



Addressing Equity in a Pandemic

The CSU Student Success Network
Annual Report 2020-21



Welcome!

This annual report comes to you from the “virtual” desk of a new director of the [Student Success Network](#) in the CSU. I am thrilled to be working with my fellow middle leaders and I want to thank you for your dedication to supporting equitable student success on your campus and across the CSU. I also want to thank our many partners and collaborators who make our work possible, including the State of California, the [CSU Chancellor’s Office](#), the [Kresge Foundation](#), [Sacramento State University](#) (where we are housed), and all 23 campuses of the CSU.

This was a breakthrough year for the Network. We reached unparalleled participation, engagement, and early impacts, as you’ll read in this report. This was accomplished as all of us sought to support our colleagues in addressing racial justice and meeting the unique educational, social, emotional, and equity challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the Network, we excel in developing structured spaces for colleagues and students across divisions, departments, and campuses to examine student data, reflect about big ideas, share strategies for practice, and build capacity for proactive change. This year, we pivoted, shifted, and adjusted to create virtual ways to engage, and meanwhile our fellow colleagues and students were pivoting, shifting, and adjusting in response to the rapidly changing, uncertain, and often traumatic conditions that they faced.

Higher education is changing now, partly due to the pandemic and social unrest that has occurred. I see this as an opportunity for all of us to reimagine our campuses for our most marginalized students, which is a key purpose of the CSU. Those who get engaged with the CSU Network are passionate about student success: we live it, we breathe it, we infuse it in our work. Our success is partly due to the amazing activities directed by our middle leaders who run the CSU Network. But the key is the contribution of participants from campuses, who take what they’ve learned from an event we host or our research we publish and end up working with colleagues and students to change practice and policy back on campus.

Spread the word. As the Network approaches its five-year anniversary, this is an exciting place to come together and build practices and systems that fully support equity and student success.

Director, CSU Network

“

It was incredible to immerse myself in an environment where everyone truly wanted to collaboratively work in order to bring about positive change. Additionally, I wanted to thank you for giving us (the students) a voice as well as making us feel heard. I hope to remain involved, and I am excited to see how this project will impact the CSU system.

- CSU Student Participant on Campus Team



Contents

Highlights from the CSU Network.....	1
What Middle Leaders Are Saying	3
Cultivating Leaders from the Middle.....	4
About the CSU Network	5
Accomplishments and Outcomes.....	6
Financial Report	13
Advisory Board, 2020-21	14



Highlights from the CSU Network

The [Student Success Network](#) in the [California State University](#) (CSU Network) experienced a breakthrough year in 2020-21, as we ramped up and adjusted our programming to support middle leaders in advancing equitable student learning, progression, completion, and success in the midst of a pandemic and a period of racial strife nationally. In light of the challenges posed by the onset of COVID-19, our activities took new forms and reached new levels of participation and impact. We also welcomed a new Network director and Convenings director, and we strengthened our organizational and financial footing.

Accomplishments. By adjusting content to address racial justice during a pandemic and by pivoting to virtual delivery models, the CSU Network achieved these milestones in its major activities:

- We launched our first annual [Student Success Conference](#) on September 25 and October 16, 2020. This virtual event, called “[Building a Student-Ready Campus: Shared Opportunities for Equity and Transformation](#),” brought together 394 participants statewide to discuss and learn about actionable, evidence-based efforts to support equity-driven student success. The event featured faculty and student plenaries on racial justice, 12 breakaways featuring the work of middle leaders throughout the CSU, and several networking sessions.
- Our [Convenings](#) shifted their content to address the challenges and opportunities of supporting students equitably during the pandemic. We also launched two new virtual series, [Navigating Uncertainty Together](#) and [Supporting and Engaging Men of Color](#). Compared with prior years, the Convenings reached their highest participation levels ever, bringing together 490 participants over the year from all 23 campuses.
- Our [Middle Leadership Academy](#) transformed its format into a virtual model, with clusters of shorter sessions and other strategies to engage participants, while continuing to provide its hallmark structure of professional development to campus teams of middle leaders and students.

As in previous years, all teams developed a concrete plan for advancing equity on their campus, based on discussions and analysis of their own student data, campus environment, and policy and programming needs. In 2020-21, the year-long Academy hosted 65 participants from eight campus teams.

- We launched a beta version of our new [Knowledge Center \(KC\)](#) in fall 2020, with an official launch planned for fall 2021. Compared with our research reports, the KC offers middle leaders shorter, practice-based memos that support them in addressing key issues. The KC is part of our [Applied Research](#) strand, which in 2020-21 also included a study examining how CSU leaders are navigating change in times of uncertainty.

Preliminary Impacts. Since its inception in 2016, the CSU Network has engaged with over 1,421 middle leaders from every campus in the CSU. After a planning year in 2016-17, the Network has been providing services and events for four years. The Network currently has several studies underway to identify impacts, understand challenges, and improve services. Based on preliminary findings, some of the Network's impacts on campus' include:

- At [Long Beach State](#), a transfer center was created after a campus team participated in and shared information with other CSU campuses at a Convening on supporting transfer students.
- [San Diego State](#) likewise implemented a range of actions to support transfer students, based on participation by campus teams at a Convening and in the Middle Leadership Academy.
- A campus team from [Chico State](#), after participating in the Academy, included equity language in the campus' new strategic and master plans, as well in the campus's General Education mission. The campus also moved forward in providing resources to support faculty using the campus's equity dashboard.
- Colleagues at [San Marcos State](#) created a course for faculty and staff on using student data, based on information and feedback they received from colleagues from other CSU campuses at a Convening.
- Based on plans developed by a campus team at the Academy, [CSU Northridge](#) established a community-based-learning component in the campus' freshman seminar courses that first-year students enroll in.
- At [Humboldt State](#), equity training is now in place to support faculty, after a campus team gathered information and developed plans at the Academy.

WHAT'S NEXT?

In the coming year, the Network will celebrate its five-year anniversary as we continue to gather data and improve our work, offering expanded opportunities anchored in racial justice, evidence, leadership development, and networking, to support middle leaders as they identify and address the needs of students in the CSU. This will likely include both virtual and in-person engagement, as opportunities allow.





What Middle Leaders Are Saying

“Opportunities for systemwide collective action among faculty and staff to address student success is so critically important and so rare. There are no other independent groups like this focused on student success across the CSU. There’s not an equivalent.”

“We took the student voice [research] report to 30 advisors and had them read it and then meet for a conversation. It led to a change in policy promoting 15 credits at orientation, which led to greater average unit load.”

“The Network has provided the validation that I needed at a tough time. I feel like everything that we’ve learned and the people we’ve connected to and the speakers—the community of support gives me hope.”

“I’ve brought ideas and processes back to [my campus] that I’ve learned at the CSU Network, and now they’re grounded in the work we do there ... That has been incredibly helpful.”

“The [Academy] experience was the boost our team needed to continue advancing first-gen student success. Investing in middle leaders ... is crucial as we continue addressing equity issues on campus.”

“The work that we’ve done at the CSU Network has been very responsive to the issues that campuses are going through. That includes the Conference this fall, which addressed equity and inclusiveness in some of the best ways that I’ve seen anywhere.”

“This CSU Network continues to bring people together to examine the ways we work on our campuses, and that’s how it continues to help us all apply pressure to make the CSU truly what it can be, which is a democratizing educational institution for students.”

“I’ve had a chance to join the early efforts of the CSU Network... What resonates with me is our passion for students and for the aims of the CSU, particularly in addressing equity and student learning.”



Cultivating Leaders in the Middle

The convergence of two pandemics, COVID-19 and racial injustice, magnified structural inequities in the U.S. and created momentum for action in 2020-21, including in higher education. The CSU Network cultivates leaders in the middle, whether they are currently sitting as a middle leader, or moving between positions on campus or departments, as principal stakeholders and innovators in creating welcoming campus ecosystems and designing and implementing plans, policies, and practices to advance equitable student success and close equity gaps on CSU campuses. Leadership is an action and its potential depends not on where we sit but on what we do. The time is now for equity-based middle leadership.

We define middle leaders as faculty, staff, and administrators who work closely with students and serve in leadership roles on their campus, though their titles may not acknowledge these roles. Why are middle leaders situated to be key innovators in the CSU? It's because of their longevity of service on their campus, their knowledge of institutional practice and policy, their active networking assets, and their proximity to students. The CSU Network provides structured spaces for middle leaders to join together, build their professional relationships within and across campus, analyze student data, share big ideas, develop concrete strategies, and create positive change for students. We can achieve so much by working together.

Are you a middle leader? Join us by participating in an event.

About the CSU Network

The CSU Network is an independent entity created and directed by CSU faculty, staff, and administrators, with financial support from the State of California, and initial seed funding from [College Futures Foundation](#), [The Kresge Foundation](#), and [The James Irvine Foundation](#). The Network creates spaces for CSU middle leaders to share ideas and take the lead in supporting equitable opportunities and outcomes for students. The Network is facilitated by the [Education Insights Center \(EdInsights\)](#) at [Sacramento State University](#), a research and policy center devoted to student success and the public benefits of education.

Our Strategic Goals

The next academic year, 2021-22, is the five-year anniversary of the CSU Network. During its first four years, the Network:

- Completed the launch of its major statewide programs: (1) an annual Student Success Conference; (2) topic based Convenings; (3) the Middle Leadership Academy; and (4) Applied Research, with a Knowledge Center featuring practice-based memos;
- Solidified its leadership and advisory board structure from CSU campuses (see Advisory Board); and
- Increased the numbers of middle leaders served every year, with participation from all campuses.

In 2020-21, we continued to build organizational strength and flexibility as we shifted all programming to address equity in the midst of a pandemic, while also going virtual. We also welcomed a new director.

In the process, the CSU Network gained traction on its shorter-term goal of changing awareness and is making headway on its medium-term goal of changing behaviors, based on preliminary feedback from participants. These goals are described below, with accomplishments and outcomes in the next section.

Shorter Term: Changing Awareness

More middle leaders **are aware** of their opportunities to use student data and to work together on their campus to: (a) reduce barriers that disproportionately affect Students of Color, students from low-income families, and first-generation college students; and (b) otherwise increase equitable student learning, progression, completion, and success.

Medium Term: Changing Behaviors

More middle leaders **are taking action** to use student data and to work together on their campus to: (a) reduce barriers that disproportionately affect Students of Color, students from low-income families, and first-generation college students; and (b) otherwise increase equitable student learning, progression, completion, and success.

Longer Term: Changing Conditions

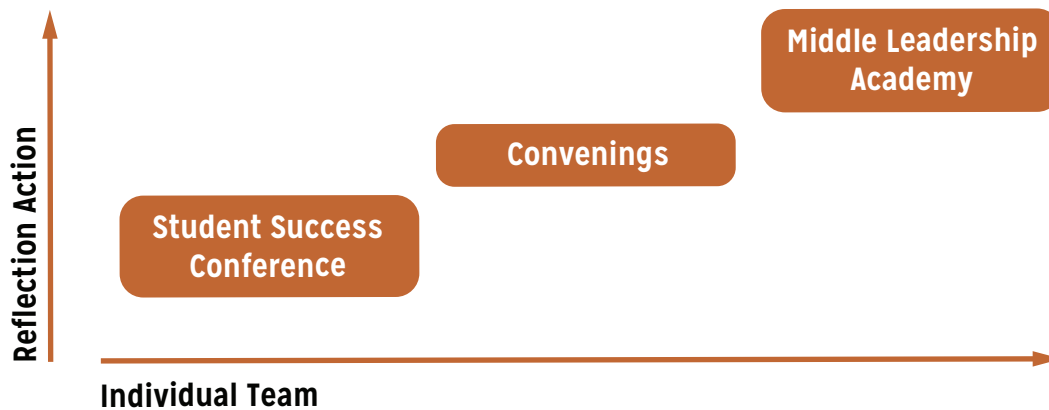
CSU campuses have conditions and systems in place that support a culture of inquiry, data use, innovation, and empowerment in service of equitable student learning, progression, completion, and success.

Accomplishments and Outcomes

The CSU Network supports positive student-oriented changes on campuses by sharing applied research and creating structured spaces for professional development that center equity, evidence, and student experiences. Through all our activities, we build capacity among middle leaders to work together across departments, divisions, and campuses to achieve equitable student learning, progression, completion, and success.

Figure 1: All the CSU Network’s major events highlight reflection and action

The Student Success Conference offers opportunities to reflect on and learn about a range of actionable strategies in place on CSU campuses; Convenings focus on addressing specific issues of practice, with events for individuals and teams; and the Middle Leadership Academy provides sustained leadership development and support for campus teams in developing plans for action on their campus.



Inaugural Student Success Conference

Evidence, ideas, and strategies for equity on every campus

In fall 2020, the CSU Network launched our first annual [Student Success Conference](#) in the CSU. In the months preceding the conference, middle leaders and students throughout the CSU were experiencing major disruptions and upheavals due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, brutal instances of racial injustice across the nation were being met with calls for change in all institutions, including higher education. We understood that the impacts of the pandemic would pose challenges for the conference, but we also knew that fellow faculty, staff, administrators, and students could benefit from stories and strategies from peers about supporting students and understanding and addressing racial equity on our campuses, particularly during a pandemic.

The Conference committee, led by [Larissa M. Mercado-López](#), PhD, associate professor of Women’s Studies at [Fresno State](#), responded to the COVID and racial injustice pandemics by completely reimagining and reconfiguring the meeting structure so as to model engaging, action-oriented sessions within a virtual format, under the theme, “[Building a Student-Ready Campus: Shared Opportunities for Equity and Transformation](#).” The team also revised conference objectives to bring racial equity to the forefront.

The Conference, held on September 25 and October 16, 2020, was a stellar success, in terms of participation and feedback. Attendance was higher than projected for this inaugural, virtual event, with 394 participants. A student plenary on racial justice stole the show on the first day, and a faculty plenary on the same topic the second day was also met with very high ratings. (The CSU Network published a [VOICES blog](#) about the student plenary after the event as well as three [Knowledge Center memos](#) featuring interviews with the faculty plenary speakers.) The conference also featured the ideas and strategies of middle leaders in 12 break-out sessions and several networking mixers.

Based on a participant survey, most middle leaders who responded said that they had gained knowledge and motivation to make changes on their campus. In particular, more than half said they had deepened their understanding of how racial inequity manifests in the CSU and over 65% said they felt empowered to promote equity from within their role on their campus. The survey findings also revealed areas where we plan to make changes—for example, in featuring some half-hour rapid presentations in our second annual conference, planned for fall 2021 titled [“The Time is Now: New Visions for Equity in the CSU.”](#)

“

I am at the strengthening student success conference, what a wonderful opportunity... [It] really helps to inspire me to do more. Many thanks for all that you do to make this possible for so many!

- Conference Participant

Preliminary Outcomes from the Conference

Over half the conference participants who responded said that they had gained knowledge and motivation to make changes on their campus. They also identified some specific plans as a result of conference participation, including:

- using equity strategies in their work, such as viewing data through an equity lens, infusing anti-racist perspectives in their interactions with students, focusing more on students' intersectional needs, and sharing strategies to combat social injustice;
- using strategies centered on student experiences, such as improving awareness of student needs and support services, incorporating family into college planning, and leading with empathy;
- supporting or developing equity-focused professional development on campus; and
- finding ways to increase student involvement in addressing equity.

Convenings

No one knows everything, but together we know a lot

With in-person gatherings out of the question during the pandemic, our [Convenings](#) team completely revamped the structure, format, and content of these events during 2020-21. The purpose of the transformation was (1) to center and explore the implications of the pandemic on racial equity and student success, (2) to provide flexible support for middle leaders as they and their students adjusted to disruptions on their campus, and (3) to model the use of virtual formats to engage middle leaders in sharing up-to-date information and strategies for use on their campus. During the year, a fourth purpose emerged: **to gather and share practice-based strategies from middle leaders** for use and adaptation by their peers.

In summer 2020, the Network launched a **new virtual series**, [Navigating Uncertainty Together](#), which facilitated the sharing of strategies among middle leaders as they prepared for and then engaged in a virtual academic year during a pandemic. Based on overwhelmingly positive feedback, we continued the series with three sessions in February and April 2021, and these focused on how to support students equitably during times of crisis. We continued to use conversation guides to structure these sessions. Based on participant surveys from the summer, however, we shifted to a self-moderated, rather than facilitated, format. This proved to be popular. Over 200 middle leaders from 21 campuses attended at least one of the six Navigating Uncertainty sessions.

The Network also launched a **second virtual series**, [Supporting and Engaging Men of Color](#), in partnership with Dr. Adrian Huerta and USC's Pullias Center. The first session, in December 2020, provided an overview of challenges Men of Color face on campus, the kinds of data that can help to identify their needs, and options for strengthening institutional support. We engaged 194 middle leaders from 22 campuses for this session. A followup session in April 2021 was directed to 16 campus teams of middle leaders (79 participants). Through step-by-step instructions, each team gathered and analyzed data from their own campus and developed a concise institutional plan to support and engage Men of Color.

The responses from middle leaders were dramatic and positive. Compared with prior years, the Convenings reached their highest participation levels ever, bringing together 490 participants from all 23 CSU campuses. At the end of the academic year, we welcomed a new Convenings Director, Dr. Shonda Goward, assistant vice provost for undergraduate advising and success at San Jose State University. Shifting to virtual Convenings may have contributed to our high engagement levels this year; our sessions moving forward will likely include virtual elements, to facilitate attendance for those who may not be able to travel.

“

I wanted to second the comments during the session about the self-moderation... I think providing such a thoughtful framing in the beginning, as well as having colleagues in the session who valued listening and learning, made for a great atmosphere for reflection and ideation.

- Participant of Navigating Uncertainty Series



Preliminary Outcomes from the Convenings

The CSU Network developed and disseminated actionable strategies drawn from the Navigating Uncertainty series, focused on increasing student engagement in virtual teaching and building a positive learning environment during times of crisis.

In surveys, participants described new awareness and several takeaways for action on their campus:

- “I had some good **take-away data and strategies to share with my campus**, particularly around online teaching and campus communication.”
- “It was incredibly meaningful to learn about what is occurring at other campuses and to consider how my campus might do the same.”
- “No matter where we are located, we need to demonstrate flexibility with our students **AND staff. Life is not back to normal**, and more folx are experiencing COVID first-hand.”

As a key outcome of the Men of Color series, each of the 16 campus teams created an institutional plan to support and engage Men of Color at their campus. The teams also amassed student data to support implementation.



Middle Leadership Academy

Leadership development and networking in service of a campus equity project

The Network's Middle Leadership Academy faced a daunting challenge in 2020-21: how to engage campus teams in dynamic leadership and relationship building as they develop an equity project for their campus--but without bringing people together for the Academy's intensive, three-day sessions in the fall, winter, and spring?

Working with a committee of middle leaders, co-directors Dr. Rock Braithwaite, professor of kinesiology at Humboldt State University, and Brett Smith, former director of the Undergraduate Advising Center at San Francisco State, switched to offering **more frequent, shorter meetings, with concise learning outcomes** for each component and plenty of break-out discussions. There were new "homework" requirements, including pre-reads and teamwork. The co-directors created and led pre-sessions with each team regarding what to expect at the Academy, so that teams could hit the ground running. In addition, the Academy expanded its **mentorship model**, through which its more experienced facilitators advised its newer facilitators, to strengthen their hands-on interactions with campus teams.

Participant feedback from surveys and interviews suggests that the virtual engagement with the Academy's content and activities was impactful and consistent with the experiences of previous cohorts, though middle leaders did miss opportunities to connect with colleagues during meals and build team chemistry in person.

In 2020-21, the year-long Academy hosted 65 participants from eight campus teams. As in previous years, all teams developed a **concrete plan for advancing equity on their campus, based on discussions and analysis of their own student data, campus environment, and policy and programming opportunities**.

“

The [Academy] experience has been overwhelmingly positive. I learned a lot about myself as a leader, especially in the context of striving for and being an advocate of equity, inclusion, and justice in higher education.

- Academy Participant



Preliminary Outcomes from the Academy

In surveys, the vast majority of respondents (over 70%) described the Academy as useful in meeting its learning outcomes, including these comments regarding takeaways:

- “I strengthened my **practices of listening and collaborating**, especially in allowing space for co-members of my team to step up and lead.”
- “I was able to learn about how to network and increase the number of stakeholder[s] in a project. I also learned more about **the various ways one can use data**, how to read it in different ways, and special considerations when considering data.”
- Participating in the Academy helped me in “**understanding the process of implementing change**, considering strategies, politics, resistance, building collaboration, and finding resources. Having a real project to work on to use all this new knowledge allowed me to put this into practice.”

Participants said they plan to implement their campus projects after the Academy by collaborating with colleagues and meeting with stakeholders. They said they’d like to learn even more about strategies for **engaging those who are resistant to change**, including faculty, and for increasing campus buy-in.

The Academy has provided leadership training for over two dozen CSU middle leaders who serve as Academy facilitators and who used their experiences to structure their own meetings back on campus. A recent study of the impacts of the 2018-19 Academy found that **eight of the eleven participating teams were able to implement their equity project on their campus**. All eleven team leads reported that the experience had increased their use of leadership and networking skills on their campus. A new study is now examining impacts for all Academy cohorts.



Applied Research and a New Knowledge Center (KC)

Evidence about student experiences and strategies for practice and policy

In 2020-21, the CSU Network launched a beta version of a dynamic online Knowledge Center, which provides succinct, practice-based memos, blogs, and other information to support middle leaders in addressing key issues on their campus. For example, current topics include [supporting undocumented students](#) in the CSU, [approaches to online instruction](#) that are engaging for students, and [addressing racism](#) in the CSU. The Knowledge Center will officially launch in fall 2021.

Under the leadership of Dr. Madeleine Kerrick, research director for the Network and evaluation director for EdInsights at Sacramento State, the Network also conducted two studies in 2020-21: (1) an examination of **leadership strategies CSU campuses are using** to navigate change during these times of uncertainty; and (2) a pilot examination of **bureaucratic and administrative barriers** that Students of Color and first-generation college students face in the CSU. Findings from the leadership study, which focuses on how campus leaders are responding to the pandemic and to calls for racial justice, will be published in winter 2022. The study of bureaucratic barriers had to be postponed due to the impossibility of conducting focus groups and interviews on campuses; the Network will release findings from the virtual pilot during 2021-22.



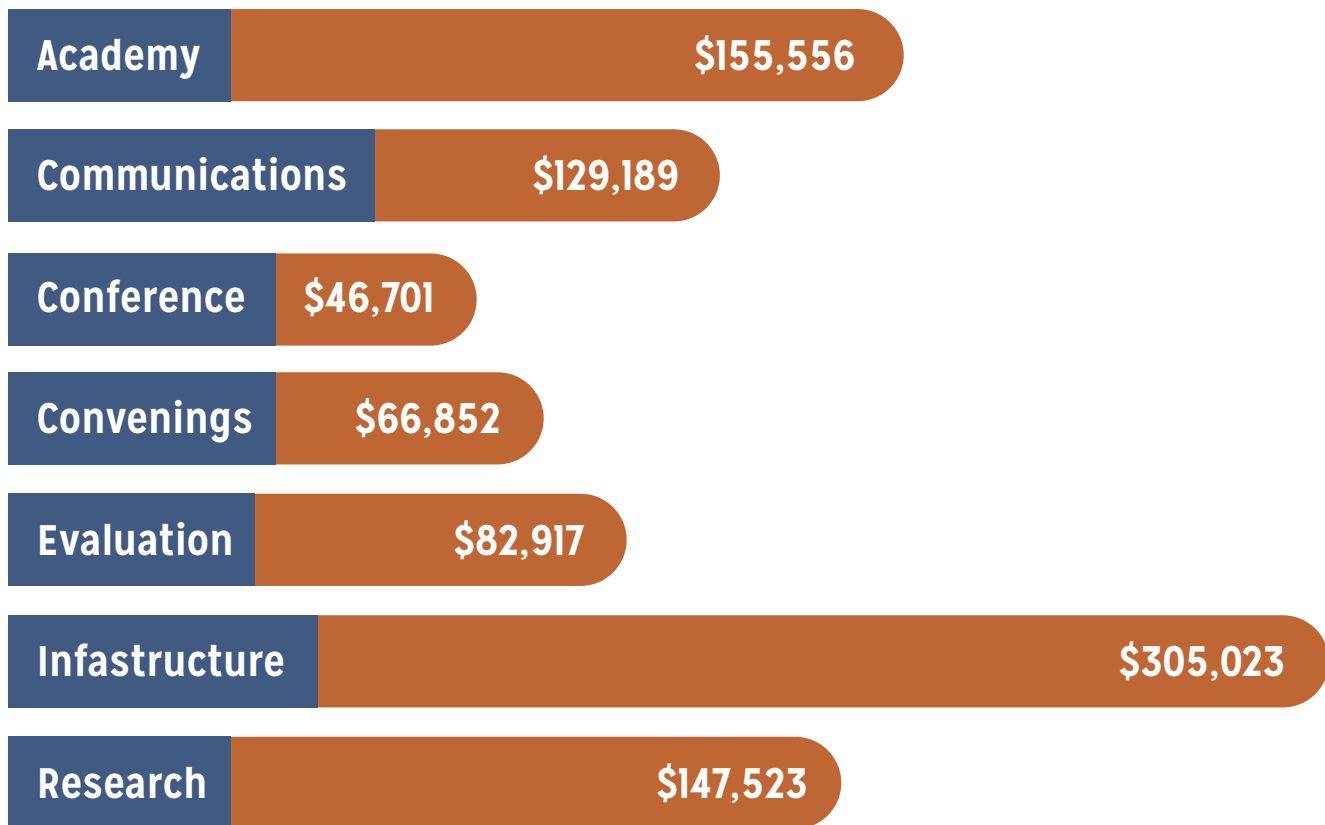
Financial Report

The Network received \$1.1 million from the State of California for fiscal year 2020-21 and spent \$933,761 (about 85%), with the savings primarily due to reduced costs associated with virtual rather than in-person events. Funds remaining at the end of the fiscal year roll over; the Network plans to use these carryover funds for a range of activities, including increasing online engagement; establishing grants to support equitable student success at the campuses; and transitioning toward in-person events, including an in-person Conference in fall 2022.

All Network activities are free of charge to CSU participants, and we reimburse reasonable and allowable travel, food, and lodging costs. Infrastructure costs support core Network functions, and include salaries and benefits, general meeting expenses, supplies, and services.

FY 2020-21 Expenditures

● Activity ● Total Spending



TOTAL EXPENDITURES: \$933,761



Advisory Board, 2020-21

The Network's leadership positions and Advisory Board members are drawn from active middle leaders on CSU campuses. The Board meets several times a year, shares information about trends and student needs on campuses, and provides feedback and guidance on Network priorities and focus areas. Board members also serve as Network liaisons on their campus, sharing information about Network activities and opportunities to get involved.

Channel Islands

Ernesto Guerrero
Director of Academic Advising

East Bay

Diana Balgas
Director, Office of Student Outreach

Long Beach

Simon Kim
Associate Vice President, Research and Sponsored Programs

San Francisco

Kim Altura
Associate Dean of Undergraduate Education

Chico

Ellie Ertle
Interim Associate Dean, Undergraduate Education

Fresno

Bernadette Muscat
Interim Dean of Undergraduate Studies

Pomona

Victoria Bhavsar
Director, Center for the Advancement of Faculty Excellence (CAFE)

San Diego

Michelle Lopez
Assistant Dean for Student Success

CSSA

Katherine Pham
Vice President of Finance Student at Cal State Long Beach

Fullerton

Ioakim Boutakidis
Associate Professor of Child and Adolescent Studies

Sacramento

Ántonia Peigahi
Director of Policy Records and Management

San Marcos

Adam Petersen
Director of Strategic Initiatives for Academic Success

Be part of a community of faculty, staff, and administrators in examining evidence, developing innovative approaches, and sharing what works. Join us by participating in an event, or reach us at studentsuccessnetwork@edinsightscenter.org.



Student Success Network

in the California State University



**Education
Insights Center**

Advancing Research and Policy
for K-12 and Postsecondary Education

**California State University, Sacramento
Education Insights Center/CSU Student Success Network**

MAILING ADDRESS:

6000 J Street, MS 6147

Sacramento, CA 95819

studentsuccessnetwork@edinsights.org

<http://csustudentsuccess.net>



COLLEGE OF ARTS & LET