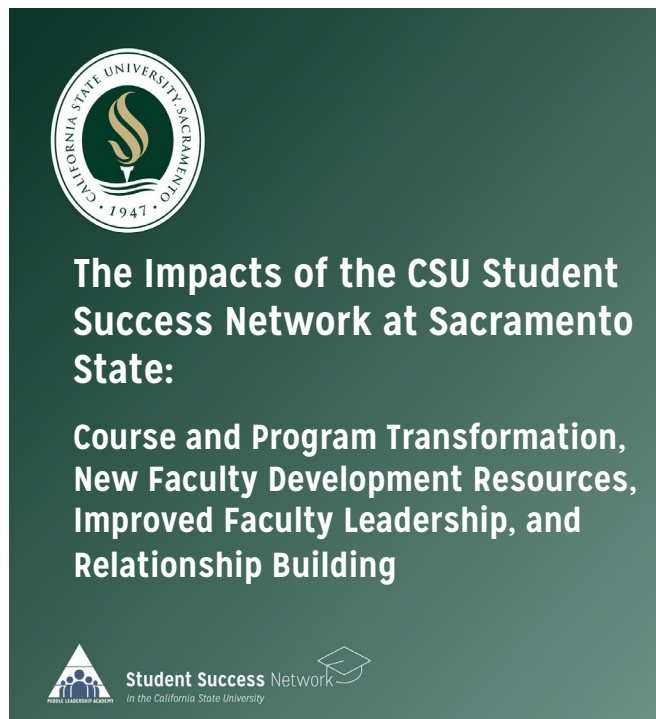


ACADEMY IMPACTS SERIES



By Thad R. Nodine, Ph.D.
September 2025



Introduction

This is the third in a series of briefs examining the impacts of the [Middle Leadership Academy](#) (Academy) on campuses of the [California State University](#) (CSU). The purpose of this series is to identify and report 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.¹ 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.²

This brief focuses on California State University, Sacramento (Sacramento State or Sac State), which sent six campus-based teams to the Academy over the first seven years of the Academy (2017-18 to 2023-24). Sacramento State also organized and led three multiple-campus teams at the Academy,³ one focused on adult re-entry learners (2021-22) and two focused on the first-year experience (2022-23 and 2023-24). The experiences and impacts of the multiple-campus teams are not included in this analysis.

Methodology

Findings in this brief are based primarily on interviews conducted in April and May 2025 with leaders at Sacramento State who led Academy teams and who have been involved in the work on campus to address and improve equitable student success: Dr. Marya Endriga, Dr. Ann Moylan, and Dr. David Zeigler. This brief also draws from earlier interviews conducted with Academy team leads from Sacramento State: an interview by Dr. Thad Nodine with Dr. David Zeigler in 2019; and interviews by Dr. Robert Gabriner with Dr. James German in 2020, Dr. Marya Endriga in 2021, and Dr. David Zeigler in 2022. In addition, the brief draws from documents and websites that are publicly available.

¹ Previous studies of Academy cohorts focused more directly on Academy curriculum and processes and their impacts on participant leadership and relationship building.

² 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/>.

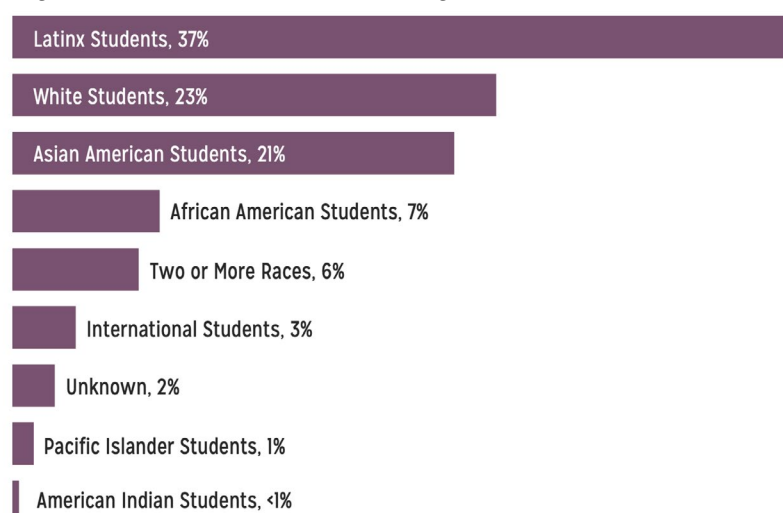
³ That is, with representation from multiple campuses in the CSU.

A limitation of this study is the turnover in administrative positions at the university over the past eight years, which resulted in the unavailability of several potential interviewees. Consequently, the findings may not fully capture the ways that Sac State managed its work to improve equitable student outcomes and the impacts of the Academy at Sac State during the relevant period.

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


Sacramento State is an urban campus located in California's capital about 1.5 miles from the city's downtown. The university serves about 31,000 students, making it the sixth largest campus in the CSU system. Sac State is one of the most diverse campuses in the western United States. The student body is composed of approximately 37% Latinx, 23% White, 21% Asian, and 7% Black or African American students (see Figure 1). It is designated as a Hispanic-Serving Institution and an Asian American, and Native Hawaiian, and American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution. The campus is home to the largest population of Black students in California. About 57% of students receive financial aid and 29% are first-generation college students.⁴

Figure 1., Sac State Student Demographics, Fall 2024



Source: Sacramento State Fact Book 2025

⁴ Sacramento State Fact Book 2025, https://www.csus.edu/experience/_internal/_documents/factbook25-webpages.pdf.



In 2016, Sacramento State President Robert S. Nelson announced that the campus' efforts to meet the goals of Graduation Initiative 2025 (GI 2025) would be focused in two key areas: to graduate freshman students in four years and graduate transfer students in two years. Sac State also announced the creation of a new position, executive director of University Initiatives and Student Success, with the informal title, "graduation czar." At the time, Sac State had 33 separate initiatives addressing graduation and retention rates. The five- and six-year grad rates had been improving somewhat during recent years, but the campus' four-year rate was stagnant at less than nine percent. Dr. James Dragna was hired as the graduation czar, and his initial role was to evaluate and reorganize the various graduation initiatives to significantly increase the four-year grad rate for freshmen and the two-year grad rate for transfer students.⁵

Dr. Dragna embarked on a mission to transform campus culture and operations around the Finish-in-Four and Through-in-Two Initiatives, which included: providing funding for collaborative work across departments and divisions; emphasizing student engagement and well-being; focusing on achieving preliminary student outcomes that serve as precursors to and drivers of student progression to graduation; and eliminating administrative barriers that impede students' academic progress. The campus also initiated the Provost Graduation Initiative Grant Program to provide students with financial support to lower the cost of summer session courses. These courses create opportunities for students to stay on track, catch up, or get ahead in progressing toward their degree.⁶

Campus strategies to increase grad rates and reduce equity gaps included:

- increasing tenure track faculty, especially in high-demand courses;
- increasing undergraduate course sections, especially in bottleneck courses;
- implementing structured scheduling to ensure that students take a full course load;
- creating student success centers to provide easy access to advising, degree planning, and tutoring;
- investing in technology to support students in degree planning and to support the university in offering the right courses at the right times for student demand; and
- increasing the use of summer sessions.

⁵ "President refocuses his Sac State vision in spring address," Sacramento State News, Jan. 21, 2016, <https://www.csus.edu/news/articles/2016/1/21/president-refocuses-his-vision-for-sacramento-state-in-sprin.shtml>;

⁶ Sacramento State, Student Success, Graduation Initiatives, website, <https://www.csus.edu/experience/student-success/graduation-initiatives/>.



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

Years 1 to 4: Informal Coordination Through the Office of Undergraduate Studies

During the campus' first four years of participation in the Academy, Dr. James German, dean and later vice president of undergraduate studies, and Dr. James Dragna, the graduation czar, helped to coordinate and support the development of campus teams for the Academy. According to Dr. German:

“

For reasons that are just happenstance, I became the point person for the Academy on our campus. And so I worked with the two subsequent teams in developing their proposals.

”

During these years, the teams tended to build on the content areas of previous teams, especially pertaining to collection and use of student data.

2017-18: Developing a Plan for EO 1110

The Academy devoted its inaugural year, 2017-18, to support campus teams in planning and implementing strategies aligned with the CSU's Executive Order (EO) 1110, which mandated the elimination of all remedial courses in English and mathematics. Sac State used the Academy to support the math department in developing its approach to EO 1110. The team was led by the chair of the math department, Dr. David Zeigler, who said, “When we first showed up [at the Academy], we did not have a game plan. We didn't have data. We were really on the ground floor.”

Dr. Zeigler said there was significant resistance from within the math department to EO 1110. He said that about a third of the team's time during the Academy year was spent identifying data to address that resistance to show colleagues the potential benefits of supporting student success in credit-bearing classes. Another third of the team's time was spent, he said, on course and curriculum planning. The final third was spent figuring out how to “navigate the bureaucracy” to create change. “I was a brand-new chair,” he said. “I knew how my department worked, but I didn't understand how anything worked” beyond the math department.

2018-19: Measuring the Impacts of EO 1110 Implementation

As EO 1110 was being implemented in 2018-19 in first-year math and English courses, Sac State used the Academy year to examine the data around first-year student success and to understand where students were not succeeding. According to Dr. German, the team lead, “We were looking for areas where we had gaps” so as to address those issues.



2019-20: Examining Equity Gaps Related to Impaction

During the following year, 2019-20, the Sac State team likewise was seeking to collect and analyze student data to better understand student opportunities and equity gaps. The team was led by Dr. Marya Endriga, who is now interim dean of the College of Social Sciences & Interdisciplinary Studies. The team sought to understand how impaction of programs and majors⁷ affects various student populations, with a particular interest in “expressed interest students”—that is, those students who have not yet declared a major.

2021-22: Expanding Faculty Understanding of How to Address Equity Gaps in Instruction

By 2021-22, first-year math and English courses at Sac State had been redesigned to better support all students, and there was a small and growing cadre of faculty who’d been to the Academy or had otherwise gained expertise in using student data, including equity gaps in DFW rates,⁸ to understand and improve student success in their courses. Sac State used the Academy in 2021-22 to plan ways to expand the number of faculty with experience in addressing equity gaps through instruction. David Zeigler had become director of undergraduate studies at Sac State, and he was the team lead that year. He said:

“

There was a population of us that was getting really good feedback and training and professional development [through the Academy]. But what about everyone else? How do we broaden that base?

”

Years 5 and 6: A More Ad Hoc Approach to Academy Team Development

During years five and six, team development for the Academy was more ad hoc, meaning that there was no point person that helped facilitate the development of Academy teams. Sac State staff or faculty, upon receiving outreach information about the application process from the Network or other sources, worked with colleagues to develop a campus team to participate in the Academy and gain approval from administrators. During these years, teams did not necessarily build on the content areas of previous years.

⁷ An impacted program or major is one for which the number of spaces available is not sufficient to meet the demand by students who qualify for enrollment.

⁸ DFW rates are the rates at which students earn a D or an F or withdraw from the class.



2022-23: Student-Parent Peer Ambassador Pilot Project

Sacramento State used the Academy to plan and develop a peer-ambassador pilot project in 2021-22. Through the use of student parents as peer ambassadors, the project sought (1) to foster a sense of belonging among student parents and adult learners and (2) to better support these students in navigating campus services and communities.

2023-24: Equity Gaps in Student Access to Academic Internships

In 2023-24, the Sac State team collected and analyzed data about equitable access to academic internships and developed plans to increase faculty use of internships and student access to them. According to Dr. Ann Moylan, the team lead and director of the Community Engagement Center, the team's goals were in close alignment with the career-readiness priorities of the new president, Dr. Luke Wood. Dr. Moylan brought together an Academy team that included the key campus leaders responsible for internships, including from the Community Engagement Center, the Career Center, the Sacramento K-16 Collaborative, and University Enterprises Incorporated (which operates the California Intern Network). According to Dr. Moylan, "Our impetus was, if we're going to be looking at internships, how do we do it in a very comprehensive way?"

What Are the Impacts from the Academy at Sacramento State?

Based on the perspectives of interviewees, the impacts at Sac State from participation in the Academy appear to be associated with the following changes. In all of these areas, Academy participation was one of several factors that contributed to these changes.

1. Laying the groundwork for enrolling first-year students in a full load.
2. Course and program changes on campus, including (a) the transformation of entry-level math courses in line with EO 1110, (b) better alignment of student supports with coursework, and (c) faculty time and a staff position to develop internships and a website hub for internship opportunities.
3. The creation of new faculty development resources, including (a) faculty workshops on equitable instruction strategies and (b) faculty learning communities and a faculty toolkit on equitable academic internships.
4. Improvements in faculty leadership around centering student success and equity.
5. Relationship building across campus around equitable student success.



1. Laying the Groundwork for Enrolling First-Year Students in a Full Load

The early years of Sac State's Finish-in-Four and Through-in-Two initiatives coincided with the early years of the Academy. Dr. German and Dr. Dragna were integral to the campus' efforts to launch these initiatives. They were also integrally involved in the development of the early Sac State teams at the Academy, and these teams focused on supports and data collection for first-year student success in graduation-credit-bearing courses (that is, without the barriers associated with remedial courses). According to Dr. German, the work of these early teams helped lay the groundwork for the campus' broader initiatives, including its Hornet Launch program, which pre-enrolls first-time, first-year students in classes to ensure they are on track to graduate in four years:⁹

“

What the Academy did was to bring some of the critical people ... together for some pretty intensive discussions. For me, it gave me a really good opportunity to get to know the people across campus who work on student success issues and first-year issues and also to engage in that across campus.

It was out of those conversations on first-year success [in math] that we have launched much broader programs on registering our first-year students to make sure they're all in 15 productive units their first and second semesters.

”

2. Course and Program Changes on Campus

The Academy served as a catalyst for planning and implementing course and program changes in several areas at Sac State, including the following.

a. Transformation of Entry-level Math Courses in Line with EO 1110

The Sac State team at the Academy in 2017-18 developed plans that helped the math department replace remedial coursework with a range of entry-level math courses that integrated student supports with instruction. The department offered statistics courses, quantitative reasoning courses, and distinct college algebra courses for STEM and non-STEM majors. According to Dr. Zeigler, “The Academy was absolutely transformative. With all the data, workshops, and activities, even though there was resistance [to the changes within the math department], the information we were able to provide had a big effect” in moving on from remedial coursework.

⁹ Cynthia Hubert, “Hornet Launch scheduling takes hold with incoming freshmen,” Sacramento State News, June 12, 2020, <https://www.csus.edu/news/articles/2020/6/12/New-freshmen-embrace-strategic-scheduling.shtml>.



b. Better Alignment of Supplemental Instruction with Coursework

One of the ripple effects of integrating academic instruction with student supports in entry-level courses is that faculty can see the impacts of this approach on student success. They gain expertise that they can bring to other courses and can share with other faculty. Sac State has supported the alignment of academic instruction and supplemental instruction through its Peer and Academic Resource Center (PARC) and through other means.¹⁰ According to Dr. Zeigler:

“

The way we used to interpret student support was to have a tutoring center, and we told students, ‘There it is. Go find it on your own.’ Now there’s a lot more communication between academic departments and tutoring centers ..., so it’s a lot more intentional now, how we support our students. When I look at the departments that were really eager and willing to participate in the Academy or other learning communities, those are the departments, I would argue, that are doing well in terms of student success and equity.

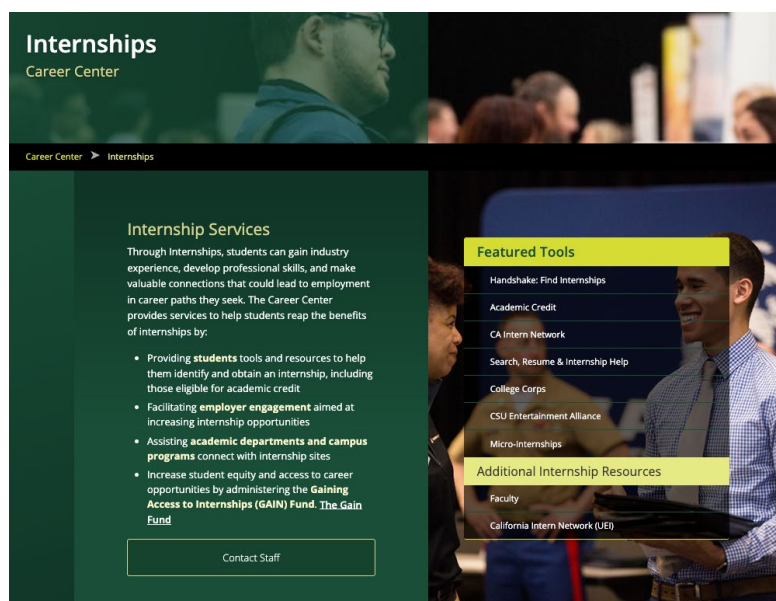
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¹⁰ See <https://www.csus.edu/center/peer-academic-resource/supplemental-instruction.html>.

c. New Faculty Time and Staff Position to Develop Internships and a New Website Hub for Internship Opportunities

In 2023-24, the Sac State team at the Academy developed a series of plans to expand and improve students' equitable access to career internships. Working together across four separate entities on campus that each have a hand in offering internships, the team, led by Dr. Moylan, sought to develop a more coordinated approach that would facilitate faculty and student use of internships. In 2024-25, the campus was already making program changes as a result:

- Sac State's College of Social Sciences & Interdisciplinary Studies supported Dr. Molyan in dedicating her faculty time in 2024-25 (3 units in the Career Center, 3 units in the Community Engagement Center, and 1.5 units in her home department) toward supporting faculty use of internship and career readiness opportunities as part of their syllabus and course requirements.
- The Career Center hired a new staff position dedicated to outreach to employers to support their internship offerings.
- The Career Center created a centralized digital hub to facilitate and coordinate student access to internship opportunities.¹¹ According to Dr. Moylan, "An essential piece that's going forward is a new internship hub on our web page. We don't have the funding now for a new physical place, but this is a start, it's a virtual hub for students."
- The Career Center also increased its outreach concerning the benefits and how-to of internships through three infographics, one each for students, faculty, and employers.



Sac State's Digital Internship Hub

¹¹ See <https://www.csus.edu/student-life/career-center/internships/>.

3. The Creation of New Faculty Development Resources

a. Faculty Workshops on Equitable Instruction

During 2021-22, the Sac State team at the Academy developed plans for expanding faculty use of student data, including DFW rates, to understand where students are struggling and how to increase student success. Back on campus, the impacts included a series of faculty workshops offered by the Center for Teaching and Learning, including one directed toward new faculty hires. According to Dr. Zeigler, the team lead that year, the workshops were designed to equip faculty with the tools they needed to understand how to gather data about student success, how to break it down in useful ways, and how to adjust instructional strategies to improve student success.

b. Faculty Learning Communities and a Faculty Toolkit on Equitable Academic Internships

The Sac State team focusing on internships in 2023-24 likewise created plans to use professional development as a way to broaden faculty use of internships—with immediate impacts for Faculty Learning Communities (FLCs). The Community Engagement Center offered an FLC in spring 2025 that included a track for those interested in developing or expanding internship opportunities. In summer and fall 2025, the Career Center is offering an FLC that integrates internships and career readiness, with instructor certification provided through partnership with the Association of College and University Educators. In addition, Dr. Moylan is working with the Community Engagement Center to update its academic internship toolkit “with revisions, modifications, and a focus on making the information more visual and accessible to all.”¹²



Sac State's Academic Internship Toolkit

¹² See https://www.csus.edu/experience/anchor-university/community-engagement-center/_internal/_documents/academic-internships-toolkit.pdf.



4. Improvements in Faculty Leadership Around Centering Student Success, with Ripple Effects Across Departments

The team leads we interviewed said that the Academy experience had advanced their own leadership development and their careers, as well as the careers of others on the team. According to Dr. Marya Endriga who led a Sac State team in 2019-20:

“

I found the Academy to be tremendously helpful. It filled important knowledge gaps for us in terms of articles, literature, book chapters, and discussion that focused on leadership—and particularly middle leadership, which I didn’t really know about before. And then the dual focus on equity, I thought, was a great combination.


”

Dr. Endriga said that the Academy leadership experience supported team members in their careers and in turn, the team members in their new roles had important impacts on student success:

“

Because of the Academy and the success of our team members in advancing their careers, we were put in positions of relatively higher authority to make decisions ... and make sure that our interventions were inclusive and equity minded. And I think that the Academy has had a very significant influence ... because it helped us change our lens in how we define what creates student success and how we go about implementing our programs more inclusively.

”



Similarly, Dr. Zeigler said that the Academy helped to transform faculty attitudes about students. When he first joined the Academy, he was a new chair of the math department. After participating in the Academy, he became director of undergraduate studies. He has since returned to the classroom and has rejoined a math department that has very different priorities compared with the one he chaired several years ago:

“

The Academy was absolutely transformative. Before this whole thing [eliminating remedial math courses] got started, our administration warned us that it was coming, and we were very cynical. But with all the workshops and the activities at the Academy and elsewhere at the time, and as chair being able to take that information back to the [math] department, even though there was resistance we were able to get through those faculty concerns.

The difference now is that the department is much more student focused. We have faculty committees looking at various data regarding student success, reviewing the data at the end of the semester. We all get together, we pull down DFW rates and other data. How did our students do? Can we do better? Where? In what ways? What are some of the challenge areas for students? Where do they get lost? How do we improve that?

The impacts of the Academy on this department? Fantastic.

”

Dr. Zeigler also described ripple effects regarding faculty attitudes and institutional transformations beyond the math department:

“

We saw this ripple effect, too. Our transformation in the math department took several years. During that time our student success rates improved and other departments—for example, biology—became interested. They said, ‘What are you guys doing? We’d like to know about this.’ And so they’d come over and we’d share what we were doing with them. And now, biology is doing much better in terms of student success, including using supplemental instruction to support the classroom.

”



5. Relationship Building Across Campus and with Other CSU Campuses

The Academy's focus on relationship building also had impacts at Sacramento State. For example, Dr. Endriga said that members of her team at the Academy continue to connect with each other to get perspective, feedback, and support when facing challenges:

“

When you're on a big campus particularly and you need to get something done, we all have our list of people to call and they'll help. That's what we created with our team, and that still continues to this day. We're a cross-divisional, cross-functional team, and we do support each other ... The relationship-building piece [at the Academy] was significant and does make an impact.

”

Dr. Moylan said that the cross-divisional, cross-functional nature of her Academy team helped the team members understand the challenges that students face in trying to access the various internship opportunities on campus. She said that engaging with other CSU campuses at the Academy helped as well, because the team had to explain to the other campuses how internships work at Sac State:

“

The Academy “was really an incredible experience in many ways. Part of it was establishing new relationships with folks on campus who have similar purposes, but are coming at it from a different place. Now I have a much better understanding of what they do and how we need to do a better job coordinating

And one thing that the Academy was great for was that we had to explain to people on other campuses how students access internship opportunities at Sac State. We explained, ‘You can go to the Career Center for internships, but don't forget that the Community Engagement Center can help with internships—and oh, by the way, University Enterprises Incorporated has internships too.’ And the other team said, ‘And why is there not one single hub for this?’

”



Analysis and Conclusion

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

Sac State's Approaches to the Academy

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

Team Coordination Through a Point Person

During the Academy's first four years, Dr. German, dean and later vice president of undergraduate studies, and Dr. Dragna, the graduation czar, helped to coordinate and support the development of campus teams for the Academy. During these years, the teams used a data-centric approach and built on the content areas developed in previous years. For example:

- **Year one** focused on understanding and presenting student data to math faculty to transform entry-level math (2017-18);
- **Year two** sought to measure the impacts of the new first-year courses in math and writing on students (2018-19);
- **Year three** applied a data-centric approach to a new area: understanding equity gaps in relation to impaction (2019-20); and
- **Year four** sought to expand faculty use of student data to address equity gaps through professional development (2021-22).

Years one, two, and four saw significant levels of implementation and impact, and administrative support was high. In all three of these years, the work aligned closely with priorities from the CSU Chancellor's Office and the Sac State President's Office regarding eliminating remedial courses in math and English, increasing graduation rates, and eliminating equity gaps. **The close alignment of Sac State's Academy teams with these priorities garnered deep administrative support, including funding associated with GI 2025, and this likely contributed to the significant impacts seen from these Academy experiences.**

The year-three project (2019-20) regarding the effects of impaction was not completed or implemented. The team was not able to complete the project because it was not provided with access to the data needed to understand the effects of impaction on various groups of students. See the next section on challenges for more information.



Team Development Without a Point Person

After 2021-22, Sac State adopted more of an “ad-hoc” 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 this challenge, and garnered administrative support for the team to participate in the Academy.

This approach resulted in two Academy teams that were not directly aligned with each other or with previous teams: a student-parent peer ambassador project in 2022-23 and a project focusing on academic internships in 2023-24. These projects did, however, share some common approaches from previous years, in that they collected and analyzed student data to understand and improve equity impacts. In addition, the internship project featured strong faculty involvement and professional development, as previous Academy projects had done.

The 2023-24 project on internship development saw significant implementation and impacts within its first year back on campus. Two factors appear to have contributed to these impacts. First, the project was aligned closely with the new president’s priorities, particularly career development. Secondly, the project’s implementation coincided with Dr. Moylan’s return from administrative duties to her home department, which granted relief time (with funding from the Career Center and the Community Engagement Center) to serve as faculty advisor to those centers. According to Dr. Moylan:

“

In each of those roles, my focus is on internships. This was a particularly important strategy for keeping the momentum going and focusing on the Academy groundwork. Someone has been identified on this campus to keep the ball rolling, and we’re carrying that out again for the fall, though I don’t know how many semesters we’ll be able to do it.

”

The implementation status of the 2022-23 project on peer ambassadors was not available for this research brief because the team lead is no longer employed at Sac State and could not be reached for an interview.



Challenges to Implementation and Impact

Administrative Support and Turnover

With the exception of the project that focused on impactation in 2019-20, all interviewees described high levels of administrative support for their Academy projects, which they said was critical for implementation. As reported in the sections above, this may be due to the close alignment between the projects and campus and systemwide priorities. According to Dr. Zeigler:

“

Administrative support was completely positive ... They provided financial assistance. If we needed something, we asked for it and we got support. I think that's because of what we were working on as a group [EO 1110 and equity gaps]. The administration gave us room to maneuver, so even when we hit obstacles, we had enough room to work around them [the obstacles].

”

Dr. Moylan likewise described administrative support as crucial to achieving impacts on internship programming, and she said she received this support from Dr. Zeigler and from Dr. Jenni Murphy, dean of the College of Continuing Education, who served as a “champion” in supporting the Academy team.

Most interviewees, however, identified administrative turnover as a key challenge to sustaining the Academy's impacts on campus, including retaining institutional memory about Sac State's projects at the Academy. Dr. Zeigler, Dr. German, and Dr. Moylan have all stepped down from their administrative roles and have returned to the classroom. Dr. Dragna, the graduation czar, passed away in 2023. Dr. Haley Myers Dillon, Academy team lead in 2022-23 and director of the Parents & Families Program, is no longer at Sac State.



Faculty Resistance

Dr. Zeigler identified faculty resistance as a primary challenge facing Academy teams during the early years. He said that by aligning with system and campus priorities (for example, EO 1110) and using data to explain student benefits, the Academy team was able to address faculty concerns:

“


We had a series of meetings, and we said, ‘This is the executive order. How are we going to address this? How are we going to do this? This is the data that we’ve been analyzing, coming from the Academy. And also from the Academy, this is what other math departments at other CSU campuses are talking about doing.’ Maybe it just built a critical mass over time, because I remember in that third meeting, there was a sense, ‘Okay, let’s do this as a department.’ We formed a subcommittee and we started working on it.

”

In describing the Sac State team’s work in year four (2021-22) to expand the number of faculty addressing equity gaps through instruction, Dr. Zeigler emphasized that there is still much work to do in this area and that some departments have been more open than others in focusing on student success in instruction.

Lack of Access to Data

In 2019-20, Dr. Endriga was the lead for a Sac State team examining the effects of impaction on student equity. The CSU system had informed campuses that program impaction should not be implemented in ways that are inequitable across student groups, and Dr. Endriga had received approvals to examine this issue from campus administrators, including from Dr. Dragna’s office. This was a data-intensive approach, and an experienced representative from institutional research was included on the team.



As the work got underway, however, the team could not collect the data needed to examine equitable access to impacted programs. According to Dr. Endriga, who was associate dean at the time:

“

We simply couldn't get access to the data. I look back at that, and I think that when forming a cross-functional team [for the Academy], it isn't just across divisions at the same level. I needed more variation vertically in the hierarchy. The data person we brought on didn't have enough management authority to get access to the data that we needed. Ultimately, that person was denied access to the data, even though we had support from higher leadership when we proposed the project and started at the Academy.

One of the things I learned is that when you are leading from the middle, oftentimes you will run into these snags or barriers because you don't have the authority to necessarily make the project work at a higher level. I think the Academy curriculum anticipated that and asked us to bring on, I think they were called 'champions,' [higher-level] administrators who would support our project. We did that, and that went fairly well. But the process of bringing on a champion happened very early, before we actually knew what we were going to ask of that champion. And so by the time we ran into the snag, some of the champions that had signed on with us to support the project no longer were available.

”

Dr. Endriga said that at the time of the project, the campus had not yet developed a policy for sharing individual-level data:

“

There was a fair amount of attention as there should be to areas of equity and inequity on campus. But there was also an awareness that not everyone should have access to any data related to things that could be sensitive ... Those discussions were just starting at the time we were doing our project. The campus wasn't used to giving access to this kind of information at an individual level.

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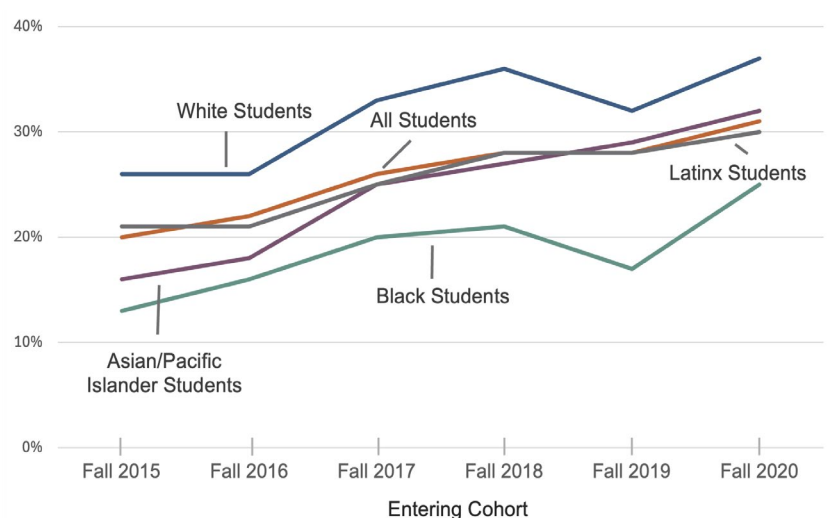
Dr. Endriga said that had she known at the time that it was possible for a campus to take on a multi-year project at the Academy, she would've considered submitting a revised project for a second year.

Student Outcomes

Sac State has received national and statewide acclaim for its work—including through its Finish-in-Four and Through-in-Two initiatives—to achieve substantial increases in the campus’ four-year and two-year graduation rates. Based on the most recent data available, over 31% of first-time, first-year students graduate within four years (as of spring 2024), already surpassing the campus’ GI 2025 goal of 30% for 2025. Since 2016, when the campus launched its Finish-in-Four initiative, Sac State’s grad rates have nearly quadrupled. Similarly, 44% of transfer students graduate within two years (as of spring 2024), surpassing the campus’ GI 2025 goal of 38% for 2025. Students reached these achievements despite the disruptions of COVID-19, during which they were forced to enroll in courses online.¹³

Sac State has seen substantial improvements in grad rates for all ethnic groups. As with the CSU system as a whole, however, equity gaps among the groups have remained persistent (see Figure 2).¹⁴

Figure 2. Sac State 4-Year Grad Rates, by Race & Ethnicity



Source: Graduation and continuation rates dashboard, first-time, full-time freshmen, CSU Reports & Analytics.

¹³ Cynthia Hubert, “Sac State four-year graduation rate rises to more than 30%, highest in university history,” Oct. 14, 2024, <https://www.csus.edu/news/newsroom/stories/2024/10/graduation-rates.html>.

¹⁴ Graduation and continuation rates dashboard, first-time, full-time freshmen, CSU Reports & Analytics, queried 6/11/25, <https://www.calstate.edu/data-center/institutional-research-analyses/Pages/reports-and-analytics.aspx>.



Suggestions for the Academy

Interviewees from Sac State said that its teams participating in the Academy had achieved important impacts in supporting equitable student success. The impacts included:


- laying the groundwork for enrolling first-year students in a full load;
- developing course and program changes on campus;
- creating new faculty development resources;
- improving faculty leadership around centering student success and equity; and
- building relationships across campus around equitable student success.

Interviewees highlighted the following Academy practices that they particularly appreciated:

- Middle leadership development combined with project development.
- In-person Academy sessions rather than online sessions.
- The full-year Academy, compared with shorter versions, to allow time between sessions to identify barriers on campus, network and gain support, and otherwise lay the groundwork for project completion and implementation.
- The Network's website about the Academy, specifically the historical information regarding each campus' past projects.

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

- **Encourage and inform campuses and teams about the importance of taking a multi-year approach to the Academy.** Substantial projects in higher education include many elements, each of which can build on previous work and contribute to long-term change.
- **Consider ways to support campuses in maintaining their institutional memory about Academy opportunities.** Due to high administrative turnover on campuses, many former team leads are no longer in a position to provide information about previous campus projects. Options include the following:
 - **Creating campus-by-campus information on the Network's website** regarding each campus' history at the Academy. This would be organized by campus.
 - **Supporting alumni gatherings, progress meetings, or other opportunities for Academy teams to reconnect and reflect on campus** after the project year. For the most recent team projects, this could include facilitated check-ins regarding progress and challenges; feedback and direction on evaluation; and exchanges with previous-year teams.
 - **An outreach campaign directed to each campus**, or selected campuses, regarding Academy impacts generally, Academy history at that campus, and upcoming Academy opportunities.

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- **Consider ways to require or encourage campuses to align Academy work with systemwide and campus priorities.** This could be achieved by: (1) encouraging campuses to appoint a liaison to coordinate team and project development in line with campus or systemwide priorities, (2) requiring cabinet-level champions to attest and identify how team projects are in alignment with campus or systemwide priorities, and/or (3) requiring campus teams to submit proposals in a limited number of topic areas in line with systemwide priorities.
 - **Consider ways to encourage vertical as well as horizontal cross functionality in team membership.** The reasoning for this suggestion is to involve upper management more integrally throughout project development so as to promote management support in implementation. This might also be achieved through engaging with upper-level administrators as champions throughout the year:
 - **Encourage team leads to select and work with campus champions who can be active in addressing challenges.** This might include meetings and presentations provided by the team lead before, during, and after project development.
 - **Consider curriculum to provide teams and team leads with training in working with cabinet-level management** in supporting project development and implementation.
 - **Consider having facilitators check in periodically on leadership goals** for each team member as well as project goals for the team as a whole. This might help to clarify the ways in which the Academy is both a leadership and project development experience.
 - **Consider funding opportunities for the implementation of team projects.** In the current budget climate, even limited funding opportunities can help teams make progress in implementation.



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 Education Insights Center (EdInsights) 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).



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