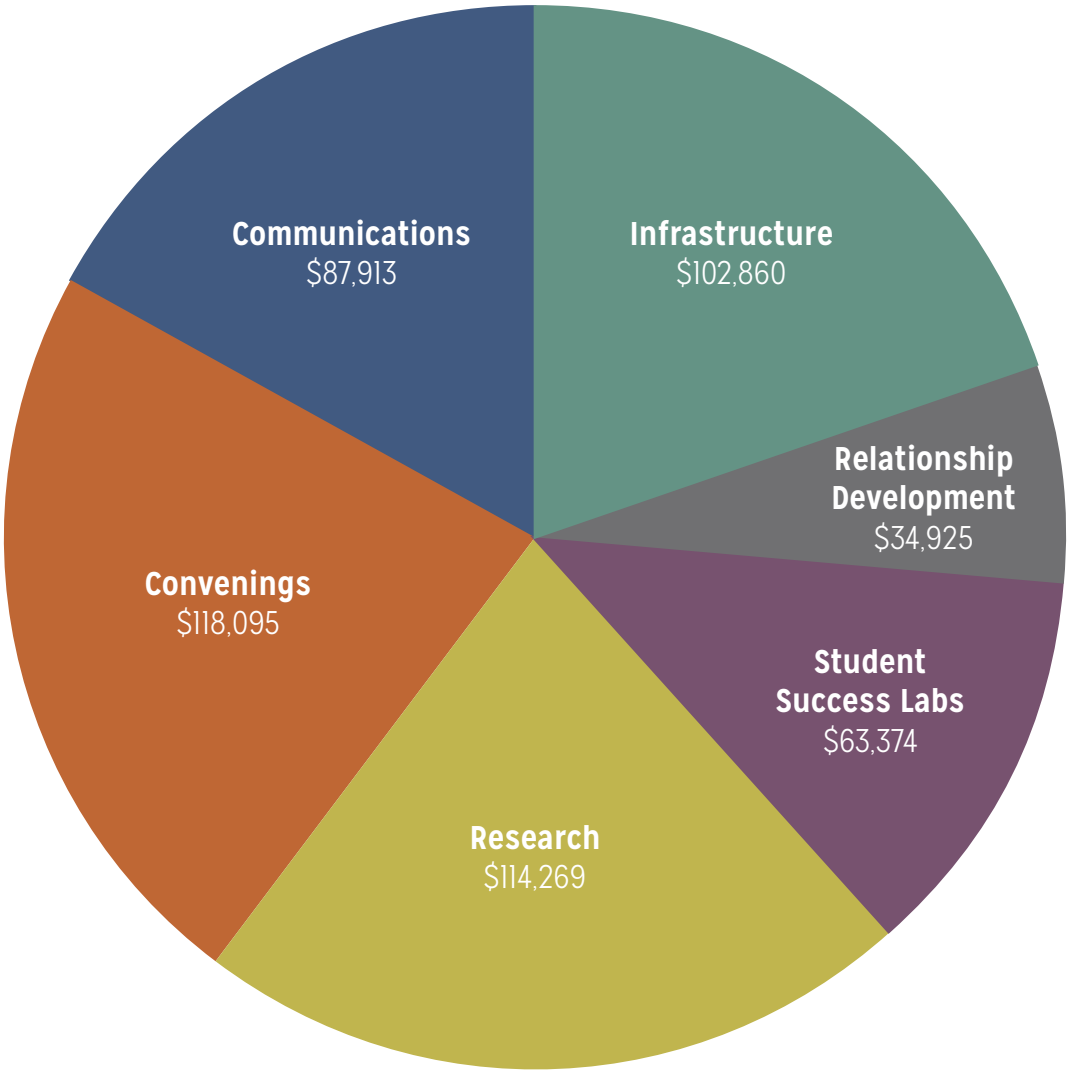
The Interim Advisory Board approved two research projects in 2016-17: one exploring student success efforts across the CSU, and another examining student experiences. Staff launched both projects this academic year. The descriptive analysis of campus student success efforts will be available on the Network website in August 2017, and the student experiences study will be completed in fall of 2017.

Created systems and resources to support Network communications

The Network has a website, a "mark" (logo), a mailing list, a slide deck, and two informational brochures. Staff sent an email in April 2017 to the Network mailing list, notifying stakeholders of the Network resources available, descriptions of Network activities, and opportunities to get involved. Measures such as number of visitors to the Network website, which pages are visited, "open" rates for email blasts, and how long users spend on the website are being tracked through Google analytics. The April 2017 email to the Network mailing list was opened by 42% of recipients (an above average rate for non-profit and education-related email campaigns); in addition, 26% of recipients who opened the email clicked on at least one link (a slightly above average rate).

CSU Student Success Network Financial Report

The Network spent approximately $521,000 in 2016-17.



The chart above was developed using estimates, given that the Network is in the process of posting final 2016-2017 expenses and reconciling the account. The Network underspent its $1.1 million budget this fiscal year, as early efforts were geared toward building capacity for the Network to be fully operational. Remaining funds have been rolled over for use in the next fiscal year in accordance with state and university guidelines. The Network will likely expend its annual allocation in 2017-2018.

CSU Student Success Network—Interim Advisory Board

About the Interim Advisory Board

All major decisions of the CSU Student Success Network are guided by an Interim Advisory Board—a diverse group of leaders from campuses across the CSU. Board members meet in person twice per year, and participate in conference calls and other ad hoc conversations to weigh in on key decisions related to Network implementation. In addition, Board members act as "champions" of the Network within their own respective professional spheres of influence in order to share information about Network activities and ways to get involved.

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Lori Beth Way
Interim Dean of Undergraduate Education and Academic Planning
San Francisco State University

TBD for 2017-18
Student Representative
California State Student Association

Endnotes

1 The Network strives for equitable outcomes for all students and is committed to closing gaps in opportunity wherever they exist. Each California State University campus has a unique population of students and achievement gaps are not the same across campuses. Gaps commonly exist for (a) students from low-income backgrounds, (b) students who are first in their family to attend college, and (c) racial and ethnic minorities (as defined by the campus/program).

2 We use the term "middle leaders" to refer to faculty, staff, and administrators at the campus level who work closely with students. We acknowledge that higher-level administrators (Presidents, Provosts, etc.), system office representatives, and students also play critical roles in improving student success, but the focus of this Network is on middle leaders in particular.

3 The Advisory Board structure will be formalized in 2017-18. Among other changes, a student representative selected by the California State Student Association will join the Board in 2017-18.

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