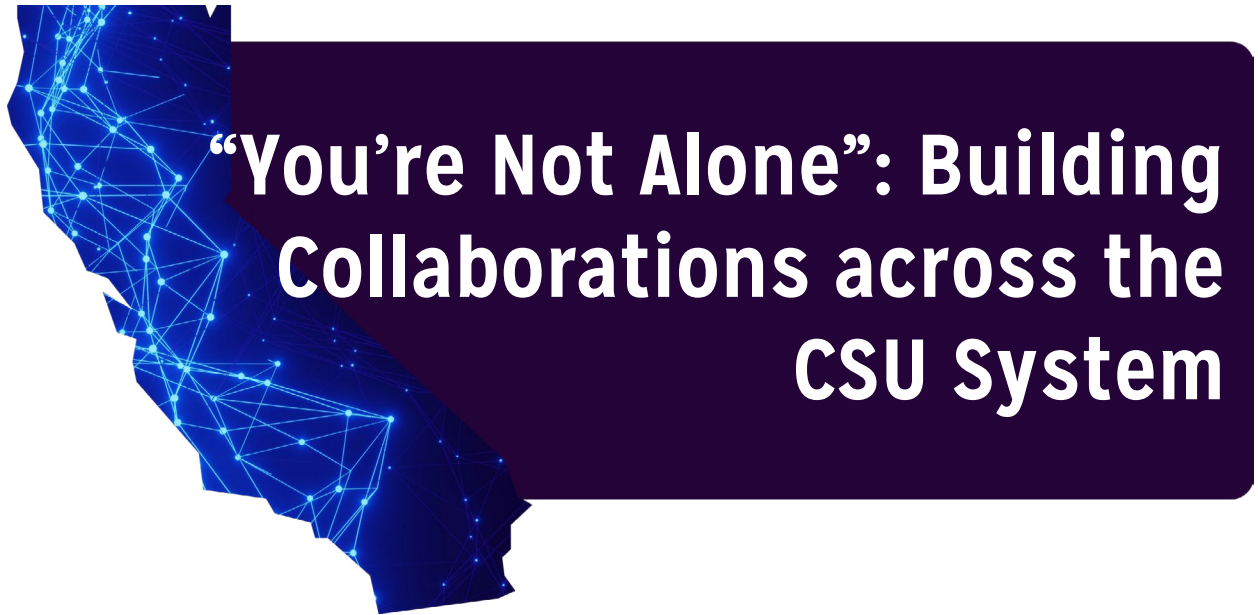




“You’re Not Alone”: Building Collaborations across the CSU System

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Introduction

The [CSU Student Success Network](#) (Network) provides a [range of activities](#) that offer strategies, resources, and opportunities for [middle leaders](#) to build relationships with colleagues across roles and divisions within each campus, and with colleagues from other campuses across the CSU system. Over the years, enterprising middle leaders have used the Network's activities as springboards for collaboration and relationship-building that reach beyond the scope of the activities themselves.

This brief focuses on two sets of cross-campus teams that drew from the Network's activities to build communities of practice (ComPs) across the CSU system. In both cases, middle leaders from several CSU campuses saw the value of building better understanding and actions across campuses in specific topic areas, and the Network adapted its activities to support their collaborations. This brief examines why the teams came together, what they encountered as they created cross-campus ComPs, and what the implications are for middle leadership across the CSU system.

This brief confirms that working in collaborative teams across CSU campuses can build valuable relationships among colleagues, engage middle leaders in ways that help to overcome isolation, expand leadership and career opportunities, and share knowledge and programming across campuses. In the process, working collaboratively across campuses also builds middle leadership itself.

Context: Creating Communities of Practice

In 2022, Jennie Econome Chalios, director of the First-Year Experience (FYE) at [Sacramento State University](#), found out about the Network's [Middle Leadership Academy](#) (Academy), which offers campus-based teams a year-long collaborative and supportive environment to work on equity-based problems of practice. But rather than convening a team from her campus, Chalios proposed to bring together a team representing several CSU campuses to examine, understand, and improve the first-year experience across the CSU system. The Network accepted the proposal, and in 2022-23 Chalios served as lead for an Academy team of middle leaders from [Cal Poly Pomona](#), [CSU Northridge](#), Sacramento State, [San Diego State](#), and [San Francisco State](#). In working to create a collaborative community of practice, the team met at the Academy and between Academy sessions via Zoom, to share practices, materials, and approaches regarding transitional academic programming for first-year and transfer students. In 2023-24, the team continued its Academy participation and its own Zoom meetings, with Chalios as lead. The team's objectives in its second year included: gathering data about first-year programs and outcomes; restructuring the first-year seminar to fit new general education (GE) requirements; and establishing a permanent CSU community of practice (ComP) for professionals working to improve experiences for first-year and transfer students.



A second example of middle leaders working together on cross-campus collaborations as a result of Network activities began in March 2024, when the Network hosted a statewide symposium in Sacramento on LGBTQIA2S+ student success in the CSU. The Symposium brought together faculty, staff, and students from across campuses, and their conversations continued after the Symposium. Building on this momentum, Symposium Director [Dr. Larissa Mercado-López](#), professor and department chair at [Fresno State University](#) facilitated the development and launch of [three communities of practice](#) in September 2024. The ComPs focused on addressing the following issues in relation to LGBTQIA2S+ students: (1) improving basic needs and data collection, (2) advocating for gender centers attentive to neurodivergent identities, and (3) creating gender-affirming campuses. The ComPs were co-led by CSU staff and faculty, with a total of 20 middle leaders participating from across the system. They met throughout fall semester 2024, with resources and feedback from Dr. Mercado-López.

Methodology

Regarding the two Academy teams addressing the first-year experience, this brief draws from an interview in April 2026 with team lead Jennie Chalios and from information available from the Network about the Academy. Regarding the LGBTQIA2S+ ComPs, the brief draws from a confidential interview session in 2025 with co-leads from two of the three ComPs, and from information provided by Dr. Mercado-López about the teams' achievements. The interviews with Chalios and with the co-leads of the LGBTQIA2S+ ComPs focused on: the experiences of the respective ComPs; the roles that team members served and the quality of the interactions they had; challenges and successes in working collaboratively across the CSU; and takeaways from the experience.

Findings from Collaborations across CSU Campuses

These findings about collaboration across the CSU system are drawn from the experiences of (a) the cross-campus Academy teams addressing the first-year experience and (b) the cross-campus ComPs that grew out of the LGBTQIA2S+ Symposium.

Coming Together to Connect and Take Action

The collaborative teams described in this brief came together with colleagues across CSU campuses to better understand and address issues of equitable student success on their own campuses. In interviews, the team lead/co-leads said they had no other sustained ways to collaborate with colleagues across CSU campuses. According to Chalios, “the biggest challenge was that we lacked access to other staff, faculty or advisors also supporting First Year programming outside of our own campus. This limited our ability to learn from one another.



For the FYE teams, the impetus came in 2022 from systemwide planning underway for a unified statewide [Intersegmental General Education Transfer Curriculum \(IGETC\)](#) pattern across all campuses. The potential shift, which had been initiated by [state legislation passed in 2021](#) and implemented [in fall 2025](#), was prompting some CSU campuses to rethink and potentially phase out existing, locally-funded support programs associated with the first-year experience. After meeting several FYE directors from other CSU campuses at a national FYE conference, Chaliros initiated the application process to create a cross-campus team at the Academy. The team included tenure track faculty, lecturers, and staff.

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We realized that we didn't have a way to collaborate across CSU campuses and find out how they were responding [to the GETC shift]. After our first meetings, we formed a goal of establishing a professional community of practice across the CSU to connect, learn from each other, and take action on campus to continue to address the academic and support needs of students transitioning into the university.

— Jennie Chaliros, Sacramento State

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Similarly, the LGBTQIA2S+ ComPs grew out of a conference experience. At the Network's LGBTQIA2S+ Symposium, colleagues working to support LGBTQIA2S+ student success felt energized in meeting colleagues from other campuses and learning about their experiences and programming. They wanted to continue to connect after the Symposium to find out more about options for addressing several key issues related to LGBTQIA2S+ student success.

Gathering Data as a Collaborative Enterprise

One of the key tasks for the collaborative teams was to gather information from other campuses about practices, funding, and staffing in the student support areas they were addressing. In seeking to gather data across campuses, the teams had to build relationships from the start, both with their team members and with colleagues across the CSU's then 23 campuses.

The FYE team—during its first year at the Academy and in monthly Zoom sessions as a community of practice—created a survey about first-year programming at each campus, including numbers of students served, types of supports, funding sources, and staffing. Chaliros described developing and implementing the survey as a “big challenge” for the group in drafting questions, finding out whom to reach out to on each campus, convincing them to fill out the survey, and then collecting and analyzing responses.



During the second year, the ComP members were able to use the survey results to inform their own campus administrators about how other campuses were planning first-year programming in relation to the IGETC shift. According to Chalios:

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We were able to refer to actions taken on other campuses: ‘Here are the different programs offered at other CSU campuses. Northridge is doing this. Chico is doing that. Would you like to have a one-unit add-on like at San Diego State? These are some options to consider for our students.’ This kind of contextual knowledge and support from other professionals was very helpful.

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For the LGBTQIA2S+ ComPs, many of the participants had met each other at the Symposium, but they did not know each other well when they began their online ComP meetings in fall 2024. One of the first objectives of the co-leads was to distribute data-gathering tasks among ComP members, in order to learn more about existing services and outcomes for LGBTQIA2S+ students related to the three topic areas: basic needs, gender centers, and name- and pronoun-change procedures. To accomplish this, the co-leads found they needed to first establish close working relationships among ComP members.

One of the co-leads said that they may have moved too quickly in assigning tasks for gathering data, as they found that their members had some hesitancy in sharing their opinions and stepping forward to take on tasks. The co-leads adjusted by creating breakout sessions and other opportunities for small conversations where people could exchange their ideas and gain trust with each other. They also changed the frequency of their online meetings from monthly to weekly. These adaptations helped ComP members establish closer rapport and participate more actively in the work. The co-lead for another ComP said, “I did activities before we started in the work, like social-emotional learning—warm welcomes, connecting with each other on a personal basis, asking questions about why you joined this, or what does it mean to you?”

In gathering information across the CSU, the co-leads also said that their engagement with colleagues at the different campuses was instrumental. For example, one co-lead said:

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Our task was to find out from all the universities what each one was doing to support gender diversity... Some of us looked at the websites... Some of us also ... contacted the directors of the PRIDE centers ... The direct conversations gave us a lot more meaningful information ... and that enhanced our ability to learn.

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Getting to know team members better was also important in team leadership. For example, the lead/co-leads of the FYE teams and the LGBTQIA2S+ ComPs said that in assigning duties they relied on their colleagues' strengths and interests. One co-lead said that faculty on their ComP tended to gravitate to the research or writing tasks and staff tended to volunteer for the outreach tasks. Chalios said, "Like with any team, there were people that wanted to provide support, but they didn't take on a lot of the work, and then there were people that had a passion, and they jumped forward and pitched in."

Challenges to Middle Leadership across Campuses

The team lead/co-leads described the following primary challenges that their teams faced in collaborating across campuses. Based on the Network's experiences, these are the kinds of challenges that middle leaders typically face as they take on stronger leadership and relationship-building roles.

Lack of time and resources. "Everyone is spread thin and stretched out," an LGBTQIA2S+ ComP co-lead said, referring to the difficulty of participants finding time for meetings and for tasks related to the collaboration. They also said that their jobs do not include resources or training for this kind of work.

The difficulty of accessing information. "Information was so scattered and difficult to access at each campus," said one of the co-leads. "More than half of our time was spent just trying to find where the data resided and who was responsible for what roles."

Operational issues, such as file sharing. The co-leads said that different campuses had different platforms and protocols in place for file sharing and collaborative work, including Google Drive, Microsoft OneDrive, and others. According to a co-lead, "It's kind of tricky to work across platforms, and everyone has different access to different things... So we had to find something that worked across the board." After some struggles with various campus-based platforms, their ComP had good experiences using [Box](#) for content management and collaborative sharing. Another co-lead said that [CASEL](#) was helpful in providing tools and resources for supporting relationship building among ComP participants: "CASEL is a collaborative for academic social and emotional learning. It provides tools that you can use for communities of practice to engage and create stronger relationships... [For the] warm welcomes and questions to enhance the group's working relationships, I used some slide prompts directly from CASEL."

Benefits from Middle Leadership across Campuses

The team lead/co-leads highlighted several benefits associated with their cross-campus relationship building. Based on the Network's experiences, these are the kinds of advantages that typically accrue from stronger middle leadership in the CSU.



“You’re not alone.” The lead/co-leads said that in working in their areas of expertise on their campus, they often felt a sense of isolation. By contrast, they said that building relationships across the CSU helped them feel more connected to and energized by their work. A facilitator of the LGBTQIA2S+ ComP co-leads described this sense of engagement as, “You’re not alone.”

Leadership and career development. “I learned a lot about the culture of the California State University system” said Chalios, who led the cross-campus FYE teams. Chalios came to higher education from the private sector, and she said that her experience leading the Academy teams helped her learn more about:

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how to be effective in the CSU culture of higher ed. As I became more knowledgeable and skillful, I was able to relax more and focus where I needed to focus... I think all of us struggled with understanding the concerns and what the norms and best practices are in navigating this kind of culture. How do we engage across our campus with Student Affairs? How do we communicate effectively with administrators and learn from them? How do we collaborate with faculty? We received a tremendous amount of insight and support from former and current administrators, faculty, and staff. This resulted in an enriched learning environment, which is hard to duplicate.
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Knowledge about programs and strategic options from within the CSU. The team lead/co-leads said that the teams’ data-gathering efforts provided them and their campus with better understanding about programs and options across the CSU. According to a co-lead, “Engaging across multiple CSUs enhanced my ability to engage with colleagues and learn very specifically about what universities are doing around gender diversity. I was able to engage in direct dialogue with staff at universities doing meaningful work. I also learned where strengths and weaknesses exist.”

Impacts from the FYE teams. Chalios said that one of the successes of the FYE teams was the data gathering about programming and the identification of colleagues in similar positions across the campuses. Team members used that information to provide their campuses with options for FYE programming. Team members also established an on-going ComP for CSU professionals working to improve experiences for first-year and transfer students across the system.



Impacts from the three LGBTQIA2S+ ComPs. The ComP that gathered data about gender centers created recommendations to help gender centers better support neurodivergent students. The basic needs ComP developed a plan and a draft survey for assessing the use of SOGI (sexual orientation and gender identity) data to improve basic needs in the CSU. The ComP seeking to create gender-affirming campuses developed recommendations for the Chancellor's Office for improving name and pronoun change procedures across the system. In addition, all three ComPs offered their members a supportive group during a very challenging social and political time for LGBTQIA2S+ communities.

Network Approaches that Contributed to Collaboration

The team lead/co-leads mentioned specific areas where the Network provided crucial supports.

Academy Sessions. According to Chalios, participating in the Middle Leadership Academy was instrumental in supporting the cross-campus collaborations of the FYE teams. “This was an invaluable experience,” she said, “to have the time, the space, and the support for three days with professionals who could mentor and advise us three times during the year.”

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It was enormously helpful to have the coaching and the mentoring, especially from all of those Academy veterans who were now coming back as facilitators, people who had been in our shoes. We felt more connected, and a greater sense of belonging. We were given different tools, language, and mindsets to be able to accomplish our goals related to student success.

– Jennie Chalio, Sacramento State

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The Symposium and Facilitated Meetings. The Network's LGBTQIA2S+ Symposium created the space, cross-campus connections, and support to launch the three LGBTQIA2S+ ComPs. The ComP co-leads also highlighted the importance of the on-going support that the Network provided after the conference ended, especially the regular meetings held among the ComP co-leads, which were facilitated by Dr. Mercado-López. As one of the co-leads said, “I found it very beneficial when ... they brought us in [as co-leads] for us to share ideas and thoughts.”



Implications and Conclusion

This brief's findings regarding cross-campus collaborations confirm what we know about middle leadership in general. For example, gathering and analyzing data across campuses is a collaborative act of middle leadership. In addition, some of the key challenges to overcome—for cross-campus collaborations as well as for middle leadership—include a scarcity of time and resources, a sense of isolation or working in silos, and issues associated with sharing across platforms and software systems. Likewise, the benefits for collaborations and for middle leadership appear to be aligned, including opportunities: to create valuable and lasting relationships among colleagues, to advance leadership and career development, and to share knowledge and programming across CSU campuses. In short, working collaboratively across campuses appears to advance and build middle leadership.

In light of these findings, middle leaders interested in collaborating about specific content areas across CSU campuses might:

- Reach out to colleagues from other CSU campuses about working together to examine, understand, and improve equitable student success in a specific program or content area across the system.
- Reach out to the Network about ways to accommodate your and your colleagues' interests in participating on a collaborative team at the Academy or through other Network activities.
- Include in your plans ways to address the challenges faced by middle leaders in working collaboratively across the system, including scarcity of time and resources and logistical difficulties working across software or other campus systems.
- Emphasize with colleagues the opportunities and benefits of working collaboratively, including overcoming a sense of isolation, advancing leadership development, and sharing programming across the CSU system to improve equitable student success.

Similarly, the Network might:

- Examine its activities for opportunities to promote and support more participation by cross-campus teams.
- Examine the final stages of its activities for opportunities to support the creation of on-going cross-campus ComPs or other topic-based collaborative teams.
- Consider sustainable ways to facilitate the on-going work of cross-campus ComPs or other topic-based teams that spring from Network activities.
- Consider sustainable ways to gather data about the challenges and successes of cross-campus ComPs that spring from Network activities.

According to team lead Chalios, “It has been said that ‘A mirror can reflect everything but itself.’ We learn so much more in community and across campuses than we could never learn by ourselves.”



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.



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