ACADEMY IMPACTS SUMMARY

Campus Planning for the Middle Leadership Academy:

Suggestions from Successful Teams in Implementing Campus Projects

Student Success Network
in the California State University

By Thad R. Nodine, Ph.D.

March 2026

To help [California State University](#) (CSU) campuses plan for the [Middle Leadership Academy](#) (Academy) in ways that help them reach their goals for equitable student success, this brief summarizes lessons learned from successful campus teams regarding planning and organizing for the Academy. According to participants from three campuses that sent multiple teams to the Academy over multiple years, adopting a multi-year strategic approach to the Academy yielded longer-term impacts aligned with campus goals.

Introduction

Each year, about 10 to 12 CSU campuses send teams of middle leaders—students, staff, faculty, institutional researchers, and administrators—to participate in the Academy. Since its founding in 2017-18, the Academy has achieved a broad reach across the state:

- 21 of the 22 CSU campuses have sent teams.
- 19 campuses participated for two or more years.
- 11 campuses participated for three or more years.

The likelihood of implementing equity projects from the Academy appears to be linked to the ability of Academy team members to:

- **leverage commitments by campus executive leadership** for Academy participation, project goals, and implementation plans; and
- **engage with colleagues through committees or other structures** across campus to institutionalize changes.

For more information about the impacts of the Academy on campuses, see our Academy Impacts Series, which includes briefs on [Chico State](#), [Cal State Fullerton](#), and [Sacramento State](#), each of which sent multiple teams to the Academy and saw impacts on campus policies, programs, and practices.[1]

Suggestions for team and project development

Team leads and campus leaders provided the following suggestions for campuses to consider for supporting successful Academy experiences that lead to project implementation and sustained impacts on campus. In addition, the brief draws from documents and websites that are publicly available.

---

[1] Impact brief findings are based primarily on interviews with team leads and other campus leaders. Interviews were completed in 2024 and 2025.

Consider a multi-year strategic approach to the Academy so that the campus can benefit from having different teams over time address interrelated challenges in a coordinated way. The three campuses we studied initiated their multi-year approach by building on projects from one year to the next and by having a point person facilitate campus involvement.

> "
> **Chico State took a multi-year approach early on in the Academy, and I think that helped us make longer-term impacts. We send different teams each year with different projects, but we initially tried to build on the projects from one year to the next, so there was a through-line. Substantial change in higher education takes time and involves many elements, and so a multi-year approach makes sense.**
>
> — Dr. Ellie Ertle, Associate Vice Provost for Academic Success, Chico State University
> "

Assign a point person or liaison to facilitate team development, support the alignment of team projects, provide networking between executive campus leadership and team leads, and connect team leads with campus committees and programs to help with project implementation. Having a point person on campus also contributed to achieving a multi-year strategic approach.

Align the Academy team's content areas with existing systemwide and campus goals for equitable student success. Academy projects that are aligned clearly with these priorities appear to be more likely to be implemented and sustained financially over time.

Leverage commitments from cabinet-level leadership up front, throughout the Academy year, and into the implementation phase. The Academy requires campus teams to submit a letter of support from an "endorser" at the cabinet level. The endorser serves several important functions, including meeting with the team lead during the year to support team progress and to help overcome obstacles. Team leads said that developing active relationships with their endorsers and/or other campus leaders—so that these leaders became project champions, for example—helped them realize sustained impacts. They also said that having the support of a campus liaison and/or aligning their project with campus goals made it easier to gain support from campus leadership.

> Having a coordinated approach through a point person "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.
>
> — Dr. Ioakim Boutakidis, Professor of Child and Adolescent Studies, Cal State Fullerton

Select Academy teams with implementation as well as project development in mind. Academy teams need members from across campus roles and divisions who have content experience to develop a project. Teams also benefit from having members who can step onto campus committees and work with others at the end of the year to facilitate implementation.

A deeper look at two key approaches to improving project implementation

The three campuses we examined in our Academy Impacts Series used two common strategies to organize their approach to the Academy. '

1. **Taking a multi-year strategic approach**

   All three campuses, at least for several years, adopted a multi-year strategic approach to the Academy whereby teams intentionally built on the content areas of prior years. This allowed campuses to convene different teams over time to address complex, interrelated challenges in a coordinated way.

   In the Academy's first year, for example, Sacramento State's team supported the math department in developing a plan to implement Executive Order (EO) 1110.[2] In year two, a different Sac State team examined equity gaps related to EO 1110 implementation. In years three and four, respectively, Sac State teams examined equity gaps in relation to impaction and sought to expand faculty understanding of how to address equity gaps in instruction. This work over four years helped to transform faculty attitudes and instructional practices on campus, including faculty practices integrating instruction and student supports.

---

[2] CSU's EO 1110 mandated the elimination of all remedial courses in English and mathematics.

> " The difference now is that the [math] 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?... 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'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."
>
> — Dr. David Zeigler, Professor of Mathematics and Statistics, Sacramento State University

During some years, two of the three campuses we studied used more of an ad hoc approach to team and content development. During these years, individual staff or faculty, upon receiving information about the Academy, worked with colleagues to develop a campus team and gain support or sign-off from administrators. The teams did not build on the content areas of previous years. This approach led to Academy team projects being implemented on campus, and these projects had important impacts. Compared with the multi-year approach, these impacts were typically more limited in scope—that is, focused more narrowly on a campus program or project.

2. **Designating a liaison or a point person**

In conjunction with their multi-year strategic approach to the Academy, all three campuses also appointed, either formally or informally, a point person to help coordinate the development of teams and content areas. The point person helped the campus align the current year's content area not only with prior Academy teams but also with the campus' strategic goals and needs. The point person helped the team develop relationships on campus, build support for its work, address challenges during the Academy year, and facilitate project implementation back on campus. The liaison also served as a source of institutional knowledge about the experiences of campus teams from prior years.

Chico State's approach to the Academy was the most robust in this regard. The campus administered the work of its Academy teams through its Advancing Equity Project (AEP), an influential committee that coordinated campus efforts to close equity gaps in student performance. AEP was led by two well-connected chairs who were actively involved in:

- facilitating campus team selection for the Academy;
- aligning team content areas with campus goals;
- providing guidance during the year about budgetary and other limitations or opportunities;
- addressing resistance in implementation; and
- connecting teams to committee and other structures to institutionalize change.

In its first year at the Academy, the Chico State team drafted policy language supporting equity in the campus strategic plan and language in a Faculty Senate resolution calling for faculty to have access to student data on equity gaps for their classes. In the second year, the Academy team developed a one-stop digital resource for student services. In the third year, the team provided leadership in the development of an equity dashboard and the creation of faculty development processes to address gaps in DFW rates. According to Dr. Ellie Ertle, team lead for Chico State in 2018-19 and associate vice provost for academic success, "The work we did at the Academy helped to support a cultural shift on campus."

> "
> **The Academy [experience] was instrumental in developing strategies for: How do we change the culture from 'I'm afraid data will be used in an evaluative way' to 'How can data inform our teaching practices?' It was also important in finding ways to engage faculty and staff. And third, we sought ways to make the overall discussion about equity and inclusion more student centered and less top driven or top imposed.**
>
> — Dr. Chiara Ferrari, Director of Faculty Development, Professor of Media Arts, Chico State University
> "

During some years, two of the campuses did not have a liaison or point person facilitating the development of teams and content areas for the Academy. These were the years in which the campuses did not have multi-year approaches to the Academy.

Challenges to project implementation

The team leads we spoke with mentioned administrative turnover and faculty resistance as the two key challenges they faced in project implementation—more important, even, than budgetary limitations.

Administrative and executive turnover

Academy team leads said that turnover of administrative and executive positions posed challenges to implementing Academy projects and sustaining impacts over time. This turnover included Academy team members who accepted promotions at other institutions after the Academy year—a positive career and leadership development outcome but a challenge for project implementation. Interviewees said that the administrative turnover also made it difficult to retain institutional memory about the campus' previous experiences and projects at the Academy.

Faculty resistance

Interviewees also identified faculty resistance on campus as a challenge facing Academy teams during project implementation. Several teams were able to overcome this resistance through adopting multi-year approaches that included aligning Academy content areas with campus priorities, inviting key faculty to participate on Academy teams, facilitating Academy team access to campus committee structures, using data to clarify the benefits to students of the proposed changes, and working with faculty development offices to create tools for faculty use and empowerment.

Conclusion

The purpose of this brief is to help campuses plan for a successful Academy experience that leads to project implementation and sustained impacts for equitable student success. According to teams from three campuses that sent multiple teams to the Academy over multiple years, adopting a multi-year strategic approach to the Academy yielded longer-term impacts aligned with campus goals for equitable student success. Other suggestions from the Academy teams included assigning a liaison to help coordinate team development and aligning the team's content areas with systemwide and campus goals.

The Academy is managed by the CSU Student Success Network (Network) at Sacramento State University. Each year, the Network invites cross-functional teams of students, staff, faculty, and administrators from all CSU campuses to apply to the Academy.

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.

Student Success Network
in the California State University

Education Insights Center

California State University, Sacramento
Education Insights Center/CSU Student Success Network
6000 J Street, MS 6147
Sacramento, CA 95819
studentsuccessnetwork@edinsightscenter.org
http://csustudentsuccess.net