



# Implementing Systemwide Changes in the CSU:

How Campuses Used the Middle Leadership  
Academy to Realize a Policy Change in Mathematics

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## Executive Summary

The implementation of new policies instituted by the [California State University \(CSU\) Chancellor's Office](#) or by campus executive leadership can benefit from having campus teams of faculty, staff, and administrators participate in the [CSU Student Success Network \(Network\)'s Middle Leadership Academy \(Academy\)](#), according to an evaluative study of the impacts of the Academy. This report, which is based on that study, finds that the Academy served as a catalyst in helping campus teams address resistance and take advantage of opportunities for substantive change through leadership, communications, and networking. As a result, the Academy appears to be well positioned, with additional supports and resources, to facilitate and deepen campus efforts to address long-standing issues such as equity.

During the 2017-18 academic year, the Network tailored its first Academy to support nine CSU campus teams in planning and implementing [Executive Order \(EO\) 1110](#) on their campus. EO 1110 mandated the elimination of all remedial courses in English and mathematics across the largest four-year university system in the United States. The Academy focused on math, since most English departments were farther along in adapting to EO 1110 at that time.

The announcement of EO 1110 met with stiff resistance among many CSU math faculty, according to interviews conducted with campus team leads. During the year-long Academy, however, every team addressed this resistance and developed a framework or plan that proactively shaped the implementation of EO 1110 on their campus. For the participating campuses, evaluators found that the Academy served as:

- **A catalyst for implementation of EO 1110.** All participating campus teams brought back a plan that shaped their campus' implementation.
- **An enabler of middle leadership.** Faculty, staff, and administrators stepped forward collectively to create a campus plan and overcome resistance.
- **A creator of inter-campus linkages.** The inter-disciplinary and inter-campus structure was a boon to problem-solving and the sharing of innovations.

**Yet substantial work remains in narrowing equity gaps**, according to team leads. For example, one lead described improvements in outcomes for first-year students completing entry-level writing and math – but equity gaps have not narrowed appreciably at this campus. Moving forward, how can the Academy work with the Chancellor's Office and with campus executive leadership to catalyze efforts to address campus equity goals?



## Contents

Introduction.....	1
Responses on CSU campuses to EO 1110 .....	2
The Academy and EO 1110 .....	3
What happened at the Academy? .....	5
What happened back on campuses? .....	8
Findings .....	11
What's next for the Academy?.....	12
Methodology.....	13
Acknowledgments .....	13
About the Authors .....	14



## Introduction

In summer 2017, the Network planned its first-ever Academy for the 2017-18 academic year. The Academy offers campus teams of faculty, staff, and administrators a year-long opportunity to plan and undertake a substantial equity project on their campus.

On August 2, 2017, as the curriculum for the Academy was being developed, the California State University (CSU) Chancellor's Office issued [Executive Order 1110](#) (EO 1110), which mandated the elimination of all remedial courses in English and mathematics across the largest four-year university system in the United States. EO 1110 also retired the use of assessments for placement of students into entry-level English and math courses that would count toward graduation. According to the Chancellor's Office, the [policy changes were intended](#) to "support student success, facilitate degree completion and eliminate persistent equity and achievement gaps." The timeline for implementing these and other related changes was one calendar year. By fall 2018, the system's 23 campuses needed to create and implement new policies, course sequences, curricula, academic support systems, and professional development for faculty and staff to support all incoming first-year students in passing entry-level English and math.



**By fall 2018, the system's 23 campuses needed to create and implement new policies...**

After the release of EO 1110, the Academy sharpened its focus for its inaugural year. Rather than supporting campus teams in undertaking an equity project of their choosing, the Academy supported them in planning and implementing their transformation of entry-level mathematics. Nine campuses sent teams to the Academy during 2017-18. This report tells the story of how these campus teams used the Academy to plan for and implement their campus responses to EO 1110 in math.

This story suggests that the capacity and creativity for achieving equitable change exist within the ranks of the CSU.

It also suggests that implementation of new policies instituted by the CSU Chancellor's Office or campus executive leadership can benefit from having teams of faculty, staff, and administrators participate in a year-long Academy that:



**supports** them in addressing and resolving issues that arise in implementing policy changes instituted by the Chancellor's Office or by executive leadership;



**builds** their leadership acumen in analyzing and using student data, mapping out plans for equitable change, developing and implementing communications plans, and reaching out to colleagues on their campus to encourage change;



**expands** their relationships across programs, disciplines, and campuses to share information, challenges, insights, innovations, and strategies; and



**creates** a space and structure for them to step forward collectively with a concrete plan for equitable change and reach out to stakeholders on their campus to shape the plan and overcome resistance.


Our story begins with responses on the campuses to EO 1110 and what the teams found at the Academy: a unique space and structure for problem-solving, planning, and leadership development. The next sections describe how the teams used the Academy to overcome resistance and transform entry-level math back on campus. The final sections present our findings and recommendations. The story is based on interviews in 2022 with the team leads from the 2017-18 Academy, and with a few others who organized or participated in it.

## Responses on CSU campuses to EO 1110

The announcement of EO 1110 met with some stiff resistance on CSU campuses, especially among math departments and student support programs related to math courses, according to interviews that we conducted with team leads. The elimination of remedial coursework in math represented a radical change for students, faculty, and staff, and it was greeted apprehensively. For example, an administrator in charge of student support programs noted,

*My initial reaction was to think about how this could possibly work, ... having worked with students and having seen how far back they were. I was pretty apprehensive.*

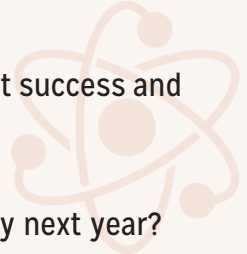
Some math faculty felt that the Chancellor's Office was involving itself in curricular issues. For example, an administrator said,



*The math department initially saw EO 1110 as a curricular mandate coming from the Chancellor's Office ... Basically, they do not like being told what to do, how to teach their classes. And you can understand that, but I would say that this falls in that fine line between a curricular mandate and a general policy change for the CSU. So initially they were ... upset.*

Many faculty felt that the implementation timeline was too short and should be extended to two years. Others had mixed feelings, saying that the order was too sudden and top-down and that its timetable was rushed, but also that the elimination of remedial courses and the provision of academic supports within credit-bearing courses was a good direction for students. Some were excited about and supported the changes.

The Chancellor's Office, meanwhile, held its ground on the general direction and details of EO 1110, including its one-year implementation deadline. Campuses had no choice but to develop a new plan for entry-level English and math, which raised a series of challenges:


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- How do we implement this order?
  - What does the research show us about student success and remedial courses?
  - What are other campuses doing?
  - How do we make this work for our students by next year?

## The Academy, EO 1110, and the Arrival of Campus Teams

The Network was created in 2016-17 by CSU faculty, staff, and administrators to advance equitable student learning and success on campuses. One of the Network's first programs was the Academy, which is a year-long leadership development opportunity that brings together campus teams of faculty, staff, institutional researchers, and students to address a challenge their campus faces related to advancing equitable student learning and closing equity gaps.

When the Chancellor's Office released EO 1110, English departments in the CSU were generally farther along than math departments in addressing the issues raised by the executive order. Most had eliminated remedial courses, but math departments were more traditional in requiring assessments for course placement and relying on remedial sequences as the structure to support students who did not perform well on the assessments. For these reasons, the Academy leadership decided to focus on supporting campuses in implementing EO 1110 in mathematics.

Announcements for the Academy arrived on CSU campuses after the executive order was released. The Academy required the participation of a cross-campus team composed of faculty, staff, an institutional researcher, and a student. Many included an administrator as well. Some teams were selected by executive leadership; some team members volunteered. In all cases, the teams represented multiple divisions, programs, and units on campus.



Upon arrival at the Academy, the campus teams faced a series of challenges. In terms of how well participants knew each other, for example, many team members did not know their colleagues on their team, even though they all had roles in supporting students in math on their campus:

*Many of us were brand new ... We had a lot of new faces trying to understand how to affect change.*

In addition, the teams were starting at ground zero in developing a game plan. Prior to attending the Academy, none of the teams had a strategic direction mapped out or had a collective sense of what they needed to do to comply with EO 1110:

*It was rather vague. I mean it was very specific in the sense we just wanted EO 1110 compliance. But I know we were like other departments, in as much as we did not have a game plan. And when we first submitted the application and even, I think, even up to when we first showed up, we did not have a game plan. We did not have data. We were really on the ground floor.*

Those who participated in the Academy knew very little to nothing about the Academy and its purposes:

*We knew very little about what to expect. We did not even know it was professional development. We thought it was like a think tank that we were all going to, ... to figure out how to save the world ... We were like, "For what did we sign up? Is it about us? ... We need to get to the work."*

Some team members were not convinced about the benefits of EO 1110 for students:

*Our team included the math department chair, who was, I would not say that she was outright opposed to it, but she was very skeptical.*

Despite the unknowns and doubts, however, there was a sense of urgency and common purpose around the next steps, as suggested by these team leads:

*We all had a charge. Everyone came in, all the CSUs came in with a charge, and we were working. I think it [the Academy] happened at a good time.*

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

Even as the teams faced unknowns and skepticism, the Academy provided a structure and a space for team members to address these challenges, and the common sense of purpose associated with addressing EO 1110 helped this process.



## What happened at the Academy?

The Academy's vision is not typical of professional development programs in higher education, with its mix of supporting leadership development through engagement with a team of "middle leaders" in planning for and implementing change. The Network defines middle leaders as faculty, staff, and administrators who have leadership roles on campus regardless of whether their position title acknowledges these roles formally.<sup>1</sup>

The Academy's curriculum supports teams in developing an equity-related project to implement back on campus, while also guiding them through the processes of:

- examining their pertinent student data to understand their campus' equity-related challenges;
- developing communications strategies for engaging with campus executive management, peers, and other stakeholders; and
- expanding their relationships across their campus and across the CSU.

Most leadership programs feature outside experts providing insights to participants, but the Academy is organized around using the experience and insights of people on the ground. The Academy begins with the assumption that the smarts are in the room – that is, CSU middle leaders already have the expertise, knowledge, experiences, and access to resources that are needed to advance equitable agendas for all students. What the Academy provides are the space and structure that encourage people to share what they know, problem-solve, and innovate together. The curriculum focuses on strategies and opportunities for change on campus, including understanding rules and policies but not getting bogged down by them. The Academy supports middle leaders in stepping forward to use their collective power, their knowledge of the campus, and their relationships to advocate for and advance equity and social justice through whatever means are most appropriate for their project and campus.


This mix of action-oriented work and leadership development can be a challenge that brings rich rewards for individuals and campus teams, as exemplified by the comments of this team lead from 2017-18:

***That was a hump that I think many people had to get over: "This is not just for our own development. This is about planning something for the students. Why are we going through all the reading and blah blah blah?" ... Then there was this aha moment. ... It was like, "Okay, I get it, we need to develop ourselves as middle leaders or power ourselves to really speak up." A lot of the time as middle leaders we are stuck in the middle: there are the people that we need to bring along, but we also have to follow the direction of the senior administrators.***

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<sup>1</sup> Middle leaders are integral to change opportunities in higher education because they tend to have long tenures on campus; to work closely with students and to understand their needs; to serve on policy, budget, and hiring committees; to be well versed in the intricacies of their institutions; and to advance during their careers to increasing levels of authority.





The Academy also differs from many leadership gatherings by supporting the work back on campus in that it provides its participants two key resources: (1) sustained focus throughout the year and (2) access to a “home team.” Prior to COVID-19, the Academy met in person for three 3-day retreats during the academic year (with plans to do so again starting in 2022-23, after meeting virtually for two years).<sup>2</sup> Each team also meets monthly with an Academy facilitator who is from one of the CSU campuses. Sustaining the work throughout the year enables team members to develop plans in a retreat setting with minimal distractions, engage with colleagues on campus about those plans, and then return to the Academy to brainstorm about how to respond to concerns, build consensus, and adjust plans and improve strategies to break down barriers and broaden buy-in.

Secondly, the Academy model encourages campuses to create a “home team” of stakeholders to work with and address the plans created by the Academy team (or the “away team”). The home team typically includes upper management as well as others critical to the success of a project. This structure acknowledges the extent to which any plans for substantial change in higher education will benefit from understanding the reasons why individuals and groups resist the change and identifying and engaging with allies.

In discussing their experiences at the Academy, team leads from 2017-18 highlighted the extent to which the Academy’s vision and structure helped them move their plans forward on campus. Regarding the “home” and “away” teams:

*I would say the Middle Leadership Academy served more as a catalyst and an infuser of ideas for a small group [i.e., the Academy team]. And then the larger group [i.e., the home team], which may have been 15 to 20 individuals, were about taking the guidance from the small group and implementing it. And there were changes along the way that the large group made.*

*I will say the main benefit we got from our focus on EO IIIIO in the [Academy] was the need to have a plan, even though what we brought back to campus was really only the first rough draft ... It underwent a lot of changes when we came back after the home team impressed upon us that this ... would have to benefit from the input of many other stakeholders on campus.*


Interviewees also described the benefits of a retreat setting with few distractions and with opportunities to meet, share with, and learn from staff at other CSU campuses:

*That is sort of how the Middle Leadership Academy functioned for us. We did work in this larger committee and made some progress and then the smaller group of us – the [Academy] team – would sort of have a reality check with other campuses ... And it felt like an opportunity to hone and refine and a space that is unlike campus where you could actually think and reflect collectively.*

*The Middle Leadership Academy really gave us an opportunity not only to meet with other campuses to share stories, to consult, it also gave us a platform to really break down the roles, the planning, and assessment that we had to consider, and gave us time to really sit and hash out some of the nitty-gritty things that we wouldn’t have had the opportunity to do at a larger leadership meeting. It had us think about our stakeholders, which ended up being everyone on campus ...*

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<sup>2</sup> The costs for food and lodging for the three retreats are covered by the Network.



Interviewees also highlighted the importance of having a cross-disciplinary team, along with support in developing strategies to engage stakeholders on campus:

*One of the things I really liked about the [Academy] was the fact that we had that cross-disciplinary team. So, when I would go back to the department and we would have an idea, it was like it was fleshed out at [the Academy], I mean not only were the workshops appropriate, but because we had just spent three days together with the members of the away team. The work from the away team helped the home team produce their plans and then it was just really easy to just push it through because we already had those conversations outside the department.*


*[The Academy] had us think about our communication strategies, who do we need to communicate this to, how, and when ... I thought it was probably one of the best things that happened because it was so focused on something that we all had to do collectively as a CSU.*

Team leads also described the extent to which the Academy increased confidence among team members in building campus coalitions, addressing resistance, and developing communication strategies. Participants gained practice using student data, logic maps, and stakeholder maps. They left the Academy with contact information from supportive colleagues on their own campus and other campuses.




## What happened back on campuses?

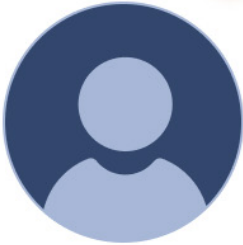
In terms of impacts on campuses, every team lead we spoke with described the Academy as helping their team develop a framework or a plan that shaped the implementation of EO 1110 on their campus. In some cases, the plan was broad; in other cases, it involved specific programs or course sequences:




*From being involved with [the Academy], we actually had a strategic plan ... The Academy, at least from my perspective, helped us have some very focused conversations about what it would look like on our campus.*




*The focus was developing a campus plan to implement EO 1110. And we ended up doing that ...*




*What we got out of the [Academy] was the structure of how summer would look for our early start students.*



*We developed our new curriculum based on EO 1110.*



*We kind of honed at the [Academy] ... a math sequence that separated out STEM students from non-STEM students and created a new course as the ... pathway to calculus for STEM students. And so that course was developed, and we have been offering it now for five years.*



In most cases, the plans developed at the Academy went through significant revisions on campus, and team leads highlighted the importance of engaging with stakeholders, planning for resistance, and being willing to adjust. For example, one team lead described the Academy as very helpful in preparing the team to face resistance on campus:


*And when we were at the workshops at the [Academy], that is where the intimate knowledge of the department really helps because, you know: “How are department faculty going to react? This is the argument they are going to pose.” So, the away team was always prepared for those contingencies.*



Ultimately, the plans developed at the Academy catalyzed thinking among stakeholders on the home team and, consequently, the final implementation plans had wide support back on campus. One lead described the Academy's impacts in this area as its most important feature:

*If I were to showcase something, it would be the way the math department turned around and embraced the idea of EO 1110. I can't think of anything better than that; they [did not] just throw non-STEM students into the first class of STEM as a way of completing their math requirement. They actually developed a suite of courses that are offered [to non-STEM majors] on a rotating basis that are intended to be great last-math classes.*





Team leads, however, were also cognizant of the work that remains in supporting equitable student learning. For example, one lead spoke at length about the struggle for changing their campus approach to learning:

*We're still working on trying to eliminate that deficit mindset ... We talked a lot about that at the Middle Leadership Academy ... It is having an equity-minded framework, really looking at how faculty are teaching ... The [Academy] ... had us really as a campus think about our approach. What are these barriers we are creating for our students? ... They bring in a lot of their own personal experience and strength, how do we tap into that, so they understand that ... they did not come in here out of pure luck or some sort of magical lottery ... It is just really shifting the way our whole campus community sees learning. And we are still working ... to really develop that sense of belonging ...*



This team lead said that as part of this ongoing work, she still meets with her colleagues from the Academy to plan next steps and find opportunities for change: “We still have our EO 1110 group that we still meet regularly, different people, but some of us are still there as part of the initial core.”



## Findings

### **A CATALYST FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION of EO 1110**

The Academy in 2017-18 provided campuses with an inclusive and cross-campus process to address and resolve issues that arose in implementing a major systemwide policy change to improve student success.

- Every campus team brought back a plan or a framework that shaped the campus' implementation of EO 1110.
- In many cases, team members overcame resistance within their own team and back on campus.

### **A ENABLER OF MIDDLE LEADERSHIP**

The Academy created a space and structure for faculty, staff, and administrators to step forward collectively to engage with student data, map out plans for equitable change, and reach out to other stakeholders on their campus to shape these plans and overcome resistance.

- This process not only supported campus actions to address EO 1110, but also helped develop practical leadership skills among team members, such as how to build campus coalitions and create communications strategies to advance equitable student learning and success.

### **A CREATOR OF INTER-CAMPUS LINKAGES**

The inter-disciplinary and inter-campus nature of the Academy was a boon to problem-solving and to the sharing of innovations.

- Campus team members were able to build relationships with other campuses, disciplines, and programs, thereby advancing innovative ideas and insights.

### **YET SUBSTANTIAL WORK REMAINS**

The Academy supported every participating campus team in addressing the requirements in EO 1110 in mathematics, but substantial work remains to achieve equitable outcomes among all CSU students, according to team leads.

- For example, one lead described improvements in outcomes for first-year students completing entry-level writing and math – and yet equity gaps have not narrowed appreciably at this campus.
- Outcomes data are complicated by the disruptions of COVID-19, but these disruptions underline the importance of the substantial work remaining to improve equitable student learning and eliminate equity gaps.



## What's next for the Academy?

These recommendations are based on our interviews with campus leads from the 2017-18 Academy and on our experience with the Academy and the Network.



The Network's Academy could continue to serve in a collaborative role with the Chancellor's Office and with campus executive leadership by supporting campus faculty, staff, and administrators as they seek to eliminate equity gaps. Recent evaluations found that 19 of the 23 campuses participated in the Academy during its first five years. Twelve campuses participated two or more times. Campuses that participated multiple times and that built on their team goals from year to year achieved more substantial and lasting changes on their campus than those that participated only once.

**How can the Academy collaborate more closely with the Chancellor's Office and campus executive leadership to catalyze efforts to address campus equity goals?**



The Network could expand opportunities for campus teams to think and work together beyond Academy sessions, such as in regional gatherings. Through these and other means, the Academy could become an important silo-buster for faculty and staff on all campuses.

**How can the Academy break down silos across faculty, staff, and administrators on campuses?**



Conversations with team leads across several years suggest that the Network and the Academy are not well-enough understood at the campus level. Higher levels of awareness would likely lead to higher rates of participation and impact. As the Academy enters its sixth year, its staff at the Network is small, with a limited reach. With additional resources, the Network could deepen the Academy's reach on campuses and sharpen the campuses' strategic use of the Academy as a multi-year resource for change.

**How can the Academy work with the Chancellor's Office and campus executive leadership to increase campuses' strategic use of the Academy?**



## Methodology

This study sought to identify and understand the impacts of the Network's Academy in 2017-18 regarding the development and implementation of campus projects addressing the requirements of EO 1110 in mathematics. A secondary goal was to understand the impacts of the Academy on leadership development for team members. A total of nine campus teams participated in the 2017-18 Academy. This study is based on one-on-one interviews with team leads from eight of the participating campuses. The ninth team lead did not respond to interview requests. The interviews were based on a common interview protocol and were conducted virtually from May to June 2022. Some additional interviews were conducted to gain further background and contextual information, including with some team members beyond the team leads and with leadership from the Academy. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interview transcripts were reviewed and analyzed for prevalent themes, from which this paper was drafted.

## Acknowledgments

The eight team leads who participated in our interviews in 2022 were accommodating in answering our many questions, and their memories were sharp about their experiences at the Academy five years earlier, and the impacts of Academy on their campus. We could not have written this report without their wisdom, knowledge, and cooperation. The eight campuses whose team leads participated in interviews were CSU Bakersfield, CSU East Bay, CSU Fullerton, Cal Poly Humboldt, Cal Poly Pomona, Sacramento State, San José State, and CSU San Marcos.

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## About the Authors

Thad Nodine, Ph.D., is a novelist, researcher, and writer who partners with practitioners, policymakers, and researchers to bring student and community voices and other evidence to bear on K-12 and postsecondary education policy. 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. Thad has a Ph.D. in literature from the University of California-Santa Cruz, and a B.A. in government from Oberlin College.

Robert Gabriner, Ed.D., is one of the founders of the Middle Leadership Academy and a co-founder of Leading from the Middle, a leadership program for California community college practitioners. He has over 50 years of experience in both the community college and CSU systems as a faculty member and administrator. He was vice chancellor of City College of San Francisco, president of the Research and Planning Group of the California Community Colleges, and director of the Educational Leadership Doctoral Program at San Francisco State University.



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