

ACADEMY IMPACTS SERIES



The Impact of the CSU Student Success Network at Chico State: Advancing Equitable Student Success through Changes in Campus Policy, the Use of Student Data, and Course Redesign



By Thad R. Nodine, Ph.D.
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Introduction

The [Middle Leadership Academy](#) (Academy) is a professional development opportunity that brings together campus-based teams of California State University (CSU) students, staff, faculty, institutional researchers, and administrators. Teams participate in several intensive sessions during the academic year to plan and undertake a substantial project on their campus to improve equitable student success. Since its inauguration in 2017-18, the Academy has achieved broad participation across the CSU: 21 of 23 campuses have sent teams, 19 campuses participated for two or more years, and 11 participated for three or more years.

The independent [CSU Student Success Network](#) (Network), which founded and continues to operate the Academy, evaluated the Academy's first three cohorts of campus teams (2017-18, 2018-19, and 2019-20) to understand their impacts on campuses and the factors that contribute to the implementation of projects developed at the Academy. Based on these evaluations, all 30 teams that participated during this period successfully developed a campus equity project. As of 2023, 77% of these projects were implemented and were growing and evolving. In terms of impacts on campuses, the studies found that Academy participation helps CSU middle leaders develop leadership skills that support project development and implementation. The studies also found that the likelihood of implementing equity projects from the Academy appears to be linked to the ability of middle leaders 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.¹

The Middle Leadership Academy Impact Series

While the Network has examined annual cohorts of campuses participating in the Academy, we have not studied individual campuses to understand the Academy's impacts over the years. The purpose of this series is to learn more about the impacts of Academy participation for CSU campuses that have sent multiple teams to the Academy over multiple years. In particular, we seek to understand whether participation in the Academy helped campuses to catalyze, support, or institutionalize changes on campus to address and improve equitable student success—and, if so, how? To answer this question, we explore how campuses used Academy participation to advance their work to eliminate equity gaps or otherwise improve equitable student success.² The “changes on campus” that the series seeks to identify include

¹Robert Gabriner & Thad Nodine, “‘Macro-level Thinking’ and ‘Good Trouble’: Impacts of the Middle Leadership Academy on CSU Campuses,” internal report for the Network.

²Previous studies of Academy cohorts focused more directly on Academy curriculum and processes.



shifts in campus policies, programs, practices, or other factors that have equity implications and that appear to be linked to the implementation of Academy projects. We also seek to identify data, where publicly available, regarding changes in equitable student outcomes on campus.

The series is directed to campus executive leadership, CSU middle leaders, and Chancellor's Office executive leadership interested in understanding how campuses are advancing their equity work and the Academy's roles in that process. Our hope is that by identifying and understanding the campus impacts of Academy participation this series will:

- provide campus executive leadership and middle leaders with information and ideas about how to leverage sustained Academy participation and project implementation across years to 1) develop a cadre of equity leaders, and 2) advance equitable student success on their campus;
- contribute to understanding of the Academy's role in supporting the CSU's goals for equitable student success as articulated by the Office of the Chancellor; and
- inspire the advancement of equity work throughout the CSU.

This first impact brief focuses on California State University, Chico, which sent teams to the Academy during five of the Academy's first seven years.

Methodology

Findings in this brief are based on interviews with five Chico State leaders who are integrally involved in the work on campus to address and improve equitable student success. All five leaders are quoted in this report. The interviews were completed in July and August 2024. The brief also draws from documents and websites that are publicly available.

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

Chico State's [Advancing Equity Project](#) (AEP) coordinates campus efforts to close equity gaps in student academic performance. Equity efforts beyond those related to student academic outcomes are led by the [Office of Equity, Diversity & Inclusion](#). AEP was formed in 2021 and grew from campus efforts to increase graduation rates through its Graduation Initiative (GI) 2025. AEP is led by two active and well-connected co-chairs: Kaitlyn Baumgartner Lee, Ed.D., assistant vice president for student success initiatives & university advising, and Kate McCarthy, Ph.D., vice provost for undergraduate education and academic success.

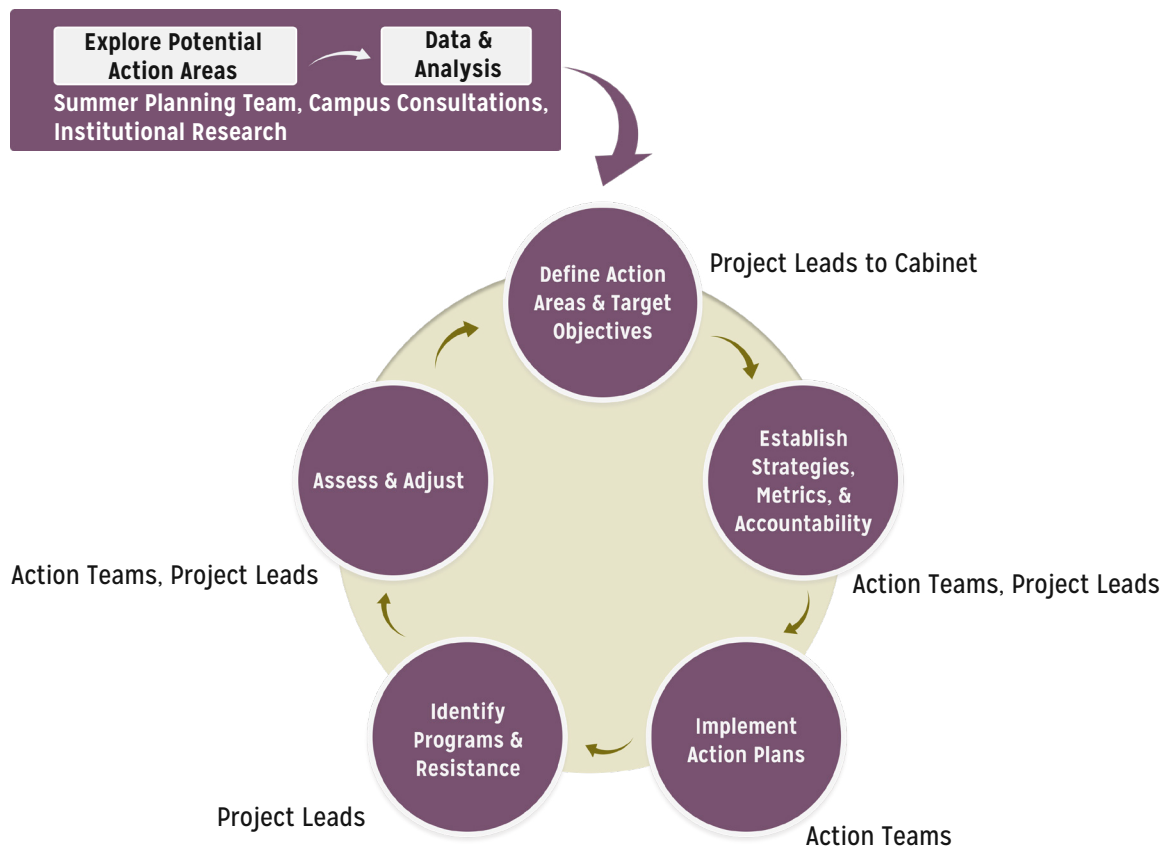
AEP's advisory team is large (about 40 members), and it draws from a growing body of equity leaders on campus, many of whom participated in project and professional development at the Academy. These students and middle leaders composed of staff, faculty, and administrators are dispersed across roles and divisions on campus. Importantly, AEP co-chairs have regular access to campus executive leadership for addressing challenges and resistance.

AEP identifies and works toward feasible annual targets through a workflow that builds in assessment and adjustment (see figure, below). The team selects annual objectives that are practicable, with institutional effects that are sustainable and focused on key drivers of equitable student success.

“**Intentionality and alignment have been our golden ticket in helping us establish objectives, identify specific deliverables, and then develop time-based approaches to what we can actually solve ... We provide our report at the end of an academic year. We then immediately circle with the cabinet and showcase our recommended priorities for the following year and how we're going to achieve them.**

- Kaitlyn Baumgartner Lee

AEP's Workflow to Close Equity Gaps





How Does Chico State Use the Academy to Support its Goals for Addressing Equity Gaps?

Over the past six years, Chico State sent five teams to the Academy to develop and plan the implementation of projects to address equity gaps. During this period, Chico State's GI 2025 advisory team and its AEP adopted a well-planned, multi-year approach to the Academy that helped the campus achieve its own aims for project development and implementation. According to AEP co-chair Kate McCarthy, "We decided that if we were all in as a campus on the Advancing Equity Project, all of these initiatives [over multiple years] should align." The campus' approach to Academy participation, however, extends well beyond alignment:

- **Team selection with implementation in mind.** Academy teams are selected with a balance between those working with students and those well placed in leadership positions to guide implementation on campus.
- **Alignment with campus goals.** The focus of each Academy team aligns with annual goals of the equity work on campus to avoid duplication and build toward work already underway (thereby improving the chances of implementation).
- **Ongoing team guidance.** AEP provides guidance to Academy teams during the year to ensure the scope of the team's final project plans fits within budgets, workflows, and other parameters on campus.
- **Addressing resistance.** As the Academy team's project moves toward implementation, AEP serves as a steward on campus to improve networking and address resistance.
- **A structure that supports institutionalization.** AEP and its committees provide a stable structure on campus to institutionalize implementation of Academy projects.

As a result of Chico State's sustained, balanced, and supportive approach to Academy participation, the Academy provides Chico State with growing numbers of staff, faculty, and administrators who have skills and leadership experience in developing, supporting, and implementing equity projects, including networking and overcoming resistance on campus. According to interviewees, the key benefits the Academy provides to campus participants include: vision and skills associated with equitable change; hands-on experience with equity leadership; and an equity incubator and catalyst.



Vision and Skills for Equitable Change

The Academy provides Chico State with sustainable, affordable professional development, which expands the campus' cadre of middle leaders who have the vision, skills, and experience in analyzing and using student data and collaborating across roles and departments to develop and implement projects to improve equitable student success. According to interviewees, for example:

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I'd observed inequities in the classroom for many years, but with my background and training as an academic I didn't have the language to understand or articulate ways to close achievement gaps. [The Academy] was a powerful turning point in my career. I was a faculty member on a team with a student and with colleagues from both academic and student affairs, including from the Student Learning Center, First-Year Experience, and academic advising programs. It was eye opening to be in that space.

- Jason Nice, Ph.D., Chico State

There are minimal professional development opportunities like the Middle Leadership Academy up in this area. We don't have program offerings that teams can leverage ... The Academy brings a lot of things that you see in full degree programs to the folks in a sustainable way.

- Kaitlyn Baumgartner Lee

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Hands-on Equity Leadership

Interviewees also said that the Academy provides middle leaders at Chico State with hands-on experience in laying the groundwork for equity project implementation, including strategizing and networking to overcome resistance and to gain traction across roles and departments.

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[The Academy] helps people see how difficult middle leadership is and how amazing it can be. You're paving the pathway, right? Oftentimes, folks don't realize how much bulldozing you have to do when dismantling inequities to systemic change. Sometimes we need to lay down the road so others can drive across it.

- Kaitlyn Baumgartner Lee

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Equity Incubator and Catalyst

In addition, interviewees said that the Academy provides Chico State with an incubator to conceptualize, plan, and implement equity-driven changes that are directed toward meaningful student impacts.

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We've used [the Academy] as an incubator and catalyst, and if you talk to all the folks who have participated in it, I think they might say it's [also] the time, the thinking time together away from campus. And it's particularly useful because they have the confidence that it will have actual impacts. We've demonstrated that this is a meaningful opportunity.

- Kate McCarthy, team lead for Chico State in 2019-20


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What Are the Impacts from the Academy at Chico State?

The GI 2025 advisory team and later the AEP planned and sequenced Chico State's projects so that the teams built from and complemented the work of previous campus teams. They also coordinated the projects being developed at the Academy with work underway on campus, which improved the chances of project implementation by providing Academy teams with access to staff and faculty who were already working toward similar goals. As a result, the work of the campus' five Academy teams contributed substantially to changes in campus policy, campus-wide changes in the use of student data, and course redesign.

2018-19 Team: Policy Changes Setting the Stage for Structural Change

In its first year at the Academy, the Chico State team drafted language that was inserted into the campus strategic plan so that one of the plan's major pillars addressed equity, in addition to diversity and inclusion. Having the institution commit to this policy language meant that those working toward equity goals could leverage the strategic plan in seeking support through campus budgets, grant requests, and other institutional commitments. Jason Nice, Ph.D., history professor, member of the Chico State team at the Academy in 2018-19, and chair of the General Education Committee at the time, said, "That language really helped us accomplish what we have over the last years."



The Academy team also drafted language for a Faculty Senate resolution supporting equity and inclusion. Drawing from their analysis of student data at the Academy, team members worked to ensure that the resolution called for faculty to have access to student data on equity gaps for their classes, as well as resources to help them understand and reduce these gaps:

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Be it further resolved that, to encourage participation and empower faculty, the university provide instructors with equity gap data for their classes in a clear, contextualized, and confidential manner and course based resources that may be needed to help reduce this gap.

- Resolution Regarding Equity for Underrepresented Minority Students, Approved by Academic Senate, 4/25/19

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As a faculty member on the Academy team, Jason Nice worked with staff, faculty, and administrators to get the equity language into the strategic plan. He and others on the Academy team were also instrumental in networking on campus to bring a diverse team of faculty, staff, administrators, and students to the table to address concerns about and build broad support for the Senate resolution. “It took multiple meetings to get that resolution through,” he said.

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The work that we did at the Academy helped to support a cultural shift on campus. We worked with the strategic planning team to firmly embed equity into the campus strategic plan and with the Academic Senate on a resolution calling for better data for faculty to support equitable teaching practices. This embedded equity as a thread that runs through all of our student success initiatives. I see that as a major success of the work that we’ve been doing.

- Ellie Ertle, Ed.D., team lead for Chico State in 2018-19 and associate vice provost for academic success programs

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2019-20 Team: One-stop Digital Resource for Student Services

The second Chico State team turned its focus directly to students. The team members, many of whom had experience in student services, arrived at the Academy expecting to identify and address gaps in services for students. But in examining data and talking with each other across divisions, they found that the biggest gaps involved communications: students didn’t know about or know how to access services that were already available. There was no single place online for students to identify and access services, from basic needs services to academic advising.



At the Academy, the team worked across divisional units to design a single navigation bar on the campus website to bring students to a one-stop digital access point for all student services. The team collaborated to make sure that the landing page was simple and that all content was directed to students rather than to institutional missions or purposes. Having a student on the team helped in these areas. The timing coincided with the impacts of the COVID pandemic, as the campus shifted to online delivery of instruction and services in spring 2020.

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This only happened because of the Academy. The cross-divisional, cross-unit collaboration was critical.


- Kate McCarthy
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According to McCarthy, the challenges to implementation were both logistical and institutional: “Who can make changes on this site? Who’s going to maintain it? Whose permission do you need to add a resource or take a resource off?” As co-chair of AEP, McCarthy was able to mobilize institutional support across student service offices to implement the Academy plan. “Managing that through the GI team and having that structure in place ... gave us a way to move things through and get agreement,” she said. The result is a [Student Resources and Services portal](#) designed for students, with student input.

2020-21 Team: Equity Dashboard and Faculty Development Regarding Gaps in DFW rates

Chico State’s third Academy team delivered on the first-year team’s policy language that was included in the Senate resolution calling for faculty access to equity gap data for their classes. The equity gaps in question involve DFW rates—that is, the disparities by which D’s, F’s and withdrawals are given to underrepresented minority (URM) students, compared with non-URM students. The faculty voted for the Senate resolution in 2019 and Institutional Research began building an equity dashboard, but the campus stalled in putting it in place due to concerns over who would have access to these data and how they might be used.

According to Kate McCarthy, the AEP worked with middle leaders to bring a team to the Academy in 2020-21 to help resolve this impasse. It helped that the team was led by Chiara Ferrari, Ph.D., director of faculty development, professor of media arts, and a trusted member of the Faculty Senate. She is now associate dean at CSU Long Beach. The plan was to house the [Grades and Equity Gaps Dashboard](#) on the faculty development website, allow access only by individual faculty for their own classes (not provided to other entities on or off campus), and treat the dashboard as a tool to be used with supporting resources.



According to interviewees, the Academy team provided leadership and vision on ways to engage with faculty to improve their use of student data on campus. The team provided feedback on dashboard development, guidance on making it useful for faculty, and direction on resources to help faculty understand the gaps and engage with ways to address them. The team was also provided resources to engage a faculty learning community around equity.

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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.

- Chiara Ferrari, team lead for Chico State in 2020-21

The equity dashboard would not have happened without the Academy.

- Kate McCarthy

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After the Academy, the dashboard was housed on the faculty development website along with resources and handouts on how to use it. A series of teaching and workshop guides, a video tutorial, and research literature followed. Eventually, Ferrari was able to obtain grant funding, including from the Chancellor’s Office, to develop a hub for “Research in Equity, Antiracism, Diversity, and Inclusion,” with the equity dashboard a central feature drawing faculty to the faculty development site.

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We went to faculty meetings and presented the possibilities of the dashboard to about 80% of the faculty ... I didn’t expect faculty to come to me. I needed to go to them ... We were trying to make accessing and discussing the dashboard as accessible as possible, and not intimidating.

- Chiara Ferrari

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As a result of this work, the campus landscape around using student data changed at Chico State, and courses are being redesigned to close equity gaps:

- **Faculty transformation.** At the start of each semester about one in ten faculty members, working on their own, access their student equity data on the dashboard (based on data from the Faculty Development Office).
- **Department transformation.** Many academic departments hold meetings to discuss DFW equity gaps and ways to address them. Some departments require that faculty either share their gaps or demonstrate how they are using inclusive teaching practices.
- **Redesign of critical success courses.** AED initiated and is leading a campus-wide redesign of critical success courses: high-enrollment courses that have high DFW equity gaps. The redesigns are being conducted by faculty, are drawing from the equity dashboard, and are focusing on closing equity gaps. The university is making significant investments, including funding course coordinators and providing additional learning support. The first courses being redesigned are large introductory courses in chemistry, political science, and history.

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I would say the biggest curricular change ... started back with the faculty equity dashboards ... The [redesign] of the critical success courses would not have had the progress it's had without the Academy. Now, faculty see their own data themselves and are afforded aligned faculty development opportunities ... I don't think we would have gotten to that type of trust without the faculty equity dashboards.

- Kaitlyn Baumgartner Lee

What the Academy did ... was to create a roadmap for what we needed to do ... I needed a roadmap to see the bigger picture of what this could become.

- Chiara Ferrari

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2022-23 Team: Student First-year Onboarding Experience

In 2022-23, the Academy team from Chico State focused on increasing student retention rates and reducing gaps in those rates by improving the first-year experience. The team focused on developing a coordinated training approach for first-year peer mentors across a range of programs, including EOP, TRI0, REACH, and a pilot Black Leadership Mentoring program.

As with previous Chico State teams, this team's efforts were aligned with work already underway on campus. In this case, the alignment included [Wildcat Way](#), a program to build out structured and supported pathways for first-year students. The team was led by Cirola Cortez, Ph.D., associate vice president of student affairs, and had representation from staff, faculty, and administrators who were involved in these efforts. All of these practices facilitated implementation.

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That team had representation of folks who can enact ... We also aligned that effort with another system-wide priority on first-year onboarding, so that first-year-experience mentor program is still rolling. It's part of our Wildcat Way year, our effort to create a journey that's more equitable and supportive.

- Kaitlyn Baumgartner Lee

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According to Baumgartner Lee, the peer mentoring and first-year experience programs are in the assessment and refinement stage, based on student data.

2023-24 Team: Re-enrollment for Black, Latinx, and Native American Students

The most recent Academy team from Chico State examined data on Black, Latinx, and Native American students and provided evidence-based recommendations to enhance student re-enrollment and re-engagement. The recommendations included adjusting hours of class and service delivery, simplifying the admissions process, enhancing credits for prior experience, focusing on those within 30 units of completing a degree, conducting focus groups with students, investing in a dedicated academic advisor, and securing funding for additional incentives and outreach.

The AEP team, in considering the recommendations, is connecting the Academy team with a campus wellness grant initiative. Due to budget constraints, the hiring of a dedicated academic advisor is not feasible. But the recommendations are promising regarding changing campus processes to be more welcoming to re-enrolled students. The best leverage in those areas, according to Baumgartner Lee, will be in working this year to develop curriculum and outreach to train existing advisors, faculty, and administrators regarding effective means for engaging re-enrolled students.



Analysis and Conclusion

Creating change in higher education can be a complex and long-term process even in stable conditions—and the past five years have not been stable. As with other CSU campuses, Chico State’s students, staff, faculty, and administrators experienced public health and safety challenges over the past several years, including the COVID pandemic, high student needs for basic services, gaps in digital access, and a series of tragic wildfires: the Camp Fire in 2018, the North Complex Fire in 2020, the Dixie Fire in 2021, and the Park Fire in 2024. Throughout this adversity, Chico State’s GI 2025 team and its Advancing Equity Project have leveraged resources and networks to bring about substantial changes on campus to improve equitable student success.

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This work is not performative. It can lead to real change. It makes a difference. And it does feel like the rhetoric and discourse has shifted on campus ... In my department and college, we’ve seen decreasing DFW rates and equity gaps ... I think our [Academy] team made a huge difference, and Chico State has sent new people every year, so we’ve sent dozens of people to the Academy and it’s had an impact through the work they’ve done back on campus.

– Jason Nice

The Academy teams have done a really good job. We don’t have so much secret data on this campus anymore because we’ve been able to show that we are good stewards of the data.


– Kaitlyn Baumgartner Lee

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Based on interviews for this brief, the Middle Leadership Academy has been a key partner for Chico State in driving and contributing to its equity achievements and impacts:

As this study describes, the Academy serves Chico State as:

- a convener bringing together campus middle leaders across divisions and departments;
- a sustainable source of professional development for data use and change strategy around equity;
- a means for growing a committed cadre of staff, faculty, and administrators with the vision and skills to develop a campus-driven equity project, and with hands-on experience in laying the groundwork for implementation, including strategizing and networking to overcome resistance;
- an incubator and catalyst for campus equity projects and initiatives; and
- a way to drive programs and initiatives toward student impacts.



Over the past six years, the Academy appears to have helped Chico State create and implement substantial changes on campus to improve equitable student success. Evidence of the transformations can be found in:

- shifts in strategic plans and budgets to prioritize and fund equity;
- changes in how faculty use student data to understand equity gaps and improve teaching;
- changes within classrooms associated with the redesign of critical success courses; and
- projects to spur re-enrollment and improve first-year experiences.

Previous evaluations of the Academy's annual cohorts showed that the likelihood of implementing equity projects developed at the Academy appears to be linked to the ability of middle leaders to (1) leverage executive leadership and (2) engage with and build on the work of existing committees or other structures on campus. This impact brief shows the extent to which a campus can proactively facilitate both of these aims by:

- selecting Academy teams with implementation as well as project development in mind;
- aligning the team's focus with existing campus equity goals and with equity work already underway;
- building on the work of previous teams at the Academy;
- providing feedback to the team during the year to ensure that the project scope is aligned with campus budgets, workflows, and other parameters;
- addressing resistance on campus by facilitating access to executive leadership and to colleagues working on similar efforts; and
- otherwise providing a stable structure on campus to institutionalize equity projects.

It is too soon to know the extent to which Chico State's changes in policy, use of student data, and redesign of critical courses will help to close equity gaps on campus. So far, the work to improve equitable student success has brought [higher graduation rates for all groups at Chico State, though equity gaps remain](#) as of 2022 (the most recent publicly available data). Based on systemwide reporting,³ we know that substantial equity gaps persist across the CSU and that much work remains for campuses to close these gaps. Based on the findings from this brief, the Academy can serve as a useful partner for campuses committed to this quest.

³ See Jeff Gold, Ed.D, [A Look at the Data](#), presentation at 2023 Symposium of GI 2025.



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. Recent publications include [Implementing Systemwide Changes in the CSU: How Campuses Used the Middle Leadership Academy to Realize a Policy Change in Mathematics](#), with Bob Gabriner (2023); [Toward Racial Justice in California's Education Systems: An Introduction to Policy Spanning K-12 and Higher Education](#) (2022); and [ISKME's Journey to Transform Teaching and Learning: A Quest for Participatory, Equitable, and Open Education](#) (2023).



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