



**Student Success** Network

*in the California State University*



# **“Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Us ‘Round”: Doubling Down on Equity in the CSU**

*Annual Report 2023-24*

IMAGE: “BECOMING” MURAL  
Photo: BIBIANA ORTIZ



Welcome!

What a dynamic, productive year for the [CSU Student Success Network \(Network\)](#) and the talented, dedicated middle leaders who worked with us and each other to support equitable student success on our [California State University \(CSU\)](#) campuses!

In my first year as Network director and our seventh year as a Network, we welcomed CSU students, staff, faculty, and administrators back to in-person as well as online events. We brought together diverse groups of people in the CSU for project and leadership development, action-oriented research, conversations about historical and policy context, brainstorming about student data, and hands-on work in communities of practice. In short, we're talking about the building blocks of equity work in the CSU today!

I'm proud to report that middle leaders this year raised the bar on what's possible. We stretched our comfort zones, brought people into the work, spoke up for each other, supported people where they sit, built relationships across the CSU, and helped people develop and implement projects to advance equity on our campuses. As a university system, we have much work to do to close our equity gaps, but we knew this work would not be easy, and this year our collective vision and actions inspire me. They remind me of a freedom song from the Civil Rights Movement that I first heard when I was young and doing my Black history homework in the East Bay: "[Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me 'Round](#)."

“The Student Success Network has become the foremost entity in addressing equity-related issues not only in the CSU, but in all of higher education in California.”

- CSU Network Participant

Especially now with the challenges we face nationally and in higher education, it's time to double down on equity in the CSU. We're in this together, and we "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Us 'Round."

At the Network, we are grateful to the swelling numbers of students and colleagues who direct, facilitate, and participate in our activities. We thank our [Advisory Board members](#) who guide our work and our institutional partners who make our work possible, including the State of California, [Sacramento State University](#) (where we are housed), [the Office of the Chancellor](#), and all 23 campuses of the CSU.

Please contact us with your ideas, and by all means, join us!

Sincerely,

Shonda Goward, Ed.D.  
Network Director and Associate Vice Provost of Undergraduate Advising and Success,  
San José State University





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# Highlights from the year

In 2023-24, the Network and participating middle leaders doubled down in understanding, supporting, researching, and advancing equitable student success in the CSU. Here are some examples from the year showing why our work is crucial today.

***At a time when some states are shutting down programs, research, and teaching that support diversity, equity, justice, and inclusion:***



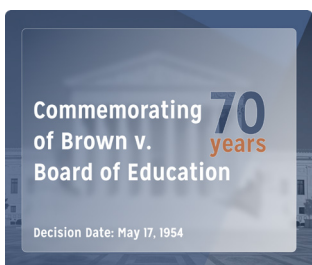
The Network's year-long [Middle Leadership Academy](#) supported 10 diverse teams of CSU students, staff, faculty, and institutional researchers in creating a campus equity project and advancing their own leadership, communications, and networking skills. Participants were thrilled to be meeting and networking in person again, and all teams successfully developed a campus equity project, created a logic model for implementation, and worked with colleagues on campus to begin implementation.

***At a time when LGBTQIA2S+<sup>1</sup> students are facing violence, threats, and other attacks in the United States:***



The Network provided our first-ever two-day [LGBTQIA2S+ Student Success Symposium](#), which brought together CSU students, staff, faculty, institutional researchers, and administrators, as well as several staff members from the California Community College system, to share practices to improve support and equitable success for LGBTQIA2S+ students in the CSU. This in-person event had the highest student representation of any major event that the Network has provided. The energy was so high that [three Communities of Practice \(ComPs\)](#) focused on improving practice and policy in support of LGBTQIA2S+ student success sprang from the event and will continue with Network support in 2024-25.

***At a time when some state legislatures are banning Critical Race Theory and the mention of race in education:***



The Network, in collaboration with the Office of the Chancellor, provided a day-long webinar called "[Separate Is Not Equal: Reflecting on the 70th Anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas.](#)" Speakers addressed the Brown decision's monumental role in setting the course toward equity in education—and the many challenges to its legacy nationally, in California, and in the CSU. A large audience (214 people) joined the all-day event. Over four out of five respondents found this event to be very useful in helping them understand the challenges to equity work they face on their campus today, based on our event evaluation.

<sup>1</sup> The Network uses the inclusive acronym "LGBTQIA2S+" (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, Two-Spirit) in reference to both gender and sexual identities, acknowledging that the LGBTQIA2S+ population is diverse in composition and varied in affiliation. When describing a particular LGBTQIA2S+ community or portion of the LGBTQIA2S+ population, we use the naming convention that applies directly to that group.

What roles do middle leaders serve on campus in creating equitable student success? During a series of Convenings on the [Power of Middle Leadership](#), participating students, staff, faculty, and administrators told us (see [Tips and Strategies on creating equity-focused change](#)) that it's the middle leaders on campus who:

- are the catalysts and the doers;
- are responsible for developing on-the-ground strategies and work plans;
- consistently center students' voices, and so their reforms are built from the student experience;
- are the go-betweens who work with deans, directors, frontline personnel, and students;
- keep everyone informed of what's happening;
- have staying power while senior leadership turns over frequently; and
- have the institutional knowledge and patience to understand the timing and politics of reform.

Participants also told us that middle leaders face challenges related to burnout, budget shortfalls, and lack of resources and staff. They're experts in their fields, but managing change typically involves tasks they're not necessarily trained to do, including using data to understand program effectiveness, mastering communications and networking strategies, and managing upward, downward, and horizontally (including committees) to get things done outside their job hierarchies.

These are areas where the Network thrives! We step in to provide CSU students, staff, faculty, and administrators with dedicated time, space, and tools to work with each other across departments and campuses to advance equity in the CSU.

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**“It is spaces and places like the CSU Student Success Network where new ideas and efforts are formed, where we are able to refill our cups and get reenergized to continue to do this very important and critical work.”**

– Dilcie Perez, Ed.D., Deputy Vice Chancellor, CSU Chancellor's Office, Speaking at the “Separate Is Not Equal” Webinar

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**“The CSU Network currently has the most relevant, sustainable information that supports populations and identities that are most affected by historic inequities that impact our communities. It frames equity-related issues in a manner that allows one to view the various topics through a practitioner's lens and make informed decisions on how to proceed.”**

– CSU Network Participant

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## Primary Activities and Outcomes

### Middle Leadership Academy

The Middle Leadership Academy (Academy), the Network's flagship program, is unique in the CSU in offering campus teams of students, staff, faculty, and administrators a year-long, hands-on opportunity to plan and undertake a substantial equity project on their campus. Twenty-one of the 23 CSU campuses have sent teams to the Academy to address campus equity challenges since its inception in 2017-18. Eighteen campuses have sent teams over multiple years, using the Academy to develop a cadre of middle leaders on their campus with direct experience in:

- understanding and using student data to improve and develop campus programming around equity;
- creating and advancing plans for substantive equitable change that involve and are supported by multiple campus divisions;
- reaching out to and working with colleagues on campus to adjust and implement these plans;
- overcoming resistance in implementation; and
- developing their own and supporting others' leadership skills in the process.

In recent years, collaborative teams representing multiple campuses have also used the Academy to create opportunities to address issues of equity across the CSU. This year, for example, a cross-campus team explored ways to restructure the first-year seminar to improve equitable student success and to establish an on-going CSU community of practice for professionals addressing the first-year student experience.

In addition to supporting project and leadership development for campus teams, the Academy trains previous participants to serve as facilitators each year for other campus teams. This practice is creating a cadre of professionals across CSU campuses with expertise in developing and implementing equitable programming and practices.

“I really appreciated the leadership development ... within a context of equity ... I need to use my position and voice to speak for and bring in those who are not at the table.”

– Academy Participant

This year the Academy provided two online orientation meetings, one for facilitators and the other for team leads. Afterwards, each facilitator traveled to their team’s campus for an in-person launch meeting to prepare the team for the Academy sessions. In February and April 2024, all team members participated in the Academy’s in-person sessions, which were held in Folsom and San Diego, respectively. As a culminating experience, each team presented its equity project online in May 2024 in the form of a “pitch” to Academy participants from other campuses and to colleagues from their own campus, a new format that was productive and well received.

“I gained a better understanding of my leadership, stronger connections to colleagues, ... and a better understanding of how to identify equity barriers impeding student success and how to develop and pitch solutions.”

– Academy Participant

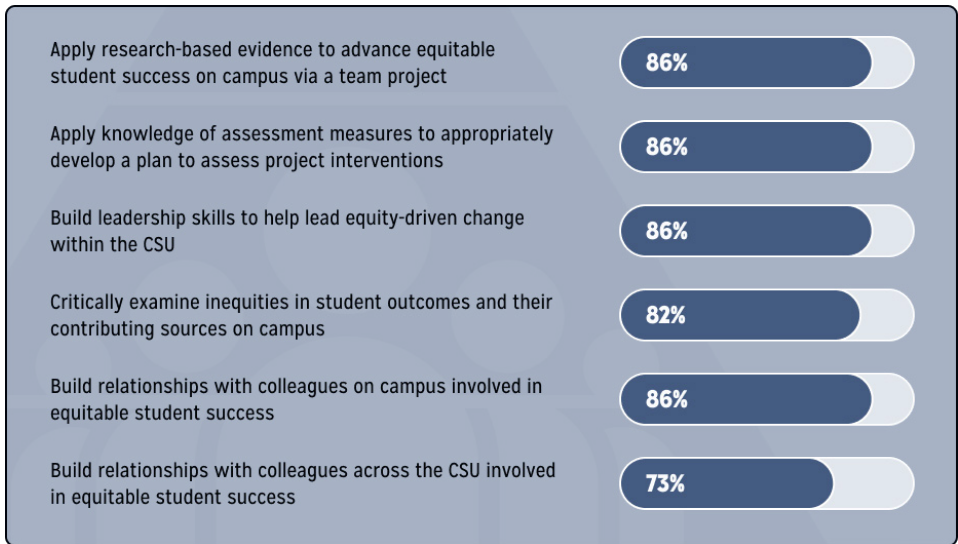
During 2023-24, Ellie Clifford Ertle, Ed.D., associate vice provost for academic success programs at Chico State University, became Academy director.

*Achievements and Outcomes*

Ten teams participated in the Academy during 2023-24, including nine campus teams and one cross-campus team. All campus teams successfully developed a campus equity project, created a logic model for implementation, and worked with colleagues on campus to begin implementation. In surveys, roughly four out of five respondents found the Academy to be “quite useful” or “extremely useful” in relation to all of the Academy’s main objectives of applying research-based evidence, using data effectively to examine inequities on campus and assess the effectiveness of interventions, practicing leadership skills, and building relationships on campus and across the CSU to support equitable student success (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Survey of Academy Participants, Spring 2024**

How useful was the Academy in helping you to:



Note: Surveys were administered after the final Academy event of the year. Respondents represented about a quarter of participants. Their distribution by job role and campus may not be representative across all participants.

## LGBTQIA2S+ Student Success Symposium

Inspired by feedback from participants in prior years, the Network's annual Student Success Conference shifted its format in 2023-24 to provide a two-day Symposium on LGBTQIA2S+ Student Success. The in-person event, held in Sacramento on March 7-8, 2024, brought together CSU students, staff, faculty, researchers, and administrators, as well as representatives from the California Community College system, to build relationships across roles and campuses and share practices to improve equitable success for LGBTQIA2S+ students in the CSU.

The Symposium featured one keynote address, four plenaries, four breakout sessions, and two organizing meetings, many of which featured students in speaking roles. Two breakout sessions focused on navigating and improving SOGI (Sexual Orientation & Gender Identity) data collection (see sidebar).

Other session topics at the Symposium included:

- the social and political landscape for LGBTQIA2S+ students in the CSU;
- addressing basic needs for LGBTQIA2S+ students;
- intersectionality of LGBTQIA2S+ identity and neurodivergency;
- intersectionality of LGBTQIA2S+ identity and racial/ethnic identity; and
- roles for campus pride centers to support academic and personal success.

All sessions facilitated action-oriented conversations and community building. To that end, the second day of the symposium brought together participants to discuss the development of three communities of practice, as reported in Accomplishments and Outcomes below.

Larissa Mercado-López, Ph.D., professor and department chair of Women's, Gender & Sexuality Studies at Fresno State, was director of the Symposium in 2023-24. She has served as director of the Student Success Conference since its inception.

### *Achievements and Outcomes*

The Symposium brought 129 students, staff, faculty, researchers, and administrators from the 23 CSU campuses, the Chancellor's Office, and the California Community Colleges. The event had the highest student representation of any major event the Network has provided. More than two out of five participants were students (43%), about a quarter were staff (26%), 17% were faculty, 9% were administrators, and 5% were community members.

**SOGI data collection** is important to inform policy, practices, and procedures that impact LGBTQIA2S+ students and impacts the funding available to support their needs. As Kailey Jo Palmer, academic advisor at Cal State East Bay, noted in a [Network memo](#) on this issue, "The lack of accessible SOGI information on our LGBTQIA2S+ student populations can perpetuate institutional marginalization and influence how each campus recognizes, supports, and empowers the Queer community." Our partners in the California Community Colleges have recently reviewed collection practices in their system from which we can learn, as reported in [Bringing Data Out of the Closet and Toward Equity](#).



On the second day, the Symposium laid the groundwork to launch three Communities of Practice (ComPs) to explore and propose actions to advance equity related to LGBTQIA2S+ student success in the CSU. Organized over the summer and working together until January, the ComPs are examining the following areas:

- improving basic needs and SOGI data collection;
- advocating for gender centers and neurodivergent identities; and
- creating gender-affirming campuses.

Each ComP will meet monthly during the fall semester 2024 to develop findings and strategies. The Network will support their work by facilitating three webinars during the semester, including presentations by ComP members regarding progress and accomplishments.

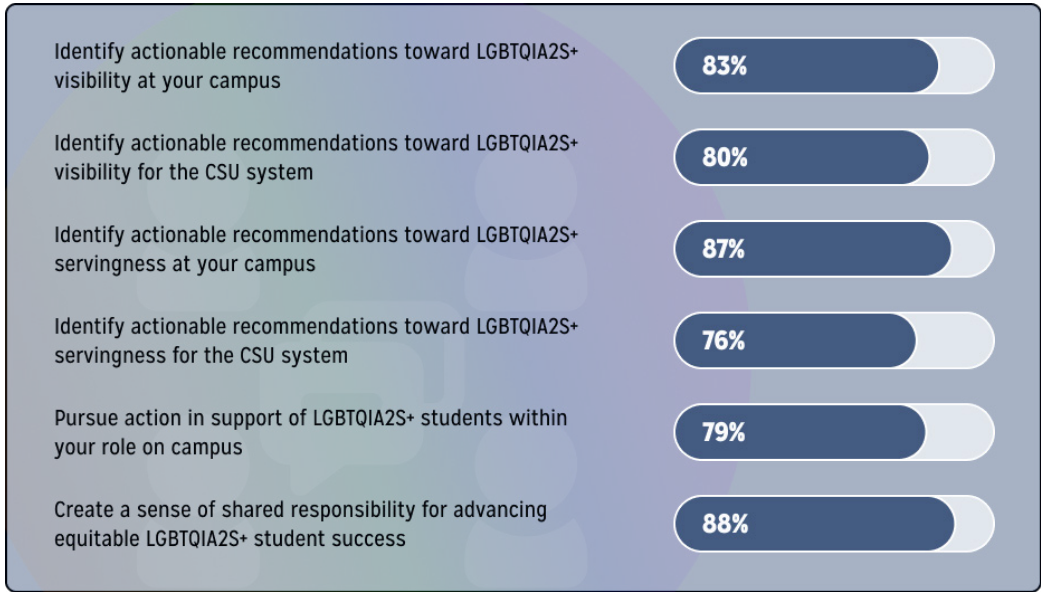
“The symposium was well done, thoughtful, and well organized. Informative and engaging.”

– Symposium Participant

Based on surveys, respondents found the Symposium to be very helpful across the board in all of the Symposium’s objectives. For example, roughly four out of five respondents found the event to be “quite useful” or “extremely useful” in building relationships with colleagues on campus (77%) and building relationships with colleagues across the CSU (84%). In terms of pursuing actions, respondents also found the event to be very helpful (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Survey of Symposium Participants, Spring 2024

How useful was the Symposium in helping you to:



Note: The survey was administered after the Symposium. Respondents represented 59% of participants.

## Convenings

The Network hosted three online Convenings this year. The largest convening was the “Separate Is Not Equal” webinar, which recognized and drew inspiration from the 70th anniversary of the landmark U.S. Supreme Court Case, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. Also during 2023-24, the Convenings team planned a new direction next year that connects the Network’s virtual events more closely with its Academy offerings and research resources.

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“Equity has to be a focus in daily work that is done with students. The importance of attending events like this [is] in shedding light on the perspectives that exist around equity and inclusion.”

– “Separate Is Not Equal” Webinar Participant

Shonda Goward, Ed.D., served as Convenings director. She is director of the Network and associate vice provost of undergraduate advising and success at San José State University.

**Separate Is Not Equal: Reflecting on the 70th Anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, 1954*, and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Programming in California.** This [day-long webinar](#), held on April 23, 2024, was co-sponsored by the CSU Office of the Chancellor. Speakers and participants addressed the *Brown* decision’s monumental role in setting the course toward equity in education, its impacts in California and the CSU, and the many challenges to its legacy nationally and in California.

The webinar featured a keynote speaker that provided a national overview of the *Brown* legacy and the challenges to it since 1954. Faculty from San José State University provided an overview of segregation and desegregation in California education. [Panels with students](#), staff, and faculty from several CSU campuses described challenges they face and the work ahead to address equity in the CSU.

**Your Power in Middle Leadership: What Does it Take to Create Equity-Focused Change?** This online Convening, held on September 8, 2023, was the fourth in a series focusing on the power and challenges of middle leadership.” In November 2023, the Network published a [“Tips and Strategies” brief](#) online that was drawn from the series and that described strategies for middle leaders to create change.

**Making the Re-Enrollment Priority an Equity Strategy.** This virtual Convening, held October 6, 2023, explored how middle leaders can create re-enrollment [strategies that equitably support students](#) after they return to campus.



Participants at the Network's 2024 LGBTQIA2S+ Student Success Symposium

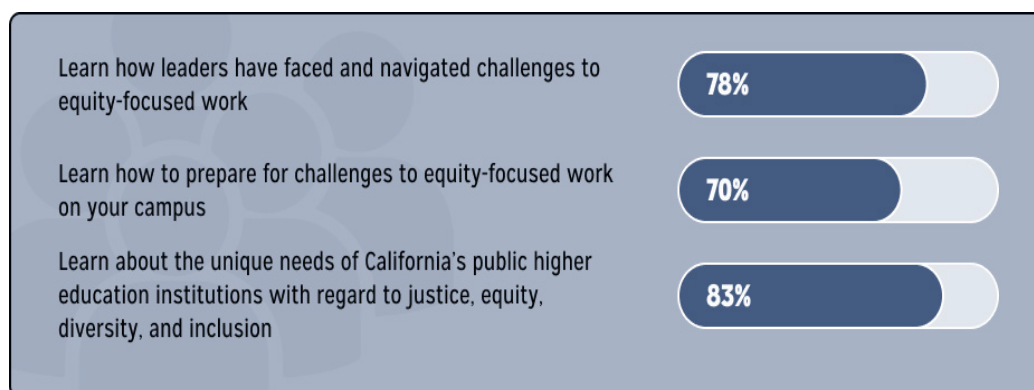
## Achievements and Outcomes

The Network's "Separate Is Not Equal" webinar drew 214 participants from across the CSU System, including from the Chancellor's Office. About half of those participating were staff (52%), a third were administrators (30%), 12% were faculty, 3% were students, and 3% were alumni, Chancellor's Office, and community members. In fall 2023, 56 middle leaders attended "Your Power in Middle Leadership" and 48 attended "Making the Re-Enrollment Priority an Equity Strategy."

Based on surveys after the "Separate Is Not Equal" webinar, 19 out of 20 respondents (95%) found the event to be "quite useful" or "extremely useful" in learning the history and current context of the challenges to equity work nationally and in California. Four out of five respondents (80%) found the event to be "quite useful" or "extremely useful" in understanding the challenges to equity-focused work they face on their campus. In addition, high numbers of respondents found the event to be helpful in learning how other leaders have faced challenges and how they can prepare for challenges themselves (see Figure 3).

### Figure 3. Survey of "Separate Is Not Equal" Participants, Spring 2024

How useful was the "Separate Is Not Equal Webinar" in helping you to:



Note: The survey was administered after the webinar. Survey respondents represented about a fifth of event participants. Their distribution by job role and campus may not be representative across all participants.



## Knowledge Center and Applied Research

The Knowledge Center is an online resource for CSU staff, faculty, and administrators to access succinct, research-based information to support and advance equitable student-centered policies and programming on their campus. This includes:

- [original research studies](#) by the Network focusing on issues of equitable student success in the CSU;
- [memos](#) that synthesize existing research pertinent to equity in the CSU;
- [Tips and Strategies](#) briefs that provide “how-to” guidance drawn from conversations with middle leaders about equitable programming in the CSU; and
- [“Voices” blogs](#) that provide perspectives from or about middle leaders in the CSU.

**Evaluation.** In coordination with our external evaluator, Informing Change, the Network in 2023-24 developed a new evaluation plan that aligns with its theory of change and will measure its indicators and outcomes over time. We will also continue to assess the effectiveness of each of our activities.

During 2023-24, Jeanine Cunningham, M.A., M.S., became research manager.

### *Achievements and Outcomes*

This year, the Knowledge Center published five memos, including a three-memo series on topics related to supporting LGBTQIA2S+ students in the CSU system. The series drew from a call for papers to the field and aligned with the Network’s LGBTQIA2S+ Symposium. The memos were authored by CSU staff, faculty, or administrators:

- [Improving LGBTQIA2S+/SOGI Demographic Data Collection within the CSU Using a QuantCrit Framework](#), by Kailey Jo (KJ) Palmer;
- [Support for 2SLGBTQIA+ Students: Creating Belongingness Through Campus Pride Centers](#), by Jessica L. Nare, Ed.D. and Kay Wong; and
- [Enhancing the CSU System’s Programs for Supporting LGBTQIA2S+ Students’ Well-being](#), by Michael C. Pratt.

Two additional memos during the year focused on supporting students from mixed immigration status families in the CSU by broadening our understanding of [students affected by immigration laws](#), and [supporting returning students](#) through equity-focused retention strategies.



The Knowledge Center published ten blogs during the year, including two that drew from knowledge and experiences that were shared at Network events:

- [Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Us 'Round: The Fight for African American Educational Freedom and Success in the CSU](#), by Shonda Goward, Ed.D., from the “Separate Is Not Equal” Webinar; and
- [Paving the Way for LGBTQIA2S+ Student Success](#), by Larissa Mercado López, Ph.D., from the LGBTQIA2S+ Symposium.

In fall 2023, the Network wrapped up a three-blog series on understanding and [supporting first-generation college students](#) in the CSU. In spring 2024, we produced a four-blog series on actions that CSU staff and faculty can take to encourage their programs and campuses to [address the needs of students with low income](#).

In addition, the Network published as “Tips and Strategies” brief called “[Creating Equity-Focused Change](#)” (November 2023). The brief drew from the perspectives of CSU staff and faculty, based on a series of three Convenings exploring the power of middle leaders to create change.

## Equity in Action Grant Program

The [Equity in Action \(EIA\) Grant Program](#) is a pilot program that supports action research and evaluation conducted by middle leaders on CSU campuses. The one-time grants were available to staff, faculty/lecturers, and middle-level administrators to identify, understand, and disrupt inequities on campus and to identify, understand, and advance opportunities for students to complete their courses of study.

During 2023-24, the EIA program was managed by Madeleine Kerrick, Ph.D., research and evaluation director for the Network and interim executive director of the Education Insights Center.

### *Achievements and Outcomes*

The Network funded [20 research projects from 13 campuses](#) in 2022. All projects submitted final reports during spring semester 2024. Campuses reported the following impacts (full findings and impacts will be reported in 2024-25).

- **Cal State East Bay:** “We were able to triple the number of participants and the retention rates have been even stronger than the first year...Our team has found that community-building in the classroom and across the program is the most critical strategy for creating a sense of belonging and, ultimately, academic success.”
- **San Diego State University:** “Successful strategies we have identified from this pilot include designing and leading high-quality tutor training, having a robust faculty community of practice, situating the program within an established college strategic plan for GI 2025, creating evening tutoring and coaching hours to support evening classes, and providing a value-add for faculty partners.”

## Communications

The communications team supports Network activities through media, graphics, and publication strategies. During 2023, the team led an organizational effort to shift our use of language so as to resist systems of oppression—for example, moving from “mission” to “purpose” and replacing “stakeholders” with relevant synonyms as a means of divesting ourselves of the settler colonial implications of these terms.

Other communications activities and achievements for 2023-24 featured:

- An active social media presence, with 585 followers on X, 501 followers on LinkedIn, and 25 subscribers on YouTube—all representing increases from the previous year.
- Direct outreach to 2,443 middle leaders in the CSU, an increase from 2,125 in 2022-23, and about 2,000 in 2021-22 (see Figure 4).
- The development of a crisis communications plan for our “Separate Is Not Equal” webinar, as well as publication and promotion of a [four-part video series](#) showcasing the webinar on YouTube.
- Comprehensive support for all print and digital communications for our LGBTQIA2S+ Symposium, including photographic coverage of this first major in-person event since 2020, adding a dynamic visual element to our communications.
- Publication and promotion on the Knowledge Center of 10 Voices blogs, five memos, and a Tips and Strategies brief.

Kalifa Madden is communications manager for the Network.

### Engagement with social media posts from our “Separate Is Not Equal” webinar



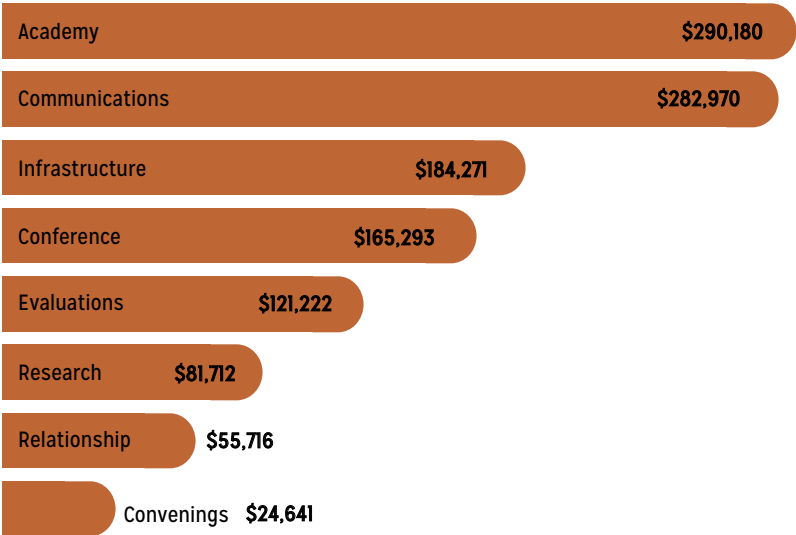


# Financial Report

The Network received \$1.1 million from the State of California for fiscal year 2023-24 and total expenses were \$1,206,006 for the year. Using carryover funds from prior years, the Network provided in-person activities for the first time since the Covid pandemic began, and at full capacity. The Network plans to continue using carryover funds where appropriate to support its key goals, including expansion of current activities, building new activities, and increasing staff capacity.

Most Network activities have been offered historically to CSU participants free of charge, including travel, food, and lodging costs. This year for the LGBTQIA2S+ Symposium, the Network piloted two changes: charging a small registration fee (\$100) for non-student participants and asking participants to cover their own travel and lodging costs. This event sold out. Infrastructure costs support all core Network functions and include salaries and benefits, general meeting expenses, supplies, and services.

*Figure 4. Expenditure, Fiscal Year 2023-24*



**Total 2023-24 Expenses: \$1,206,006**

# Advisory Board, 2023-24

The Network expanded its Advisory Board in 2023-24 to represent 14 campuses and the Chancellor's Office. The Network also updated the board's roles in providing feedback and guidance on policies, priorities, and activities.

First Name	Last Name	Title	Campus/Entity
Jennifer	Mabry	Director of Enrollment Services/University Registrar	Bakersfield
Mary	Virnoche	Graduate Program Coordinator	Cal Poly Humboldt
Brianne	Davila	Associate Dean and Professor of Sociology	Cal Poly Pomona
Doreen	Hatcher	Assistant VP for Student Affairs	Channel Islands
Duan	Jackson	Systemwide Director, Student Advising Initiatives	Chancellor's Office
Ellie	Clifford Ertle	AVP, Undergraduate Education and Success	Chico
Larissa	Mercado-López	Department Chair and Professor	Fresno
Jessica	Stern	Associate Dean	Fullerton
Catherine	Ward	Chief of Operations, Office of the Provost	Long Beach
Svetlana V.	Tyutina	Associate Professor, Graduate Program Director	Northridge
Nadine	Kelley	Senior Director for University Housing Services	Sacramento
Lisa	Guzman	Project Director	San Bernardino
Michelle	Lopez	Senior Assistant Dean for Student Success	San Diego
Susanna	Jones	First-Year Experience Faculty Director	San Francisco
Shonda	Goward	AVP, Undergraduate Advising and Success	San José
Jane	Lehr	Professor, Director of Student Research	San Luis Obispo
Adam	Petersen	Director of Strategic Initiatives for Academic Success	San Marcos



IMAGE: "BECOMING" MURAL  
Photo: BIBIANA ORTIZ

**Student Success Network**   
*in the California State University*




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 <http://csustudentsuccess.net>

**About the mural images:**

The "Place of Belonging" mural has been a multiyear project that supports Sacramento State's [Antiracism and Inclusive Campus Plan \(AICP\)](#) and highlights "Believing," "Becoming" and "Being."

Sac State collaborated with Roseville-based nonprofit art education center and gallery Blue Line Arts.

[Learn more about the "Becoming" mural.](#)

Layout and visual design by Ben Paquette-Ferguson and communications team.  
Template designed by Pat Davis Design Group, Inc.