ACADEMY IMPACTS SERIES

The Impacts of the CSU Student Success Network at Cal State Fullerton: New Campus Data Strategies, Programming, and Faculty Development Resources

Student Success Network
in the California State University

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Introduction

This is the second in a [series of briefs](#) examining the impacts of the [Middle Leadership Academy](#) (Academy) on campuses of the [California State University](#) (CSU). The Academy is a professional development opportunity that brings together campus-based teams of CSU students, staff, faculty, institutional researchers, and administrators for several intensive sessions during the academic year to plan and undertake a substantial project on their campus to improve equitable student success. The Academy is operated by the independent CSU Student Success Network (Network).

The purpose of this series is to learn and report about the impacts of Academy participation for CSU campuses that have sent multiple teams to the Academy over multiple years. In particular, this series seeks to understand:

> *Has participation in the Academy helped CSU campuses to catalyze, support, or institutionalize changes on campus to address and improve equitable student success–and, if so, how?*

To answer this question, this series examines how CSU campuses (including individuals, programs, departments, and other entities) used Academy participation to advance their work to eliminate equity gaps or otherwise improve equitable student success.[I] The "changes on campus" that the series seeks to identify include shifts in campus policies, programs, practices, or other factors that have equity implications for students and that appear to be linked to or aligned with the implementation of Academy projects. The series also seeks to identify data, where available publicly, regarding changes in equitable student outcomes on campus.[II]

This brief focuses on Cal State Fullerton (CSUF), which sent seven teams to the Academy over the Academy's first seven years, including two teams in 2023-24.

Methodology

Findings in this brief are based primarily on interviews conducted from November 2024 through January 2025 with five leaders who were at Cal State Fullerton when they participated in the Academy and who have been involved in the work on campus to address and improve equitable student success: Dr. Ioakim Boutakidis, Laura Hooks, Dr. Catherine Ward, Dr. Jessica Stern, and Dr. Vincent Vigil. This brief also draws from two interviews conducted for earlier evaluative reports: an interview by Dr. Robert Gabriner with Dr. Karyn Scissum Gunn in 2021, and an interview by me with Dr. Rochelle Woods in 2022. In addition, the brief draws from documents and websites that are publicly available.

[I] Previous studies of Academy cohorts focused more directly on Academy curriculum and processes and their impacts on participant leadership and relationship building.

[II] For more information about the series and its purposes, please see the opening pages of the first impact brief, Nodine, T.R., The Impacts of the CSU Network at Chico State (CSU Network, 2024), https://www.csustudentsuccess.net/memo/the-impacts-of-the-csu-network-at-chico-state/.

How Does Cal State Fullerton Manage its Work to Improve Equitable Student Outcomes?

Cal State Fullerton, situated in Orange County about 30 miles southeast of downtown Los Angeles, is a suburban campus with urban population centers and opportunities nearby. CSUF has the largest student enrollment in the CSU system, serving 43,662 students (by headcount) as of fall 2024. The student body is diverse (see Figure 1). About 59% of students receive financial aid, 57% are from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds (Black, Hispanic, Native American, and Pacific Islander populations), and 32% are first in their families to attend college.[1] CSUF has been ranked in the top ten universities nationally for advancing economic mobility.[2]
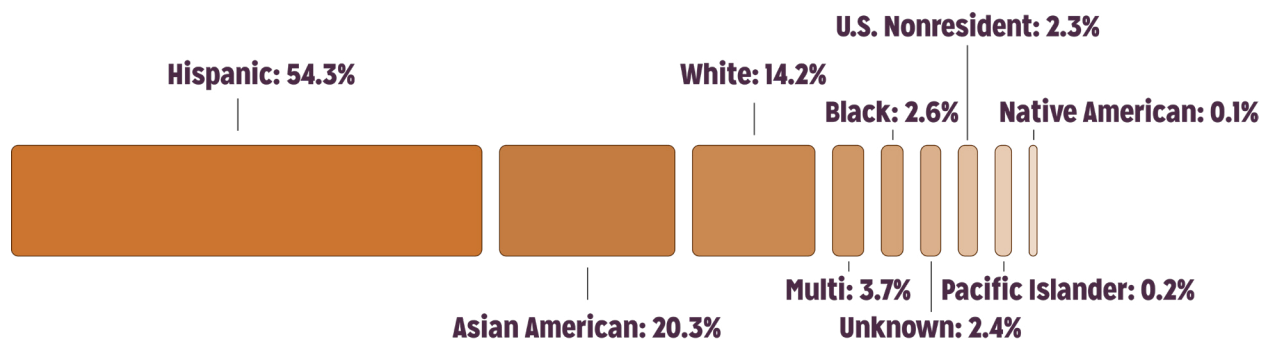

Hispanic: 54.3% **White: 14.2%** **U.S. Nonresident: 2.3%** **Black: 2.6%** **Native American: 0.1%** **Asian American: 20.3%** **Multi: 3.7%** **Unknown: 2.4%** **Pacific Islander: 0.2%**

Figure 1[3]

In 2015 when the CSU system adopted its Graduation Initiative 2025 (GI 2025), CSUF was already in the midst of raising graduation rates through strategic planning and actions focused on improving student engagement and success.[4,5] In response to GI 2025, CSUF built on these efforts by creating a cross-campus advisory group to deepen the work and align it with system-wide priorities. In 2021, the CSU Office of the Chancellor announced new equity goals and priorities,[6] and CSUF again took action aligned with the system-wide priorities, this time by creating working groups to help identify and remove barriers to timely graduation. The committees represented a broad cross-section of faculty, staff, and administrators across campus and focused on four areas: academic experiences; administrative processes & barriers; advising & success pathways; and student engagement & well-being.[7]

During these processes, the campus developed a range of initiatives seeking to improve student retention and degree completion and meet equity goals, including re-enrollment programming, a "Finish in 4" Campaign, an equitable pedagogy module for faculty, student data dashboards, innovation and summer completion grants, and other supports for retention and on-time degree completion.[8] The campus also developed a new strategic plan, called Fullerton Forward: 2024-2029, with equity priorities and policies well represented.[9]

How Has Cal State Fullerton Used the Academy to Support its Goals for Addressing Equity Gaps?

During the Academy's first seven years, from 2017-18 to 2023-24, Fullerton sent seven teams to the Academy to develop and plan the implementation of projects to address equity gaps.[III] Over this period, the campus changed its strategic approach to the Academy.

Year 1: An Opportunity to Develop a Plan for EO 1110

The Academy devoted its inaugural year, 2017-18, to a single content area: supporting campus teams in planning and implementing the CSU's Executive Order (EO) 1110, which mandated the elimination of all remedial courses in English and mathematics.[IV] According to Dr. Rochelle Woods, CSUF's team lead at the Academy and executive director for special populations at the time, Fullerton took a proactive approach to implementing the executive order:

> We were one of the first campuses saying, 'We're going to go ahead and do it. We are going to just jump in with both feet.' And so, part of the goals of our team [at the Academy] was just really trying to figure out how we would implement it, how we would measure it, how we would see impact from it.

The team included students, faculty, and staff whose experience facilitated the planning of math content, student supports, and outreach on campus. The team also included directors of advising and admissions, which facilitated access to the provost and other campus leadership.

Years 2 to 4: A Coordinated Approach Through a Campus Liaison

In 2018, Dr. Ioakim Boutakidis, associate professor of Child and Adolescent Studies and faculty fellow of student success at the time, was asked by Dr. Pamella Oliver, who was provost and associate vice president for academic affairs, to serve as an unofficial liaison coordinating CSUF's approach to the Network and its new Academy. From 2018-19 to 2020-21, Dr. Boutakidis worked closely with campus leadership and middle leaders to coordinate the development of project topics and the selection of teams from CSUF for the Academy. According to Dr. Boutakidis:

> For a long time with Fullerton engagement with the Academy, I was the campus point person. Who was going to submit a proposal for the Academy and the ideas or topics the campus team would focus on ran through me. Because of my connections on campus, it was relatively easy for me to reach out to the provost and get her blessing, feedback, and buy-in.

[III] The campus participated in the Academy every year except 2021-22 and sent two teams in 2023-24.

[IV] After 2017-18, the Academy broadened its approach to supporting campus teams in increasing student success and degree completion and eliminating equity gaps.

During this three-year period, the CSUF teams at the Academy built from the work of prior teams.

2018-19: Triple-Opportunity Students

Fullerton's team in 2018-19 laid the groundwork for addressing equity gaps by collecting and analyzing disaggregated student data regarding which CSUF students were most likely to not persist or to persist at lower rates than their peers. The team found that CSUF students with intersectionality across three factors were more likely to persist at a lower rate than others. The term that the team used for these students was triple-opportunity students: students who are eligible for Pell Grants, who are from traditionally underserved communities, and who are first-generation college students. According to Dr. Catherine Ward, a team member and executive director of retention initiatives at the time, "We noticed that the equity gaps were most profound for the students who had all three of those factors."

> **We created an inventory or taxonomy that identified campus supports focused on these students, that sought to identify which of those were effective, and that identified options for reducing the gaps on campus between triple–opportunity students and other students … One of our overall findings was that there were some supports for triple–opportunity students at the departmental or program level, but the campus was not doing anything at scale for that group, not in terms of campus-wide efforts.**

During the year, the team also sought to identify the services that were available on campus for these students. According to Dr. Boutakidis, who served as team lead:

2019-20: Faculty Development around Equitable Teaching Practices

Fullerton's team at the Academy in 2019-20 continued to address and improve services for triple-opportunity students by focusing on the classroom. According to Dr. Karyn Scissum Gunn, associate vice president for academic operations at the time, CSUF's team created an action plan called "Titans for Equitable Education" that identified the following priorities to support faculty in understanding and engaging in equitable instruction:

- The development of a faculty toolkit of low-cost, high-impact classroom practices to improve course success rates for all students and for triple-opportunity students in particular.
- The creation of processes for engaging and supporting faculty in examining and improving equitable classroom outcomes through use of the toolkit and other means.
- The development of a communications campaign to inform the campus about the importance of these efforts.
- A commitment to data gathering and analyzing student outcomes to understand and improve instructional practices over time.

2020-21: The Faculty Toolkit

In 2020-21, the Fullerton team focused on supporting the development of the faculty toolkit identified during the prior year. This work was in alignment with research that Dr. Boutakidis was completing on campus regarding the roles that faculty serve in closing equity gaps. According to Dr. Ward, who was the team co-lead:

> **We spent that year asking the question and seeking to understand, 'What practical classroom approaches and tools do faculty need, with consideration for where they were in their equity-minded growth and development?' And so we set out to help inform that toolkit.**

Years 5 and 6: Academy Team Development without a Campus Liaison

In 2022-23 and 2023-24, the campus no longer identified a liaison to coordinate the development of teams for the Academy. Rather, CSUF staff or faculty, upon receiving outreach information about the application process from the Network or other sources, worked with colleagues to develop a cross-campus team to participate in the Academy. During these years, teams did not necessarily build on the content areas of previous years.

2022-23: On-boarding Experiences for Black Students

In 2022-23, CSUF's team brought together middle leaders from student affairs and academic affairs to align and improve first-year supports for Black/African American students in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences. The team, which was led by Torell Foree, assistant director of diversity education and campus partnerships, produced a map identifying and proposing supports across academic and student affairs for first-year and transfer students.

2023-24: Two Teams with Different Areas of Focus

The Academy accepted proposals from two teams from CSUF in 2023-24, each with its own content area:

A. Centralized Advising Services. This team's project sought to develop a plan to centralize advising services across four colleges: the arts, engineering and computer science, business and economics, and education. The team was led by Caroline Harrington, assistant director of academic advising at the College of the Arts.

B. On-boarding Experiences for Transfer Students. This team developed an equity-driven plan to provide onboarding resources and programming tailored to incoming transfer students in the College of Health and Human Development. The team was led by Laura Hooks, assistant director of the Transfer, Adult Re-entry, Parenting, and Pregnant Student (TAPP) Center.

What Are the Impacts from the Academy at Cal State Fullerton?

Based on the perspectives of interviewees, the impacts at CSUF from participation in the Academy appear to be associated with the following changes:

1. A new campus-wide strategic approach to identify and support triple-opportunity students;
2. Programmatic changes on campus, including transforming entry-level math in line with EO 1110, a new graduate scholars program, and new onboarding opportunities for transfer students;
3. The creation of faculty development resources, including a toolkit to support faculty in understanding and adopting equitable teaching practices;
4. Equity leadership on campus; and
5. Relationship building across campus and with other CSU campuses.

1. A Strategic Approach to Identify and Support Triple-Opportunity Students

In 2018-19 when the CSUF team investigated the relationships between various student groups and persistence rates, there were no straightforward ways to collect and examine disaggregated student data on campus. For most faculty and staff, the work to investigate and address equity gaps was in the early stages at that time. According to Dr. Ward:

> **Much of that year was really about data collection and trying to understand where the data was. It didn't just live in institutional research at the time, although they were leading the charge, and we were very grateful. We also examined what programs and services would be helpful to address the fact that the institution had the responsibility to optimize students' learning experience from an equity-minded frame.**

At the time, campus leadership was already looking for ways to increase its four-year and six-year graduation rates, and the work of the CSUF team at the Academy regarding triple-opportunity students helped the campus to focus its strategic priorities in that direction. According to Dr. Vincent Vigil, senior associate vice president, dean of students, and a member of the 2018-19 team:

> **The focus on triple-opportunity students [at CSUF] started at the Academy, and it became a university mindset that we needed to help these students.**

Similarly, Dr. Boutakidis said that the work of CSUF's teams at the Academy was important in catalyzing equity work in general on campus and CSUF's strategic direction regarding triple-opportunity students in particular:

> **The direction of the equity work at Fullerton was absolutely furthered along or fueled by the Academy projects of the Fullerton teams … A throughline between campus priorities and Academy projects at Fullerton involves better identifying, understanding, and helping triple-opportunity students.**

2. Programmatic Changes on Campus

The Academy served CSUF as a catalyst for planning and implementing programmatic changes on campus to improve equitable student success. These changes included the following.

A. Transforming Entry-level Math in Line with EO 1110

In 2017-18, the CSUF team used the Academy to develop a plan to transform entry-level math in line with EO 1110. According to team lead Dr. Woods, the plan became the basis for campus implementation primarily due to the strength of collaboration of the Academy team across roles and divisions and the perspectives shared by other campuses:

> **The Academy … helped us have some very focused conversations about what it would look like on our campus. I think coming together with other campuses and having those discussions, even down to the nuances, we were able to get feedback on our plans from our sister campuses, I think that also helped.**

B. A New Graduation Scholars Program for Triple-Opportunity Students

In 2018-19, the CSUF team at the Academy investigated the importance of identifying and supporting triple-opportunity students. Immediately afterwards, in fall 2019, campus leadership backed the launch of a holistic support program for a cohort of incoming first-year students who met triple-opportunity criteria and who were interested in graduating within four years. The program, called Tuffy's Graduation Scholars (TGS), was led by Dr. Ward, a member of the CSUF team at the Academy. Participating students received personalized and comprehensive advising supports, as well as opportunities to get involved in leadership, internships, student employment, and community service. Dr. Ward left CSUF in 2022 and the program ended in spring 2023.[10]
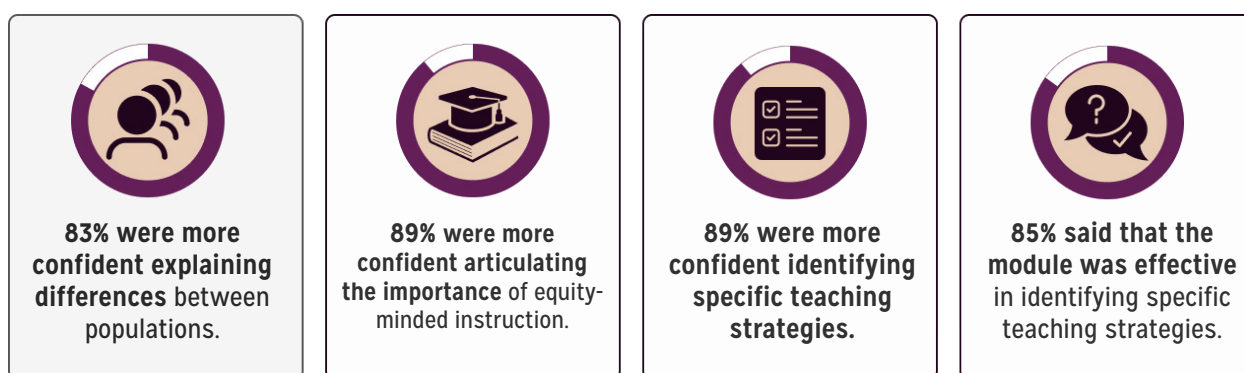
C. New Onboarding Opportunities for Transfer Students

In 2023-24, a CSUF team at the Academy developed an equity-driven plan to provide onboarding resources and programming to incoming transfer students. Team lead Laura Hooks brought the plan back to CSUF and got support "to launch a version of our Academy project for our transfer students in the College of Health and Human Development." The program, called Transfer Connect, provides orientation programming specifically designed for incoming transfer students. Hooks added that the Academy was also the catalyst for TAPP's new series of 60-minute Zoom webinars called "Transfer Thursdays."

3. The Creation of New Faculty Development Resources

In 2019-20, the CSUF team at the Academy created a faculty development plan to advance the use of equitable teaching practices. The plan called for a faculty toolkit of low-cost, high-impact classroom practices to improve course success rates for all students and for triple-opportunity students in particular. In 2020-21, the CSUF team supported the development of the faculty toolkit in alignment with research that Dr. Boutakidis was completing on campus. These faculty resources are now featured as "Equity-Promoting Pedagogical Practices" on the Faculty Development Center website, which also features an online asynchronous course created by faculty for faculty called the "Equitable Pedagogy Series."[11]

According to the Faculty Development Center, more than 1,200 faculty have completed the first part of the series, called the "Student-centered Teaching Module." Surveys of participating faculty[12] found that, after completing the module:

83% were more confident explaining differences between populations.

89% were more confident articulating the importance of equity-minded instruction.

89% were more confident identifying specific teaching strategies.

85% said that the module was effective in identifying specific teaching strategies.

Other elements of the faculty development plan created at the Academy in 2019-20 have not been realized, partly because Dr. Scissum Gunn, the team lead in 2019-20 and associate vice president for academic operations, left Cal State Fullerton. She now serves as provost and senior vice president at Cal State Long Beach. According to Dr. Boutakidis, however, CSUF did develop and test a pilot initiative for faculty development:

> **The initiative supported a small number of pedagogical and curricular changes at the classroom level to close equity gaps. This project, which got the green light from the provost, did not involve massively intrusive or costly efforts. We did it with instructors who volunteered from across departments and colleges. We saw promising changes in GPA at the classroom level for triple-opportunity students, but the program did not get scaled, and I wish it had. That project grew from campus work at the Academy.**

As another example of equity initiatives aligned with the work of Academy teams, Dr. Boutakidis pointed to the creation of online data dashboards that now provide faculty at CSUF with easy access to disaggregated data about student outcomes in their classes. He said, however, that not enough faculty have been using the dashboards to improve instruction, and suggested that:

> **the only way you're going to get more faculty looking at these dashboards, trying to interpret them, and then taking the next step—which is the critical step, thinking about how to change their pedagogical and curricular practice to reduce those gaps or to improve the student metrics—is if there's an institutional push to do it. Institutions can incentivize that, such as by folding this explicitly into retention, tenure, and promotion practices, and build this culture so that faculty are getting the message that this is routine.**

4. Equity Leadership on Campus

During the Academy's first seven years, CSUF selected its teams primarily based on project development goals (that is, based on content and resource expertise, and particular roles on campus). But CSUF also benefited from the leadership development of those who participated.

Given CSUF's proximity to Los Angeles, there are many opportunities for training and development nearby but the Academy is unique in providing leadership training for middle leaders as they work together to develop equity projects. Dr. Vigil said that having time and space to problem-solve with colleagues was a crucial benefit of the Academy:

> **We were all so busy doing other things that one of the most important things we had … was time. We could set everything else aside and just work on this project, because we didn't have time outside of the Academy.**

Laura Hooks commented on the value of learning about middle leadership and the importance of understanding and using student data:

> **That's the layer where I am on campus, I'm a middle leader. Sometimes we're being squished from our student staff and our newer colleagues, and then there is the upper management. We're kind of right there in the middle. Learning how to work through that was beneficial, actually understanding and appreciating the value of where we are as middle leaders.**
>
> **I also really appreciated the sessions on data, … the relevance of collecting that data and what that data means.**

Dr. Jessica Stern, a history professor and associate dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, said that joining the 2022-23 team at the Academy gave her tools to plan and evaluate campus projects:

> **"**
> **I didn't know what a logic model was [prior to the Academy]. I've done a number of projects before but never with the deliberate thought process that this encouraged us to go through. Honestly, it's helped me see the whole process and realize how long projects take to execute and how deliberately you have to understand and evaluate them. That really did stick with me. I approach projects differently now.**
> **"**

Dr. Stern has since become dean at CSUF and has joined the advisory board of the Network.

Similarly, Dr. Ward has seen personal growth and career advancement after Academy participation (from executive director of retention initiatives at CSUF to chief of operations for the provost at Cal State Long Beach), and she connected this trajectory to equity-minded leadership. She also said that, collectively, this leadership development has key impacts on campuses:

> **"**
> **My participation in the Academy supported my career trajectory. [It] absolutely supported my own growth and development, not only regarding what it means to be equity minded, but in my confidence to lead in this space.**
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> **The sustaining piece of the Academy most profoundly lies in the growth and development of the people who participate, not only in completing the project, but in taking their learning into all of the work they do and then influencing and impacting changes with the lens of equity and inclusion.**
> **"**

Dr. Boutakidis, who has served on the Network Advisory Board and as Academy director, likewise said that the Academy experience impacted his professional trajectory and the equity work at CSUF:

> **"**
> **The training and experiences I received at the Academy directly impacted what I ended up doing back on campus and the student-support initiatives and student-success initiatives that I've since run, assessed, and led. Many examples of that were directly inspired by my work in the Academy—and I know I've had impacts on student outcomes like improved retention rates and improved graduation rates.**
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> **Many people pushing for closing equity gaps on campus have been the ones who were on the Academy teams. For example, the push on campus to improve on-time graduation—the work on improving four-year and six-year graduation rates—featured efforts to support triple-opportunity students.**
> **"**

As evidence of this equity leadership on campus, several of the Academy participants populated the working groups that CSUF charged with addressing equity gaps on campus: Noha Abdou, Elizabeth Boretz, Diane Mazzey, Jessica Stern, Sean Walker, and Jenny Zhang were members of Academy teams and of the Advising and Success Pathways working group; and Vincent Vigil chaired the Student Engagement & Well-Being working group.

5. Relationship Building Across Campus and with Other CSU Campuses

The Academy's relationship-building approach likewise had impacts on equity work at CSUF. Dr. Stern and Dr. Boutakidis each spoke about the important impacts of working with colleagues across academic and student affairs:

> **Rarely do we get time to actually do concerted work with people on campus … The Academy cemented my relationship and comfort with student affairs. I was a history faculty member, and then when I became associate dean in 2019, I didn't even know what student affairs was. Honestly, I knew the history field, but I had a steep learning curve even figuring out what student affairs is all about … We hadn't had the actual ability to create something across academic and student affairs. That had not presented itself, so [the Academy] was a great experience to see how these units could work together.**
>
> – Jessica Stern
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>
> **One of the clearest through lines across teams was the advantages and benefits— honestly they couldn't have managed without the Academy—of creating good communications across academic affairs and student affairs. That happens rarely in higher education in a systematic, intense way. So when these teams came back to campus, those relationships were sustained. People can point to specific colleagues on the other side that they continue to work with now to advance equity-related outcomes.**
>
> – Ioakim Boutakidis

Similarly, Dr. Vigil said that the relationships built at the Academy had lasting impacts:

> **The relationships that we built within our group expanded beyond that. We were continuing to work on projects together across the university that were related to retention or DEI efforts after the Academy.**

Laura Hooks, who led a team in 2023-24, said that respect and collaboration among colleagues across campus helped with the rapid launch of the team project, and its overall impact.

> **To have the mutual respect that existed on our team and the willingness to collaborate and work together really helped us develop the overall program and foster our own professional development … I don't know how many programs actually launch when they say they're going to, but the fact that we were all determined and supportive, we were like, 'We're doing this.' … I also think it really improved the impact of the program.**

Interviewees also spoke to the importance of building relationships with colleagues at other CSU campuses as a way to get broader feedback and perspective on equity programming.

> **The Academy absolutely became a key component as to why and how we did the work. And it became an anchor because we could point to a systemwide effort instead of this just being a single campus effort.**
>
> – Catherine Ward
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> ———————————————
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> **This is a very important kind of professional development, because middle leaders do not get these opportunities to interact with folks at other campuses who are experiencing similar challenges.**
>
> – Ioakim Boutakidis

Analysis and Conclusion

This section provides an analysis of CSUF's approaches to the Academy; identifies challenges to the implementation and impact of Academy projects; summarizes public information about recent student outcomes at CSUF; and concludes by offering suggestions for the Academy to consider to improve impact.

CSUF's Various Approaches to the Academy

This analysis is based on examining CSUF's two primary approaches to the Academy in relation to the impacts during those respective years.

Team Coordination Through a Liaison

After the initial Academy year focused on transforming remedial math instruction, the CSUF academic provost selected a faculty member, Dr. Boutakidis, to serve as a liaison coordinating the development of campus teams and content for the Academy. Having a liaison fulfilling these roles coincided with several years of Academy teams that (1) built on or aligned with the content areas developed in previous years, and (2) enjoyed consistent interaction and buy-in from campus leadership. Each of the teams during these years saw impacts in terms of strategic or programmatic changes on campus.

According to Dr. Boutakidis, having a coordinated approach:

> **helped to provide the Academy team with the ear of the upper administration. They knew the team was being brought together. They knew the basic outline. There was buy-in at the provost level and with associate vice presidents and the like. Other years [when there wasn't a coordinated approach], that wasn't necessarily the case.**

As an example of content coordination and leadership buy-in, the 2018-19 team identified the importance of addressing triple-opportunity students. Afterwards, campus leadership immediately supported the development of Tuffy's Graduation Scholars, a holistic support program that was launched by student affairs in fall 2019. Since that program was already underway, the CSUF team during 2019-20 focused on academic rather than student affairs: supporting faculty development in equity-minded instruction. Dr. Ward, who developed and managed Tuffy's Graduation Scholars, said that having access to and support from leadership was crucial during these years:

> **We had a vice president of student affairs and a provost who were very much in sync, working together … where it was quite an easy task to work across divisions. It was their leadership that really made it possible.**

Team Selection Without a Liaison

In 2022-23 and 2023-24, CSUF adopted more of a "bubble-up" approach to Academy participation, in which interested and enterprising middle leaders identified a challenge involving equitable student success related to their expertise, built a cross-campus team to address that challenge, and garnered administrative support for the team to participate in the Academy. This approach coincided with three Academy teams that (1) were not aligned with each other or with previous years in terms of content areas, and (2) depended primarily on the connections of team leads for interaction and buy-in from campus leadership.

This approach may have been more flexible in addressing issues identified by middle leaders, but the work of each of the teams has not necessarily led to or been aligned with impacts on campus. This may be related to the recentness of the Academy participation, as the projects may still be implemented in some form. Lack of implementation may also be related to staff and leadership turnover. In any case, the following examples suggest that without a campus liaison, the connections of team leads to campus leadership appear to be pivotal for project implementation:

- The CSUF team at the Academy in 2022-23 created a plan for student supports for incoming Black/African American students—both first-year and transfer—in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences. After the Academy, however, the team lead accepted a promotion at another university. This departure and the loss of the team lead's connections with leadership coincided with the project not yet being implemented at CSUF.

- A CSUF team in 2023-24 implemented its TAPP Center project immediately after the Academy, in fall 2024. Team lead Laura Hooks said she was very deliberate in gaining support and buy-in across campus, from student affairs leadership, and from the director and associate director of TAPP, which in turn was crucial for implementation:

> **In leveraging my experience, I had the idea to create some sort of supplemental orientation, offering not to replace orientation but to create a supplemental resource for our incoming transfer students … Before I wrote the proposal I reached out to very specific stakeholders on campus to see if it was something they were interested in being a part of… And then, I went to our leadership at student affairs to pitch my proposal … Everyone was in agreement.**

Challenges to Implementation and Impact

Interviewees from CSUF said that turnover of leadership positions—both campus leadership and Academy team leads—had posed challenges to implementing Academy projects. Four of the seven team leads from Fullerton have accepted promotions at other institutions after completing the Academy year—a positive career and leadership development outcome but a challenge for program implementation.

Interviewees also said that Fullerton's considerable size, the number and reach of its initiatives associated with GI 2025, and the context of the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to challenges in tracking and understanding the impacts of the Academy on campus. They also said, however, that the Academy curriculum helped teams gain a better understanding of innovations already underway at CSUF. For example, Dr. Stern said that the logic model her team developed at the Academy provided her with a broader vision across campus:

> **This is such a huge university … The Academy started to give logic to all these disparate things we were doing … That was one of the first times where I was starting to see a larger view of what our approach to GI 2025 was and all the different actors and all of the different initiatives.**

Dr. Boutakidis emphasized the importance of the Academy's role in empowering core groups of motivated people to make change in a large institution:

> **At campuses the size of Fullerton, you need to have specific people who are willing to engage in a sustained effort toward a particular common goal, people who are motivated enough that when they come up against challenges or roadblocks they don't quit. They keep working and keep trying to find other ways to do things. The Academy is crucial to that.**

Student Outcomes

Since GI 2025 began in 2016, CSUF's graduation rates have increased significantly. The campus' four-year graduation rate for first-time, first-year students increased from 22% in 2016 to 38% in 2024. The campus' six-year graduation rate for these students increased from 62% to 70% during the same years. These rates are higher than CSU averages across the campuses. However, the equity gap at CSUF for first-time, first-year underrepresented students increased from 6.6% in 2016 to 7.6% in 2024.[13]

According to Dr. Boutakidis, the equity gaps at CSUF were decreasing before the shutdowns and other changes associated with the COVID-19 pandemic:

> **We were having success in improving graduation rates for both freshmen and transfers—you know, the six-year and four-year rates. The outcomes were getting better. We were closing equity gaps as well, and then COVID hit.**

Suggestions for the Academy

Interviewees from CSUF said that its teams participating in the Academy had achieved important impacts regarding equitable student success at CSUF. The impacts included:

- shaping the campus' strategic direction;
- developing new programming;
- supporting the creation of new faculty development resources;
- improving leadership development; and
- increasing relationship building across academic and student affairs.

The following suggestions were drawn from CSUF interviewees for the Academy to consider to increase opportunities for project implementation and impact:

- **Require teams to get approval and on-going feedback from cabinet-level leadership.** This could include: sign-off on team applications; presentations provided by the team lead before, during, and after project development; and curriculum at the Academy focused on working with and what to expect from upper leadership regarding project implementation.

- **Suggest that campuses appoint a liaison** to help coordinate team development in line with campus goals and to work with campus leadership to get buy-in, feedback, and support prior to, during, and after the project year.

- **Consider curriculum** to provide teams with training in the following:

  ◦ **Creating projects that are action oriented** and that have measurable goals and outcomes. This might be offered during the application phase or prior to the first Academy meeting.

  ◦ **Developing realistic project budgets** to present to campus leadership. Make sure that team leads get direction from campus leadership (or from a campus liaison) prior to and during the project year so that project scopes and budgets are realistic in light of campus fiscal constraints.

  ◦ **Developing project evaluation plans** with sequenced benchmarks for outcomes.

- **Consider offering follow-up outreach to teams** after the project year. This could include check-ins regarding progress and challenges; feedback and direction on evaluation; and exchanges with teams from other campuses.

Endnotes

[1] CSUF, "CSUF Facts: Fall 2024," https://www.fullerton.edu/data/_resources/pdfs/ir/csuf-facts-fall-24.pdf.

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[3] CSUF, "CSUF Facts: Fall 2024," https://www.fullerton.edu/data/_resources/pdfs/ir/csuf-facts-fall-24.pdf

[4] CSUF, Graduation Initiative 2025, Goals and Progress, https://www.fullerton.edu/grad2025/,

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[7] CSUF, Graduation Initiative 2025, Working Groups, https://www.fullerton.edu/grad2025/groups/index.php.

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[12] Ibid.

[13] CSUF, Office of the President, Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Planning, Data of the Month, November 2024, GI 2025 Progress, https://www.fullerton.edu/data/data-of-the-month/gi2025-nov-2024.php.

About the CSU Student Success Network

The CSU Student Success Network (Network) is an independent network founded by and for middle leaders and students in the CSU. Located at and facilitated by the Education Insights Center at Sacramento State University, the Network creates spaces and provides resources for CSU middle leaders to engage in equity-based inquiry and action aimed at closing critical opportunity and outcome gaps.

About the Author

Thad R. Nodine, Ph.D., is a writer, researcher, and novelist. He has written widely about strategies to support more students in reaching their educational and career goals, particularly Students of Color, low-income students, and first-generation college students. Recent publications include Implementing Systemwide Changes in the CSU: How Campuses Used the Middle Leadership Academy to Realize a Policy Change in Mathematics, with Bob Gabriner (2023); Toward Racial Justice in California's Education Systems: An Introduction to Policy Spanning K-12 and Higher Education (2022); and ISKME's Journey to Transform Teaching and Learning: A Quest for Participatory, Equitable, and Open Education (2023).