

Why Colleges Struggle to Implement Priorities and What to Do About It

First Edition

Dr. Al Solano



**CONTINUOUS
LEARNING INSTITUTE**

What Educational Leaders Say



Dr. Michael Baston

President, Rockland Community College, New York

Dr. Solano's coaching work and guide is impressive. I look forward to colleges pushing his suggestions forward. From the six factors of why colleges struggle to implement priorities, two factors and suggested approaches spoke to me. Given the current crisis, here are my thoughts on two of the factors from the guide.

Factor 4: Silos, Silos, Silos

Collaboration motivated by crisis brings people together but will not keep people together. When the crisis is over too often returning to the institutional default setting of silos occurs. To alter cultural norms, institutions must engage in a change leadership strategy that includes sustained, deep, and broad engagement where the goals are clear and there is a real palpable sense that equality of effort and input is expected of all and is valued.

Factor 6: Effective Leadership Challenges

Institutions must be responsive, innovative, and agile in addressing changing circumstances if they want to stand the test of time. If we have learned nothing else from the COVID-19 pandemic, economic uncertainty, and racial unrest stemming from the toxic mix of lethal police brutality and structural racism, thinking outside the box and making data-informed decisions will keep the institution relevant and relatable as the convener of hope and opportunity it was always meant to be.

Diego Navarro

Professor Emeritus, Cabrillo College; Founder, Academy for College Excellence, California

Dr. Solano's guide to addressing the endemic issue of why community colleges struggle with completion by students of color is filled with structured frameworks and tools. He addresses six core issues that undergird the struggle. Regarding faculty teaching preparation and learning in the classroom, I very much appreciate Dr. Solano's focus on Faculty Inquiry Groups (FIGs) and the 5 E's constructivist instructional model. I remember when Dr. Rose Asera, then a Senior Researcher at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, helped bring FIGs to California Community Colleges. FIGs were helpful in exploring deep learning by faculty as they explored issues faced by their students in learning. Dr. Solano's approach is helpful in framing the issues and useful in providing methods for addressing them.





Dr. Gretchen Schmidt

Senior Fellow, National Center for Inquiry & Improvement (NCII); recent Executive Director, American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) Pathways Project, Washington DC

Dr. Solano has developed a thoughtful and practical guide for institutions to use as they navigate their institutional improvement reform efforts. He writes and provides advice and support through a practitioner's eye, knowing from personal experience how institutions are designed and operate. Institutional transformation is a marathon, not a sprint--scaled reform takes resiliency and refinement that only comes when a culture of improvement is embedded at all levels of an organization. This simple but powerful guide outlines clear steps for an institution to take that will result in that necessary culture change over time.

Dr. Davis Jenkins

Co-Author, Redesigning America's Community Colleges; Senior Research Scholar, Community College Research Center, Columbia University, New York

After reading this guide by veteran higher education coach Dr. Al Solano, you won't have any excuse to continue the same practices that have prevented colleges from implementing meaningful change. So only do so if you and your colleagues are willing to operate in new ways that will enrich the experience for all students in and outside of the classroom and lead to improved outcomes for students and the college.



Dr. Mordecai Brownlee

Vice President of Student Services, St. Philip's College, Alamo Colleges District, Texas

Dr. Al Solano offers an impactful guide for college educators and administrators to utilize in the advancement of the student success agenda and performance excellence. By embracing the strategies, resources, and information provided within this guide, student lives will be transformed and so will the lives of those empowering those students.

Dr. Angelica Suarez

President, Orange Coast College, California

In typical fashion for Dr. Al Solano, this guide walks us through six factors that impact a college’s ability to implement priorities by providing familiar examples of campus environments and dynamics that impede forward movement. Dr. Solano clearly outlines practical strategies that can lead to institutional transformation and drives home the point that any meaningful conversation about student success must start and end with a focus on equity within a “culture of kindness.”



Dr. Claudia Lourido-Habib

President, Porterville College, California

Dr. Solano’s articles invite us to pause and reflect on academic and institutional practices. His frank style encourages deep reflection and examination of traditional approaches that have been slow in achieving the outcomes we urgently need for our students. Dr. Solano’s guide is a compilation of specific strategies to optimize processes and support equity-focused outcomes. Many of Dr. Solano’s recommendations and insights have been invaluable in helping us respond effectively during this time of transition.

Preface

I have spent 11 years coaching institutions of higher education—from community colleges to public and private universities—to plan and implement small, medium, and large-scale homegrown practices to increase student outcomes and close equity gaps. Prior to that, I worked at two institutions of higher education and began my career in K-12 education. The countless meetings, facilitations, trainings, coaching, and behind-the-scenes work have been the most valuable professional experiences of my life. It led me to write over 50 practitioner-focused blog articles on student success strategies, educational leadership, and institutional planning and implementation. Therefore, this resource has an unabashedly practitioner-based focus on why colleges struggle to implement priorities, mandates, projects, strategies, and activities, as well as considerations of how to overcome those struggles.

There are no silver bullets in education—the work of education is about continuous improvement. My goal is to provide the necessary visuals and language to explain *why* colleges struggle along with practical approaches to address the challenges. In the end, the devil is in the details with the suggested approaches in this resource. It takes an enormous amount of hard work, innovation, and exceptional leadership from across the campus to bring all of the suggested approaches together to get results for students.

It is worth noting that I am kind at my core. I have written extensively about why kindness is important. That said, I am also forthright. As a hard-core practitioner who focuses on getting results, I want to convey from the get-go that I do not pull any punches in this resource. I am candid because students deserve me to be as frank as possible about why colleges struggle to attain and sustain results.

Finally, I mention equity throughout this guide. I have been successful in closing equity gaps because I help institutions, programs, projects, teams, etc., improve their structures and processes to engage in meaningful actionable inquiry that gets results. However, I am humble enough to know that I am not an expert in equity per se. For example, equity as it relates to race. There are experts on race in higher education who are far better resources than me. I appreciate, for example, of Dr. Frank Harris III and Dr. J. Luke Wood of San Diego State University, and Dr. Gina Ann Garcia of the University of Pittsburgh. College personnel should consider reading their studies and inquire about their webinars as workshops. I am more about improving and creating the conditions to do the equity work well.

While most of my work has been with community colleges, institutions of higher education (IHEs) in general will benefit from this content.

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Six Factors: Why Colleges Struggle to Implement Priorities

“We do that! And we win awards!”

In case the preface was skipped, it is worth reiterating that as a devoted practitioner who focuses on getting results, I want to convey from the start that I do not pull any punches in this resource. I am candid because students deserve me to be as frank as possible about why colleges struggle to attain and sustain positive results.

Before we get started, a word to those who skip the bulk of the resource content to simply read the summary of the six factors and say, “Oh, we do that at our campus!” I wish I had a dollar for every time I suggested an approach and a college leader told me with bright, convincing eyes, “We do that!” After I do more digging with the frontline employees (those responsible for implementation), I discover more often than not that the college does *not* “do that.” Information flow to presidents and vice presidents is not always accurate, and in an effort to tout the work of the college to me, an inaccurate picture is painted when someone says, “We do that!” Finally, that statement is not reflected in the student data. If the college was, in fact, “doing that,” student graduation and transfer rates would significantly improve, and equity gaps would be a thing of the past. Phrases such as, “I don’t know,” or “We’re not doing that yet,” are not a sign of weakness—they are a sign of strength.

There is one more response that is my favorite: “We win awards!” This is code for “we don’t need to change and try to learn about different approaches.” Every single time I checked on the awards—such as colleges whose students earn the most certificates, associate’s degrees, transfers, or four-year degrees—I disaggregate the data and compare it with peer institutions. I do not want to take away from institutions that win awards, because doing so can serve as a morale booster, but it can also create complacency. When one disaggregates the data and compares the numbers with peer institutions, most of the student data is horrible across colleges. Thus, many institutions receive awards for being less horrible.

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Thus, many institutions receive awards for being less horrible.

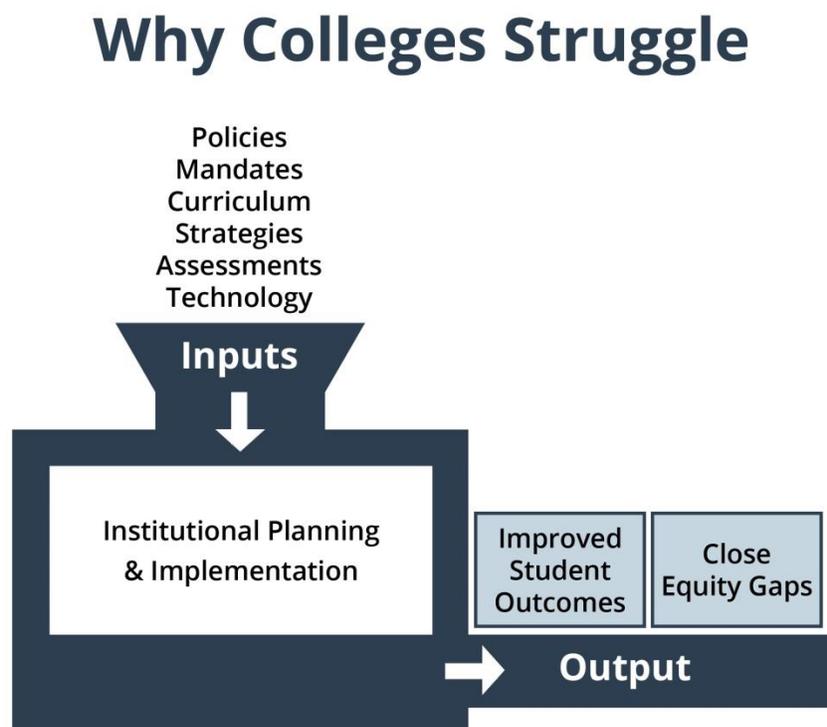
Summary: Why Colleges Struggle to Implement Priorities and What to Do About It

Six Factors	Weak Structure & Support	Approaches
<i>Why Colleges Struggle to Implement Priorities</i>	<i>Issue</i>	<i>Learn...</i>
1. Lacking a Culture of Kindness (or Not Prevalent)	Support	Four strategies to be kind
2. Unproductive Committee Structure	Structure	A process to improve the committee structure
3. Lacking a Student-Centered Framework	Structure	How to leverage student journey frameworks
4. Silos, Silos, Silos	Structure	How student services & instruction can effectively collaborate
5. Lack of Faculty Teaching Preparation	Structure & Support	How to continually improve instructional practices
6. Effective Leadership Challenges	Support	<p>Note: This section has the most approaches because leadership is the lynchpin.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Five questions to answer before launching priorities • The three-month reality check • To recognize the doer vs inputer dynamic • To avoid the term “best practices” • To understand the difference between data-driven and data-informed decision making • To lead with kindness

Setting the Stage: Why Colleges Struggle

The inputs/outputs shown in Figure 1 set the stage for articulating why colleges struggle to implement priorities, mandates, projects, strategies, and activities and produce improved student outcomes. In the inputs section on the top are general priorities such as policies, mandates, curriculum, strategies, assessments, and technology that are injected into the institution represented by the center box. In the center box, college educators are supposed to make sense of all of these inputs, plan, and implement them ideally through a continuous improvement cycle so that the desired outcome is improved student outcomes and closed equity gaps.

Figure 1.



Why colleges struggle to implement continuous improvement and significantly increase student outcomes

Each state or region may have a variety of specific inputs. When we drill down to specific inputs in Figure 2 we see a variety of approaches that are supposed to produce significant improved student outcomes, such as:

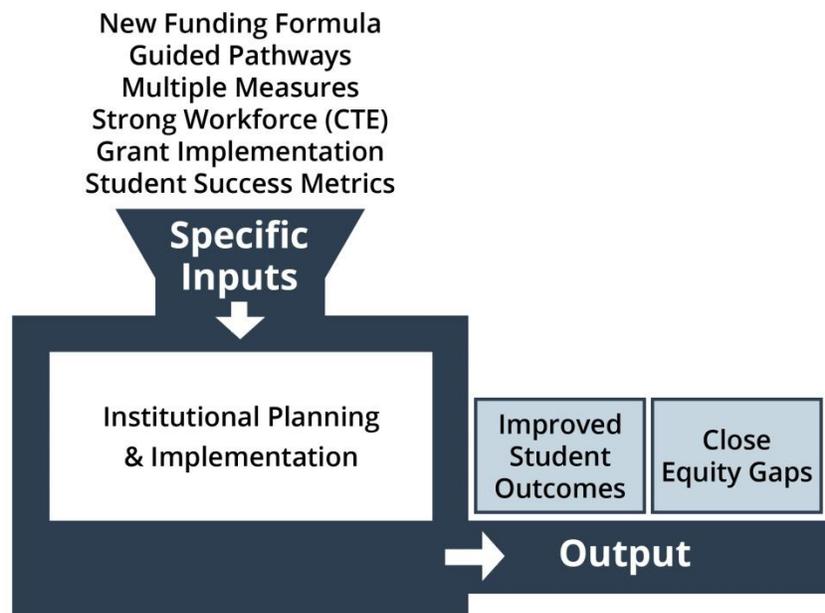
- Implementing a new performance-based funding formula to incentivize higher student completion rates;

- Using the Guided Pathways framework to better prepare the institution to support students to completion;
- Integrating multiple measures into assessment practices to place more students into college-level math and English;
- Strengthening career and technical education programs to increase job placement;
- Leveraging grant implementation (e.g., Title III/V Strengthening Institutions) to enhance programs; and
- Utilizing new student success metrics to standardize and provide a common language across colleges

Unfortunately, that is not what typically happens.

Figure 2.

Specific Inputs



Given all the inputs, why aren't degree and transfer rates significantly higher and remarkable reductions in equity gaps?

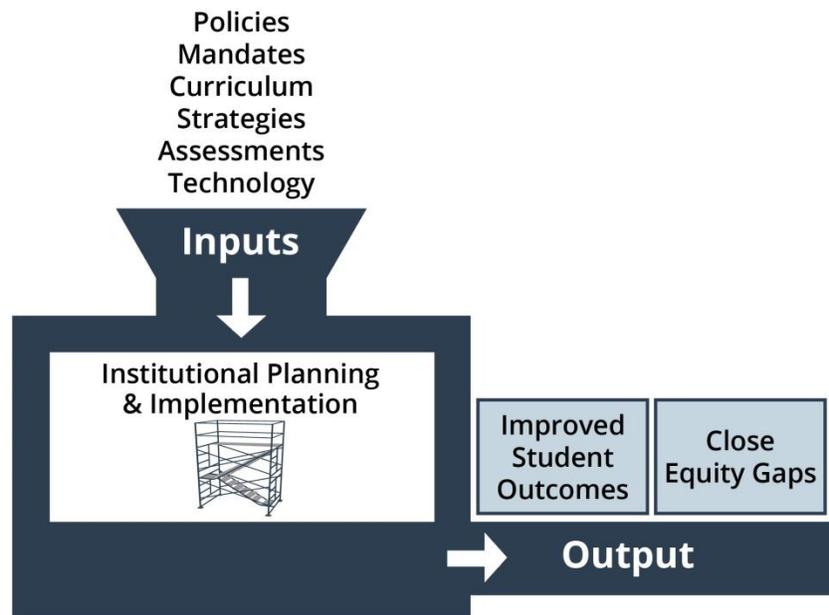
Why do inputs rarely turn into campus-wide significant increases in student outcomes and equity gap reductions? In a nutshell, colleges tend to have a weak structure and support system that hinders the most important foundational and recurring action colleges need to undertake: continuous improvement.

In Figure 3 the structure image inside the planning and implementation box represents what is needed to be addressed in order for college educators to make better sense of all the

inputs injected into their institution and how to have what I like to call the “Three Cs”: clarity, coherence, and consensus. Without clarity, coherence, and consensus, continuous improvement is impossible.

Figure 3.

Answer: A Weak Structure & Support Hinders



A weak structure and support hinders continuous improvement of the institution

Six Factors Unpacked: Why Colleges Struggle to Implement Priorities

After years of being neck-deep in the work of change, embedding with a multitude of colleges to help them get results, and parachuting in at countless colleges to facilitate difficult conversations to get the work of change moving, I have concluded that there are six factors that describe why colleges struggle to implement priorities.

Figure 4. Six Factors



1. Lacking a Culture of Kindness (or Not Prevalent)
2. Unproductive Committee Structure
3. Lacking a Student-Centered Framework
4. Silos, Silos, Silos
5. Lack of Faculty Teaching Preparation
6. Effective Leadership Challenges

Factor #1: Lacking a Culture of Kindness (or Not Prevalent)

A college is like a living organism. Treat it with toxicity, and it produces negative outcomes. Treat it with kindness, and it produces positive outcomes. Without college educators treating each other with kindness, it is that much more difficult to make sense of all of the inputs and implement them well. I have seen bullying first-hand—from a bombastic, arrogant male faculty member yelling at a female college president in a meeting with college-wide constituents present, to a female president scolding and angrily pointing fingers at her team with other college teams in the room during a regional convening. This behavior is unacceptable. It accomplishes nothing. It gives someone a moment of satisfaction at the expense of compromising organizational culture and morale. Employee evaluations need to include how people treat other people.



...a meaningful test of success is how helpful we are in contributing to our fellow human beings' happiness.

I came up with the following phrase years ago: *A meaningful test of success is how helpful we are in contributing to our fellow human beings' happiness.* One day I took stock of the little things that were making me happy, such as:

- When I'm at a store and a baby gives me a big smile;
- When a former co-worker from years ago sends me a text to wish me happy birthday;
- When I receive hugs from participants (strangers) of my workshops and trainings;
- When the worker at my local juice bar greets me by my name; and
- When a waitress discouraged me from ordering an item because she didn't think it was worth the money and recommended a more delicious and less expensive option. (She was right, by the way.)

It also brings me joy to see other people happy. For example:

- When an elderly lady gleams with joy when a teenage boy working at the grocery store holds her hand as he assists her walking through the store aisle to gather her items;
- When someone is in line at the store with only one item and the person in front of her allows her to go first; and
- When multiple strangers help someone chase down his naughty, runaway dog.

All of these examples help make me happy, calm, and even productive. We know how it feels to work if we are unhappy and tense. These are not always the most productive and healthy days for us. When packets of joy come our way and change our behavior more positively, there is an essence or feeling of "success" here. This feeling of "success" is what prompted me to reflect more on what it means to be successful. Therefore, a meaningful test of success is how helpful we are in contributing to our fellow human beings' happiness.

This non-groundbreaking insight led me to think about how society has tended to define success. Our society (or at least my generation) has been conditioned to believe that success is defined by graduating from a top-tier university, owning an expensive car, landing a job with a hefty salary, climbing the organizational ladder, and buying a big home. But what if we defined success by how we make others feel? What if we took a different communication approach? Here are some kind communication examples:

- I remember when I made a similar mistake and this is how I handled it. Does my example help? How can we keep this issue from happening again?
- Let's have lunch to discuss a strategy.
- How can we work together to make this better?
- I don't know. Let's figure this out together.
- How can I help you be successful?
- Do you have the capacity to take on this project/task?

- As I reflect on the week, I noticed you did X, Y, and Z. I just wanted to let you know that I noticed and appreciate you and your work.
- What do you think?
- Thank you.

Through my reflection journey of what it truly means to be successful, I was reminded of what our ancestors—regardless of nationality or ethnic origin—have taught us through the ages: some variation of the Golden Rule. Remember? That saying about treating others how you would want to be treated? Of course, the saying is only as good as the person saying it, but you know what I mean.

Often in our all-too-human efforts (we do, after all, need to pay the bills and take care of our families) to climb the organizational ladder, produce significant income, earn titles and prestige, and/or amass material wealth, it does not take much to forget what prior generations taught us and what should be in our hearts: how we help contribute to our fellow human beings' happiness. That, to me, is success. So, what are some practical approaches to cultivate a culture of kindness? It starts with the individual, especially those in the higher levels of the organizational chart.

Strategies to Address Factor #1

When I talk about kindness, I often hear, "I'm not the touchy-feely type." However, we do not need to be "touchy feely" to be kind. Here are four strategies that can promote kindness:

1. **Cafecito Time:** This means taking the time to have coffee (or tea, breaking bread, or perhaps happy hour) with someone who has concerns. We often come in cold to a committee meeting knowing there will be resistance to an idea or concept, but we do not take the time to engage in an informal setting with people to better understand their underlying concerns. Informal settings can lead to productive formal settings.
2. **Art of Listening:** Avoid listening in order to respond, and instead listen in order to learn. Sometimes we have an idea or counterargument that we cannot wait to blurt out without taking the time to actually learn what the other person is saying.
3. **Change One Word:** Go from saying "Yes, but..." to "Yes, and..." This simple word change could improve the conversation dynamics.
4. **Start and End Meetings on Time:** I need to elaborate more on this strategy. It might seem like a minor thing to arrive on time and stay for the duration of a meeting. In truth, however, it is not minor at all, and it should not be taken for granted, because it is a form of kindness. It is also a dependable indicator of an effective team or committee. Effective meeting bodies across the campus contribute to a healthy culture.

Consider this scenario. A single parent with a sick child decides to attend what has been deemed a critical meeting. She takes the day off but decides to come in for an important meeting and makes every effort to arrive early. Is it fair to her to

start the meeting 10-15 minutes late after all of the effort she made to be on time? Honor and show kindness to the people who arrive early by starting on time.

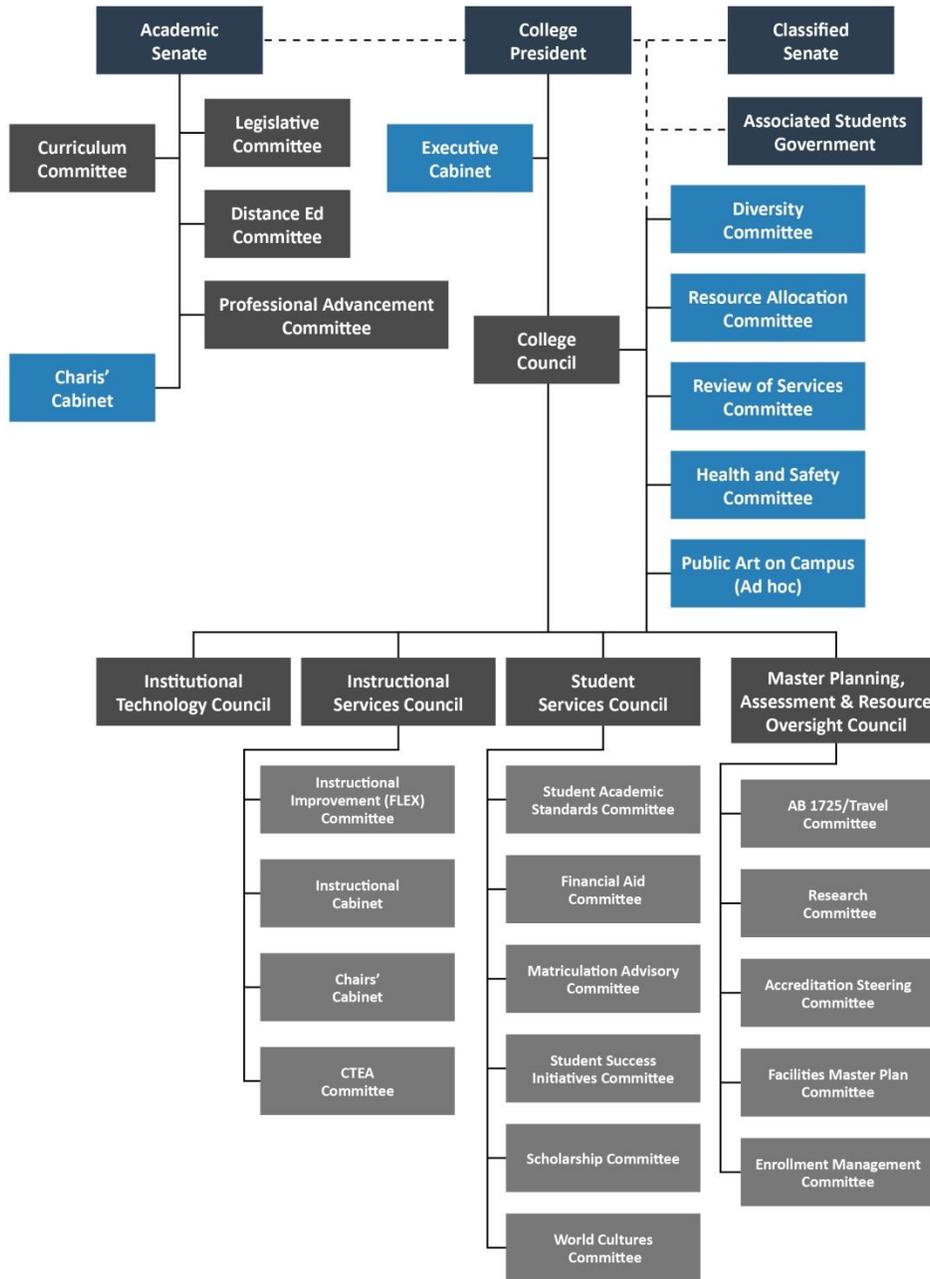
Finally, being kind does not require a serious demeanor. We should not lose our sense of humor. Once we get to know people, it is sometimes appropriate to poke fun at our short-comings and mistakes. Being kind is about how we make others feel. Being kind also does not mean we have to abandon the need to sometimes be highly direct, candid, and forthright with someone. It is the totality of the conversations we have with someone overtime that counts.

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Informal settings can lead to productive formal settings.

Factor #2: Unproductive Committee Structure

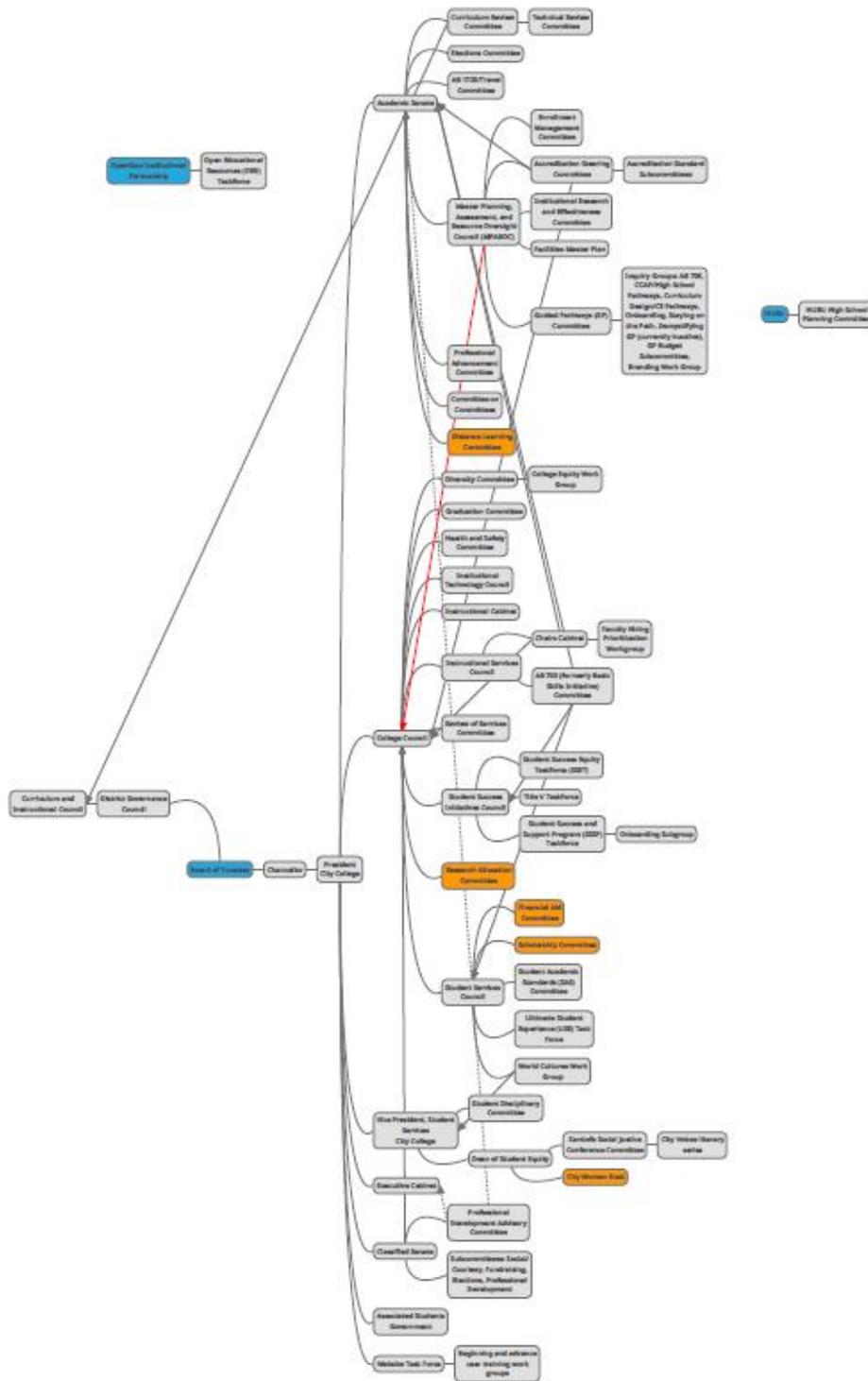
Kindness is important. But even with a culture of kindness, it is still extremely challenging to implement an array of inputs because of a college’s committee structure (also known as participatory governance) and the often broken and dysfunctional information flow and workflow within, between, and among the committees. To make my point, I will use as an example a college I have been working with to reimagine its committee structure. Figure 5 shows a well-organized committee structure with college council at the center.

Figure 5. Committee Structure on Paper



However, Figure 6 visually represents reality, mapping the reporting relationships of committees as submitted by a committee inventory survey produced by the college's Office of Institutional Effectiveness. There is no need to examine the details. You get the picture.

Figure 6. Committee Structure Reality



The team I worked with did not have to take the time to explain the visual. They simply showed it to a broad constituency at the college. People understood it immediately because it represented what they have been feeling and experiencing.

Strategies to Address Factor #2:

The first step to reimagining the committee structure is to admit there is a problem with it. If people get defensive about it, then simply state that the committee structure could be improved (instead of saying “revamped”—one word can make the difference) to ensure it meets the student-centered vision, mission, and values of the institution. To recognize that the committee structure is not, in reality (although intended), student-centered takes courage. Therefore, developing an explanation of why change is needed is critical.

Part of the above-shown college’s “why” was to visually demonstrate how convoluted the committee structure had become. Another strategy was to convene a broad group of administrators, staff, and faculty and conduct an activity to get a policy, procedure, or practice through the existing committee structure using a large wall with chart paper. Participants had to demonstrate with arrows and cards representing each committee how to get a “bill passed,” as it were. Of the 30+ people in attendance from all levels of the institution, only one person figured out how to get a “bill passed.” The group ultimately identified that there was:

- Duplication, redundancy, overlap among committees;
- Unclear information flow within and among committees;
- Unclear committee purpose; and
- Unproductive meetings.

In fact, in the process of figuring out how to work within, between, and among the committee structure, people naturally started to talk about solutions for improving participatory governance. This often requires a follow-up session to help participants brainstorm how to potentially nest, merge, or deactivate committees. This session is critical. Therefore, I used Figure 7¹ (which I use in many other situations) to explain to participants that in the process of Discover → Develop → Implement → Evaluate → Report, the focus is on discover.

“We automatically block or shut down ideas because we are already thinking about implementation and the potential roadblocks ahead.”

¹ Thanks to Maria Narvaez, former long-time institutional researcher at Long Beach City College and presently at Mount St. Mary’s University, for creating these phases which is also known as the “Integrated Planning Model.”

As educators, I have noticed that our minds have a tendency to jump to implementation, without taking the time to think boldly and creatively during the discovery stage of “what might be.” We automatically block or shut down ideas because we are already thinking about implementation and the potential roadblocks ahead. The Develop stage is the time to start thinking about roadblocks. We need to let our imaginations run wild in the Discover phase.

Figure 7. Integrated Planning Model



Discover: This is an important but often overlooked component of institutional processes. This phase allows the institution to take a step back and assess how planning is done and is aligned across campus. Discover also allows practitioners to figure out how to integrate a new initiative into existing services. Data and information are examined throughout this phase. It is also the phase during which people are allowed to be as creative as possible.

Develop: The Develop phase includes a focus on forward-thinking in the design of tools, processes, and practices to support implementation and evaluation. It is also important to anticipate the roadblocks ahead in order to be proactive instead of reactive.

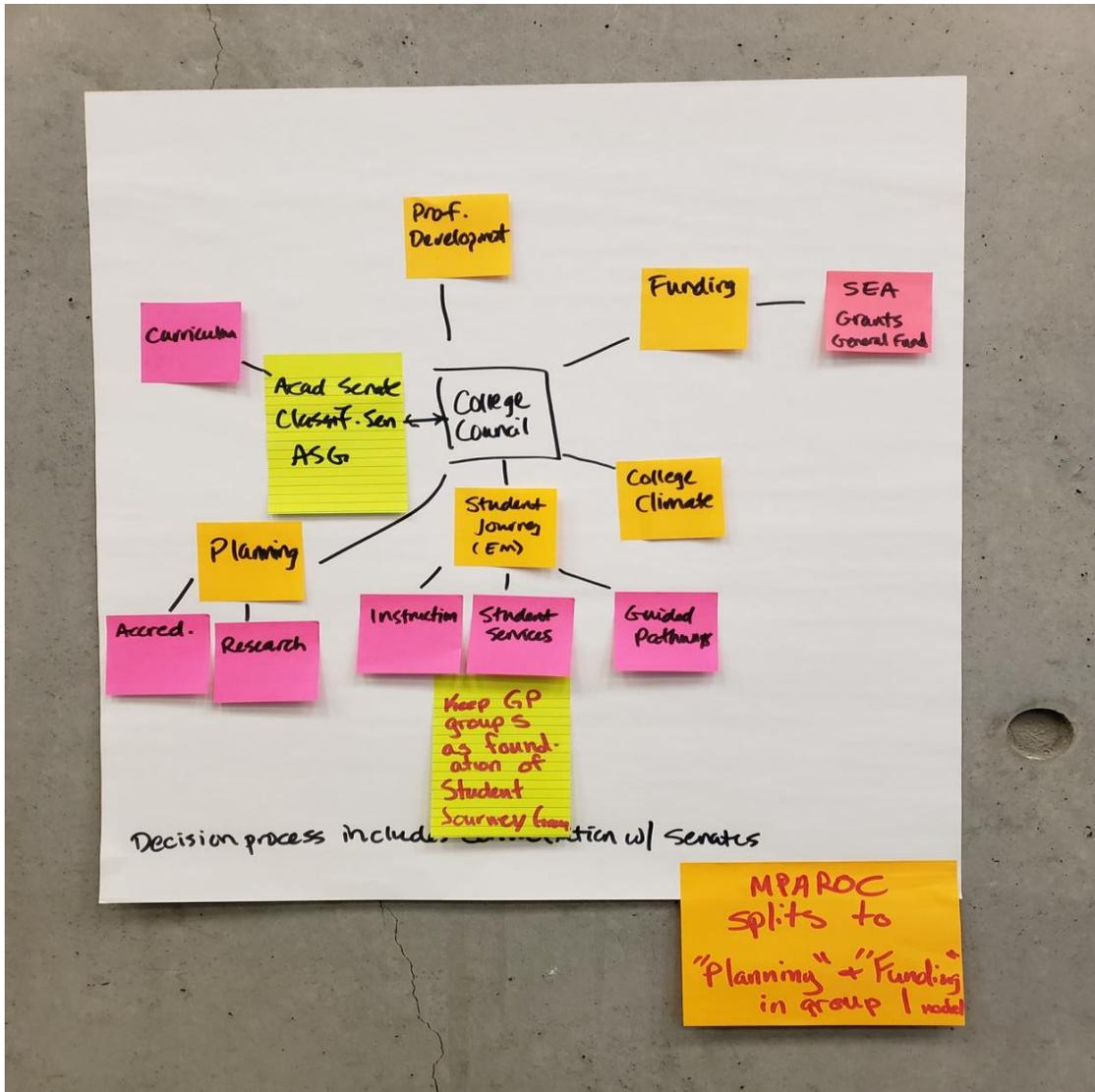
Implement: The Implement phase is the time for action, when relevant goals, objectives, and strategies of the plan are operationalized. Practitioners should continue validating data and information throughout this phase.

Evaluate: In this phase, practitioners measure progress toward the achievement of goals and objectives associated with planning efforts. This phase offers an opportunity to check the impact of your work.

Report: The Report phase provides a means to share results from processes and products associated with the Implement and Evaluate phase. This phase is supported when results of the evaluation are shared broadly and results are viewed as a critical component in the process.

With an emphasis on Discover, the group with which I worked came up with a first draft of a new committee structure shown in Figure 8 below.

Figure 8. Committee Structure Brainstorm



They initially proposed “houses” centered around the College Council:

- The Student Journey
- Planning
- Curriculum
- Professional Development
- Funding
- College Climate

To be clear, I am not recommending that colleges follow this exact committee structure model. Rather, this example shows how a college recognized the need for change and how it began its journey to work smarter, not harder. While “work smarter, not harder” is an effective slogan, the team created a powerful “why” statement that helped to propel and maintain the work of change:

We recognize that over the last few years, we have been working in a heightened state of transition, uncertainty, and instability and have often created structures in a reactive manner. Redesigning our governance structure is intended to enable us as a campus to re-ground ourselves in our values and priorities of inclusion, equity, and social justice. The magnitude of our passion should be reflected in the results we are achieving, and our outcomes should be commensurate with the amount of intellectual and emotional energy that we commit to our collective work.

The goal for this redesign is to give us the direction, support, and structure that will enable us to put our energies where they will produce the most value and impact for students. Clearer and more efficient processes and structures will improve communication and allow for productive engagement and participation from all constituent groups. This redesign will enable the campus community to engage in the intentional work and sound practices that are vital to serve our students.

There have been more committee structure drafts since the one shown above was developed, and I as write this resource, the college is finalizing the visual to represent its new shared governance system. That said, creating a new, streamlined, and more efficient structure is one thing, but even a leaner structure can be dysfunctional if the meetings are unproductive and they lack a student-centered framework that allows everyone to have common language and shared understanding of work undertaken by their committees and the overall structure.

Factor #3: Lacking a Student-Centered Framework

Committee, workgroup, taskforce—whatever the meeting bodies are called—more often than not lack a common language and framework they can all use to ensure that the discussions are relentlessly student-centered. Here is where once in a while I get push-back. Educators tell me, “I care about students! How can you say I’m not student-centered?” Well, I did not say that you, as an individual, do not care about students. My point is that when individuals are a part of a larger structure that is filled with interest-group politics, the focus on students often gets lost.

“...when individuals are a part of a larger structure that is filled with interest-group politics, the focus on students often gets lost.”

That is part of the reason I became so excited when the Guided Pathways framework began to take hold nationally. It is a simple, non-prescriptive, agnostic, student-journey framework, with suggested strategies that colleges can modify for their institutional context. It provides everyone with common language: let us work on how we can clarify a path for students, help them enter a path, help them stay on the path, and ensure their learning on the path.² Each student journey point (some people call them “pillars”) has data that can be disaggregated to help inform equity issues.



Without a student journey framework, committee discussions are often scattered, lacking clarity and coherence.

Another student journey framework closely aligned with Guided Pathways is Completion by Design.³ Completion by Design comprises of Connection → Entry → Progress → Completion → Transition. This framework also includes data points per student journey phase that can be disaggregated to help inform student equity.

Without a student journey framework, committee discussions are often scattered, lacking clarity and coherence. It is also why colleges struggle to integrate their work and inevitably duplicate efforts across the campus. For example, how many entities does a typical college have that work on professional development? Do they ever talk with one another to integrate the work? I can go on and on with such examples.

Interestingly, another push-back I sometimes get is, “We already know about Guided Pathways and Completion by Design as student journey frameworks. We have used both.” Here are my follow-up questions for which the answers are typically “no”:

- Do all committees know what part or parts of their work is focused on the student journey?
- Does the program review process use a student journey framework?
- Are institutional outcomes tied to a student journey framework?
- Does the college’s strategic and/or educational master plan use a student journey framework?
- Do the budget process and funding request forms use a student journey framework?
- Is the college website structured to align with a student journey framework?
- Are all grants aligned with a student journey framework?
- Do Board meetings use the student journey framework language?
- Do meeting agendas include the student journey framework?

² Resource: <https://www.pathwaysresources.org>

³ Source: <https://www.completionbydesign.org/s/>

- Does the college use a student journey framework to communicate with the community and partners such as K-12 schools, business and industry, other institutions of higher education, and nonprofits?

Strategies to Address Factor #3:

To continually work on the Three C’s (clarity, coherence, and consensus) using a student journey framework, let us start with an effective tool—logic models.

Creating a logic model⁴ helps all involved think about what they are doing and what they hope to achieve. Logic models are used to show relationships between outcomes, outputs, activities, and resources:

- Resources—what an institution has
- Activities—what an institution does
- Outputs—what an institution produces
- Outcomes—institutional results

Figure 9. Logic Model

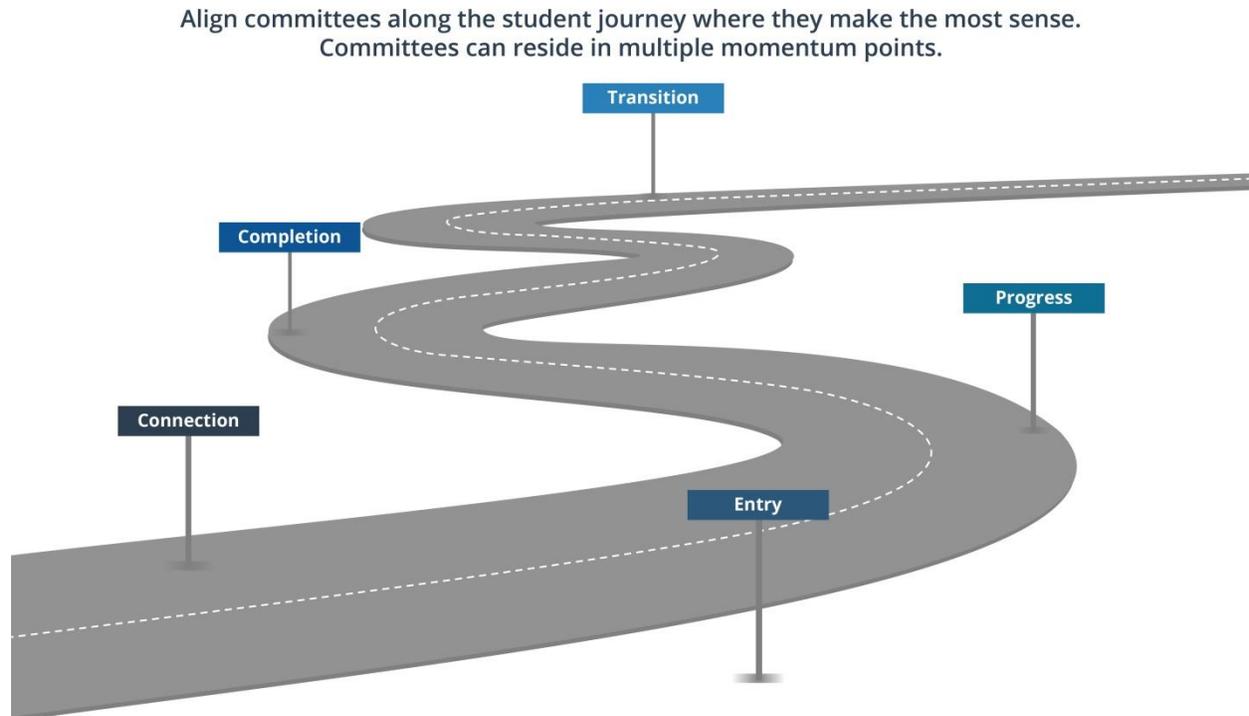
Purpose Statement:					
Inputs/Resources In order to accomplish our set of activities we all need the following:	Activities To address/complete our project we will complete the following activities:	Outputs/Deliverables/ Direct Results Once completed or underway, these activities will produce the following:	Outcomes We expect that if completed of ongoing these activities will lead to the following changes over time. (Outcomes should reflect or align with the goal of your project)		
			Short-term	Medium-term	Long-term
Assumptions:					
External Factors:					

⁴ Thanks to 3CSN (<https://3csn.org>), the California Community College’s Success Network for logic model resources they have provided throughout the years.

A logic model serves as the basis for committee meetings and it allows participants to literally be on the same page. The logic model is a living document that is modified overtime. That is why it is good practice for each college committee to have its own logic model and for the college overall to create one as well. It is also key to use a student journey framework.

Figure 10 shows the prompt I use with colleges to help them align existing committees or the committees currently undergoing a revamp along the student journey.

Figure 10. Committees & Student Journey Alignment



It is important to know that a committee’s charge can reside in one, many, or all of the student journey points. Let us take a professional development committee as an example. The committee may conclude that its focus is on student Progress within the Completion by Design framework of Connection → Entry → Progress → Completion → Transition. Therefore, the professional development committee may undergo the logic model process shown in Figures 11 through 15.

Figure 11. Outcomes

Step 1: Outcomes

Purpose Statement:									
<p>Inputs/Resources In order to accomplish our set of activities we all need the following:</p>	<p>Activities To address/complete our project we will complete the following activities:</p>	<p>Outputs/Deliverables/ Direct Results Once completed or underway, these activities will produce the following:</p>	<p>Outcomes We expect that if completed of ongoing these activities will lead to the following changes over time. (Outcomes should reflect or align with the goal of your project)</p>						
Timelines to consdier									
<p>Short-term: Remaining spring semester through June 30</p> <p>Mid-Term: Summer</p> <p>Long-Term: Fall/Spring</p> <p>Prompt: What does the institution expect to be completed or activities that are ongoing during these time frames?</p> <p>Mid-Term Outcome Example: By August 30th, 100% of faculty will be trained on Canvas, Zoom, and basic remote pedagogical principles.</p>			<table border="1" style="width: 100%; height: 100%;"> <thead> <tr> <th style="width: 33%;">Short-term</th> <th style="width: 33%;">Medium-term</th> <th style="width: 33%;">Long-term</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td style="height: 200px;"></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Short-term	Medium-term	Long-term			
Short-term	Medium-term	Long-term							
Assumptions:									
External Factors:									

Figure 12. Activities & Outputs

Step 2: Activities and Outputs

Purpose Statement:			
<u>Inputs/Resources</u> In order to accomplish our set of activities we all need the following:	<u>Activities</u> To address/complete our project we will complete the following activities:	<u>Outputs/Deliverables/ Direct Results</u> Once completed or underway, these activities will produce the following:	You can work on activities and outputs simultaneously. We expect that if <i>(Outcomes should reflect or align with the goal of your project)</i> lead to the following changes over time. Prompts Activities: To meet our outcomes, we will need to complete these set of activities. Example: Outline trainings, save the dates, dry run trainings. Outputs: Once the activities are completed or are underway, they will produce the following deliverables. Example: 25 trainings will be completed.
Assumptions:			
External Factors:			

Figure 13. Inputs/Resources

Step 2: Resources/Inputs

Purpose Statement:					
Inputs/Resources In order to accomplish our set of activities we all need the following:	Activities To address/complete our project we will complete the following activities:	Outputs/Deliverables/ <u>Direct Results</u> Once completed or underway, these activities will produce the following:	Outcomes We expect that if completed of ongoing these activities will lead to the following changes over time. (Outcomes should reflect or align with the goal of your project)		
			Short-term	Medium-term	Long-term
	Prompt: In order to complete our set of activities, we will need the following Example: Instructional designer, distance educator coordinator, expert faculty, software				
Assumptions:					
External Factors:					

Figure 14. Purpose Statement

Purpose Statement:									
Inputs/Resources In order to accomplish our set of activities we all need the following:	Activities To address/complete our project we will complete the following activities:	Outputs/Deliverables/ Direct Results Once completed or underway, these activities will produce the following:	Outcomes We expect that if completed of ongoing these activities will lead to the following changes over time. (Outcomes should reflect or align with the goal of your project)						
			<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Short-term</th> <th>Medium-term</th> <th>Long-term</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Short-term	Medium-term	Long-term			
Short-term	Medium-term	Long-term							
<p>Purpose Statement:</p> <p>Some teams feel better prepared to articulate a purpose statement after working on the LM for a bit. Other teams focus on creating a purpose statement first. Either way is fine. Choose the path that best suits your context.</p> <p>Example: To ensure that students receive the best quality education remotely.</p>									
Assumptions:									
External Factors:									

Figure 15. Assumptions & External Factors

Purpose Statement:			
Inputs/Resources In order to accomplish our set of activities we all need the following:	Activities To address/complete our project we will complete the following activities:	Outputs/Deliverables/ Direct Results Once completed or underway, these activities will produce the following:	Outcomes We expect that if completed or ongoing these activities will lead to the following changes over time. [Outcomes should reflect or align with the goal of your project]
			Short-term Medium-term Long-term
Assumptions:		External Factors:	
Assumptions are reality checks. What are indicators of success for planning to remain virtual? This is where you unpack issues of capacity, logistics, buy-in, etc., and write down how to address them. Example: Faculty will implement what they are taught.		Factors that might influence the institution's ability to do the work planned or potential barriers to achieving the outcomes. Example: Not all faculty will have internet access and computers at home.	
Assumptions:			
External Factors:			

It is critical that the logic model activities/strategies be put in a separate document with the names of those responsible for implementing them. This document, which could be a simple spreadsheet, allows those responsible to provide a status on each of the activities/strategies. The professional development committee now has a clearer picture of its charge, with an accountability mechanism (status spreadsheet) and the shared understanding that they are focused on the Progress part of the student journey to help faculty be better prepared to serve students.

These logic models and status spreadsheets would reside in the college's intranet. For the sake of productive meetings, people should read the updates prior to meetings so the meetings are not entirely about update report-outs, which could be reviewed in a status sheet prior to the meeting. I am not suggesting that update report-outs are useless, but I do know that more often not, the updates could have been read ahead of time so the limited meeting time could be more focused on collaboration and problem-solving.

As mentioned, a student journey framework plus a project management resource such as logic models would allow the institution to incorporate these tools into other processes and projects of the institution: program review, institutional outcomes, strategic and/or educational master

planning, funding requests, website design, grant development, board meeting discussions, and collaboration with the community.

Factor #4: Silos, Silos, Silos

As a noun, a silo is historically known as tower to store grain. Visually, the silo is separate and alone from other areas of the farm. As a verb, it means to isolate a process or entity from others. In essence, this is how colleges have been created and operated, with student services and instruction in their own silos, rarely coming together to collaborate systemically and across campus for the betterment of students. The negative effects of silos within the institution are exacerbated when the vice presidents of student services and instruction fail to get along, and when the president does little to nothing to rectify the situation.

Silos also cause harm when one silo holds one big pot of funding. For example, I have found the practice of giving funding to one vice president for a significant priority such as Guided Pathways does more harm than good.

First, many vice presidents were never taught how to manage a budget, understand allowable versus unallowable activities, and realize the importance of having a shadow budget to reconcile with accounting (especially when accounting can be up to three months behind).

Then, there is also the perception that since one silo owns the funding, the other silo is meant to be excluded or have limited say in planning and implementation of the priority. For example, I have seen a vice president of student services manage the funding, which then gave instruction the perception that they had to take a back seat. Yet, with transformational priorities such as Guided Pathways, the funding should reside in the college's "Switzerland," such as administrative services or institutional effectiveness, to at least give the appearance of neutrality.

An effective way to break the silos then is to have the frontline workers—those actually responsible for implementing policies and practices—collaborate as a team to increase student success and close equity gaps. One such way is the Student Success Team model; however, there are challenges to planning and implementing Student Success Teams and it takes exceptional leadership to pull it off.



The negative effects of silos within the institution are exacerbated when the vice presidents of student services and instruction fail to get along...

Strategies to Address Factor #4

What is a Student Success Team? Generally speaking, a Student Success Team is an academic and student services team that collaborates to plan and implement data-informed, equity-infused practices along the student journey.

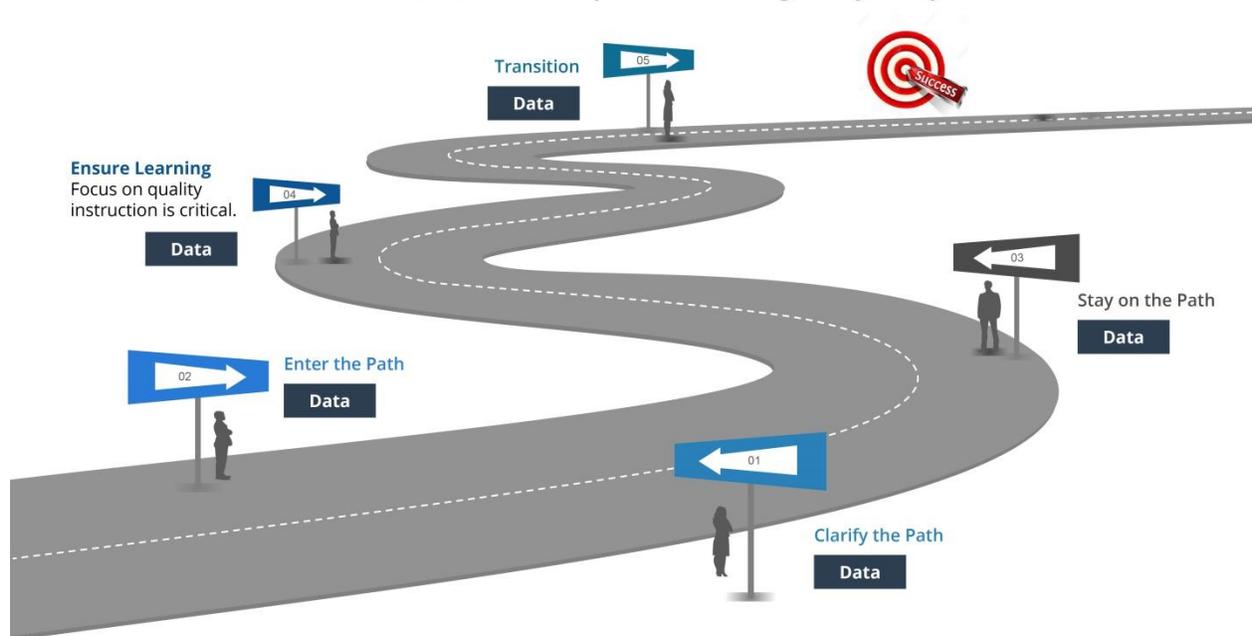
I often use these the visuals shown in Figures 16 (Guided Pathways) and 17 (Completion by Design) to describe the framework under which a Student Success Team would operate. I add “Transition” as an additional student journey point because the intention—to help students transfer or secure a living wage—around this part of a student journey is critical. I also emphasize what I have been arguing for years is the most important student journey point in Guided Pathways—**ensure learning**. Where do students spend most of their time when they are at the campus? In a classroom environment.

Figure 16. Guided Pathways Student Journey



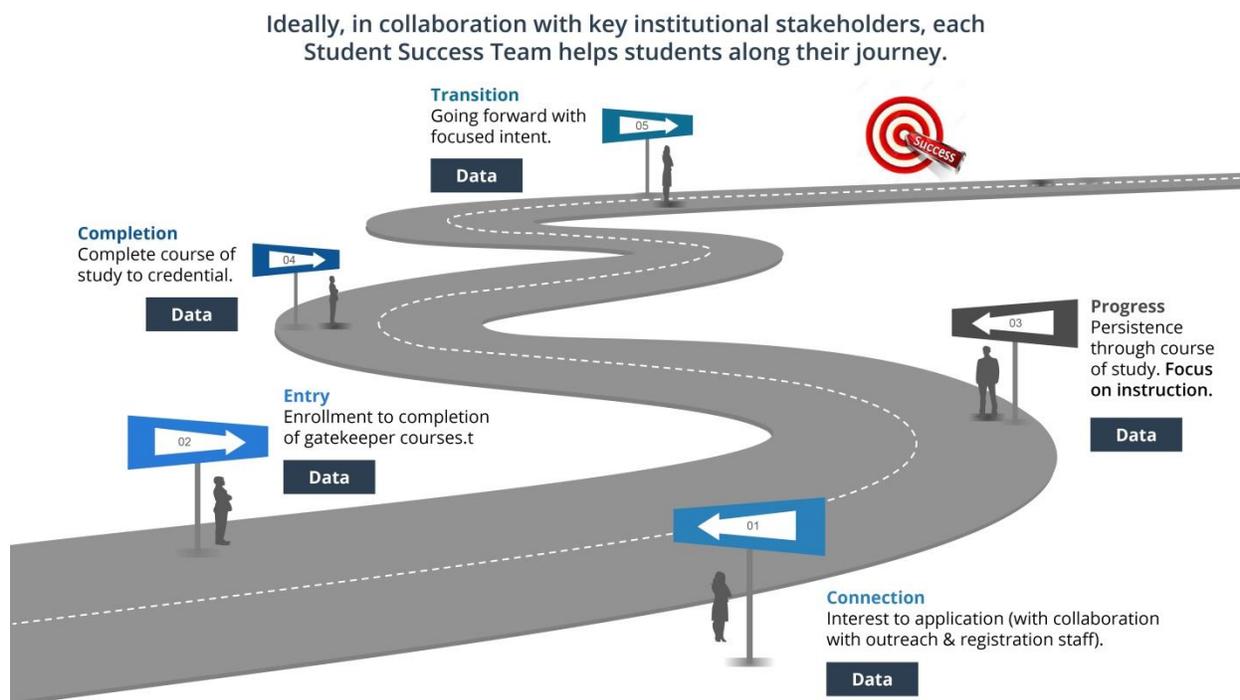
...a Student Success Team is an academic and student services team that collaborates to plan and implement data-informed, equity-infused practices along the student journey.

Ideally, in collaboration with key institutional stakeholders, each Student Success Team helps students along their journey.



Each student journey point has student data that can be disaggregated to address equity issues.

Figure 17. Completion by Design Student Journey



Student Success Teams' development and implementation has been a significant challenge at colleges. It often begins with the misconception that the Student Success Team is a Guided Pathways concept. It is not. For colleges that have created cross-functional teams in special programs such as Extending Opportunities Programs and Services (EOPS) or Title III/V Strengthening Institutions grants, the construct has been around for decades. The primary challenge is scaling teams for the entire campus. First, let us unpack why there are challenges.

CHALLENGE #1: FEAR OF CHANGE

The reason Student Success Teams have been tied with Guided Pathways is in part because of a blog post I wrote a couple of years ago that was shared far and wide. In my Q&A with Bakersfield College about its version of a Student Success Team, called "Completion Coaching Communities," Bakersfield College attached them to their Guided Pathways meta-majors (see Figure 18).⁵ I argued that if a college develops meta-majors, the way to operationalize them is through these academic and student services teams coming together to analyze data and act upon it. However, given that "meta-major" is a dirty name at many colleges (a lack of clarity

⁵ Meta-majors are collections of academic majors that have related courses. The intent of selecting a meta-major (as opposed to choosing from a list of 100+ majors) is to help students choose an academic area based on their interests. Therefore, a student may initially choose to be in a STEM meta-major instead of specifically choosing chemistry, biology, or physics.

and misinformation is largely to blame), people have been fighting the cross-functional team concept at their campuses. I have seen it all—from outright sabotage to stalling tactics. At some colleges, it is not so much that the concept has been tied to Guided Pathways, but that people fear their job descriptions would change. In short, it is the fear of change.

Figure 18. Bakersfield College Student Success Team Model

Bakersfield College Meta-Majors Completion Coaching Communities

Arts, Humanities, & Communication
[2463 overall; FTIC 477]

Business [2583 overall; FTIC 447]

Education [1750 overall; FTIC 359]

Health Sciences [4450 overall; FTIC 981]

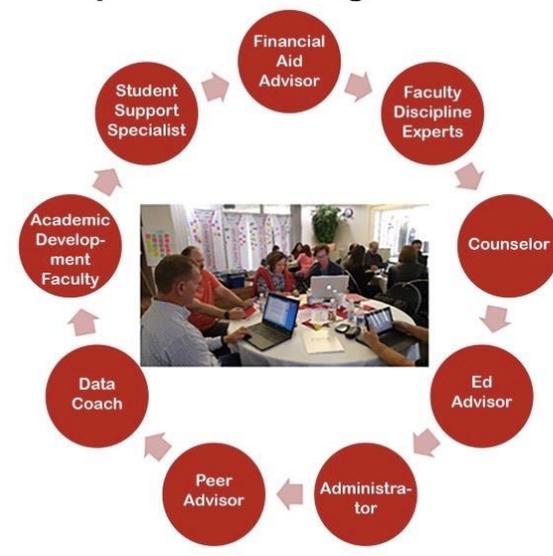
Industrial & Transportation Technology [1157 overall; FTIC 317]

Public Safety [1222 overall; FTIC 176]

Social & Behavioral Sciences
[3,798 overall; FTIC 835]

STEM [2450 overall; FTIC 527]

Personal & Career Exploration
[1637 overall; FTIC 290]



At Bakersfield College, representatives from instruction include a faculty discipline expert, academic development faculty, and a data coach who is typically a faculty member. The rest of the team is from student services.

CHALLENGE #2: INEFFECTIVE CONSULTING

It does not help that there are outfits claiming that they could help colleges implement Student Success Teams. One individual recently confided in me at a conference, "We had this organization visit us to help with student success teams. They're nice people, but they don't know what they're doing. Like us, they're making it up as they go along, and the so-called coaching is ineffective."

This particular organization set the college on the wrong path because they failed to ask faculty the right questions critical to their institutional context. And this organization has never implemented Student Success Teams, but they claim they are a resource.

CHALLENGE #3: PILOT BACKLASH

There has been a backlash against pilots. I get it. Some ideas die in "pilot land," but to be fair, many do not. I wholeheartedly support pilots when it comes to Student Success Teams. There is nothing wrong with experimenting with two or three Student Success Teams for a semester. These pilots can help offer lessons learned when teams are scaled across the campus. When

campuses fully implement Student Success Team all at once, it takes exceptional leadership, starting with the president, to pull this off. If the president lacks a high degree of tolerance for ambiguity and points fingers when there are bumps in the road instead of being supportive, large-scale Student Success Team implementation will be set up for failure.

CREATING EFFECTIVE STUDENT SUCCESS TEAMS

What are some considerations to plan Student Success Teams? An effective coach and/or internal college leader(s) would help the campus come up with its own homegrown Student Success Team configuration. Here are some initial questions to ask:

- Who needs to be on each team and why?
- Are there any costs, or will the team be entirely time-resource allocated?
- Where will the teams be attached to—a division, meta-major, or existing school?
- What will be their purpose?
- What kind of training will team members receive?
- What is the agenda for the kick-off?
- How much time will the teams be given to norm?
- How often will teams meet and for how long?
- Who would be the lead or co-leads of the teams?
- How often would the leads or co-leads of all teams meet?
- Will the teams serve as inquiry teams that push our practices and/or student support case management teams?
- What data will the teams analyze and why?
- Will there be a data coach?
- Will a few teams get started first, or will the campus scale all at once?
- What will the relationship between Student Success Teams and the overall committee structure/shared governance be?
- How will equity be infused via these teams?



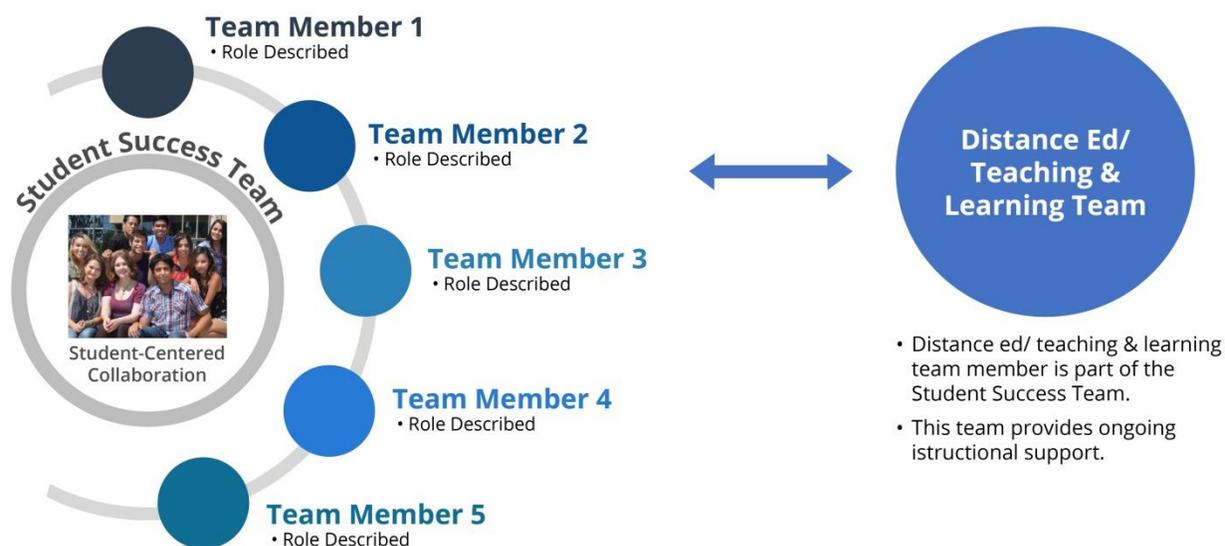
If Student Success Teams ignore instruction, it is a missed opportunity to address equity.

Thus far, I have seen all Student Success Teams planned to be student services heavy. And even when there is a plan to include instruction, the teams' interventions are all student services solutions, because it tends to be the easiest route (and they lack training, structure, and processes to fold in instruction). Yet, where do students spend most of their time in campus? The classroom. If Student Success Teams ignore instruction, it is a missed opportunity to

address equity. That is why I advocate for a separate teaching and learning team (another team where the devil is in the details in terms of its function) that has a faculty member with expertise in pedagogy embedded into each Student Success Team. Given the long-term impact of COVID, it is critical that a distance education coordinator and staff be a part of the teaching and learning team to support the continued expansion of online learning.

Figure 19. Student Success Team and Teaching & Learning Team

Student Success Teams | Distance Education/Teaching & Learning Team Relationship



* For this example, the Student Success Team number of members is based on one campus. Each college will determine the number of members.

Here is a scenario that illustrates why instruction is key to Student Success Teams. A STEM Student Success Team at a Hispanic-Serving Institution (over 80% Latina/o/x) analyzed data and learned that the majority of incoming biological sciences majors were placed in college algebra and trigonometry. Fewer than 10% of these students reached calculus courses, and only about 5% transferred to a four-year university. Given the data, faculty conducted research on promising practices and decided that biology and math faculty would collaborate to contextualize math content with biology. They also created supplemental materials in college algebra and trigonometry for biology majors that were leveraged in weekly academic success workshops.

This is one of numerous scenarios that meaningfully involve instruction. Otherwise, the go-to strategy would be a Student Success Team that emails students (among the countless other campus emails they receive) or initiates some form of "intrusive" counseling. Not that these practices are meaningless, but again, this kind of approach puts the onus entirely on student services and totally excludes instruction.

While Students Success Teams need to figure out much of what they do organically—by actually doing the work—they still need support through trainings, and they need to utilize an inquiry protocol that allows their work to be organized with processes. Without any support and structure, Student Success Teams will wander in the unproductive wilderness, which over time creates burn out and resentment. Therefore, here is a simple five-step inquiry protocol, based on a lengthy, in-depth inquiry guidebook I created. The focus here is on the rapid transition to online:

STEP 1: Identify student needs.

Identify and clarify specific student needs as students transition to online courses and continue their learning online. Most of this information will be garnered from faculty, frontline student services professionals, institutional research, and of course, students.

STEP 2: Choose strategies.

Identify strategies to address student needs:

- The team brainstorms ideas.
- The team sets the direction based on a simple majority consensus

STEP 3: Draft an implementation plan.

In the team's virtual meeting settings, decide how to best deploy the strategies. A 1-3 pager uploaded to a virtual platform such as Google docs would suffice. Answer the following questions:

- What are the strategies?
- How will they be implemented?
- Who will be responsible for implementing?
- What's the timeline?
- How will we gauge that they're working?

STEP 4: Implement the strategies.

STEP 5: Report back and make adjustments if necessary



Most importantly, by analyzing and disaggregating data along the student journey, the Student Success Team can be more intentional about addressing equity gaps.

In the team's virtual meeting settings, those responsible for implementing need to communicate how the strategies are unfolding and their impact on personnel and students:

- The team is informed and provides ongoing input and recommends necessary adjustments.
- The team keeps a record of strategy updates.

As with everything I write and create, it is sufficiently agnostic for a campus to modify and make it their own. Student Success Teams is a way to break silos by having frontline employees from both student services and instruction collaborate and problem-solve. *Most importantly, by analyzing and disaggregating data along the student journey, the Student Success Team can be more intentional about addressing equity gaps.*

Factor #5: Lack of Faculty Teaching Preparation



...they have failed spectacularly to prepare graduate students to *teach* at community colleges and other open-access institutions.

Universities, especially top-tier institutions, make a significant positive impact on society—from scientific breakthroughs to informing the public of significant research to preparing the workforce. The list goes on and on. But they all have a significant shortcoming: they have failed spectacularly to prepare graduate students to *teach* at community colleges and other open-access institutions.

Key word: *teach*.

Student success rates at community colleges and open-access universities are stubbornly low. Twelve hundred community colleges enroll over ten million students each year. Fewer than 40% of these students complete an undergraduate degree

in six years.⁶ Four-year and six-year graduation rates at open-access universities can be in the single digits and below 30%, respectively.⁷

There are efforts underway to improve student success. For example, many campuses have revamped their remedial math and English requirements. Ditching standardized tests and placing students in math and English based on high school academic performance has allowed more students than ever before to start their college careers taking classes that advance them

⁶ Bailey, T., Jaggars, S. S., & Jenkins, D. (2015). Redesigning America's community colleges: A clearer path to student success. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

⁷ Chronicle of Higher Education Graduation Completion Data:
https://collegecompletion.chronicle.com/state/#state=ny§or=public_four

toward a degree, with extra tutoring or other support to help them succeed. However, as open-access institutions are in the midst of transformational change, there is an elephant in the room that is often ignored.

Let me explain with an analogy. Imagine that a teenage girl is struggling in high school. The student's mother meets with the high school teacher, and he explains the following to her after she expresses her concerns:

“
Key word:
teach.”

Students need to learn the standards. So, it's my job to provide them with the content they need. It's not my fault that elementary and middle schools didn't properly prepare your daughter for my class. I'm an expert in my content area, and I expect all my students, including yours, to take the information from my PowerPoint slides in order for them to meet the standards. I suggest you get her some tutoring.

Let us unpack that statement for a moment. The high school teacher takes zero responsibility for the student's learning. He blames external factors and thinks that simply providing content via PowerPoints should be sufficient for the student to learn. We would not (and should not!) accept this statement from a high school teacher. So why is it okay to accept such a statement in higher education? Does not an adult student—who may be a single parent struggling to make ends meet, a veteran dealing with PTSD, a former foster youth, or a student of color—deserve quality instruction as well? Why do we, as a society, seem to stop caring about pedagogy after high school?

Top-tier universities focus their attention on preparing their graduate students to become researchers and content experts. And that is fine. But content knowledge alone is insufficient to be an effective college teacher. When it comes to teaching, the manner in which the content is delivered is just as important as the content itself. By not paying more attention to teaching graduate students how to teach, universities are, in effect, contributing to an all-too-common, toxic, student-blaming culture that is prevalent at some (not all) community college and open-access universities.

Somewhere along the line, we stopped caring about the quality of instruction. Universities focused so much on producing content experts that they contributed to an environment in which many (again, not all) community college and open-access university faculty actually resent their students, when they *should* feel that it is a privilege—not a sad inconvenience—to teach these students. The faculty who genuinely understand this are frustrated that their graduate school failed to prepare them to meet the instructional needs of disproportionately impacted students.

Let us consider another key scenario. A parent with a child who has an individual educational plan (IEP) most likely had to fight for special education services. Many schools fight against IEPs, because it is expensive to serve students who learn differently. The irony is that an IEP often recommends that a teacher implement instructional strategies that not only benefit “special needs” students but *all* students.

Think about two consequential questions:

5. How many low-income parents lacked the resources and knowledge to successfully secure an IEP for their child?
6. Of these students, how many eventually enrolled at a community college or an open-access university?



... higher education needs to focus on *internal* attributions to understand why students struggle to learn and succeed.

There has been a tendency in higher education to focus on external attributions. It is easier (and more commonplace) to blame college students for low student success rates. Instead, higher education needs to focus on *internal* attributions to understand why students struggle to learn and succeed. But even if institutions focus on internal attributions to address the issue at hand, what are we to do when universities continue to produce degree-holders who are inadequately prepared to teach disproportionately impacted students? Talk about a leaky bucket!

How about the most influential universities in all geographic areas come together for the sake of disproportionately impacted students? How about holding a joint summit on how their respective colleges of education, where teaching and learning experts reside, can work together to support other graduate divisions to help better prepare graduate students to *teach*? Invite other colleges of education from the area and, of course, community college faculty to learn about the daunting but rewarding tasks of working in their environment. From there, create a plan of action to effectively address, implement, evaluate, improve, and sustain strategies from the summit.

It is a start. Students are waiting for universities to act.

Strategies to Address Factor #5

Until universities get their act together, colleges need to find a way to help faculty continually improve their practice. Let us unpack equity in grading and a framework to continually improve instruction.

EQUITY IN GRADING

What does it mean when two students with the same academic performance and socioeconomic background receive different grades from two different instructors when the quality of instruction is relatively the same? How can it be that these same students have a 30%

chance of getting a C or D with one instructor, but a 0% chance with a different instructor, despite very similar instructional quality?⁸ This is when equity in grading becomes an issue.

First, consider what it means to be a resource-poor or a resource-rich student. Resource-rich students have opportunities during the K-12 journey to participate in activities such as academic summer camps, ongoing tutoring, after-school music enrichment, and internships. These students for the most part can handle any quality of instruction and grading policy. Resource-poor students are the ones about whom some open-access college and university educators say, “I wish they would have come to me better prepared.”

We don’t have control over how students arrive, but we definitely have control over which of our practices can help them succeed without compromising rigor. It’s also worth noting that students from a resource-rich background can also have negative academic outcomes. Students of color, regardless of socioeconomic background, often deal with racism and implicit biases that have a significant impact on their outcomes.

Table 2 offers some examples of when resource-poor students transition to open-access colleges and universities and experience significant challenges with some grading policies.

“ We don’t have control over how students arrive, but we definitely have control over which of our practices can help them succeed without compromising rigor. ”

⁸ Scenario modified from this example: <https://www.kqed.org/mindshift/52679/why-its-crucial-and-really-hard-to-talk-about-more-equitable-grading>

Table 2. Grading Policy Challenges & Opportunities

Grading Policy	Challenge	Opportunity
Presentations constitute a portion of the course grade.	Resource-poor students are insufficiently prepared in K-12 to deliver presentations in college.	College faculty include in the curriculum a lesson on how to deliver a presentation. If it is a key part of the syllabus, teach it. Teach students how to present, provide them with tools and resources, and then evaluate how they implement what they've been taught.
Participation constitutes a portion of the course.	While perhaps not a challenge that is specific to all resource-poor students, this practice often punishes extremely shy people. This grade can mean the difference between passing or failing a class. Reserved, introspective, and quiet students should be given the chance to shine in a college environment.	Offer students the opportunity to participate via online chat forums or iClickers, and/or to share or demonstrate their knowledge in smaller groups.
Significant weight is placed on a final paper.	Many resource-poor students will procrastinate because they are overwhelmed with unavoidable family and/or part-time job commitments.	Scaffold and chunk sections of the paper throughout the semester, allowing students to build different sections at a time. Provide feedback and give them the opportunity to improve each section. Let students submit all sections at the end of the semester as one final paper.
Significant weight is placed on a final cumulative exam.	We do not know how many students had an IEP in K-12, nor how many of them should have had an IEP but never got one. One of the many issues with "special needs" students is the debilitating effect that high-pressure and timed test environments have on their ability to perform. They do know the content and could demonstrate their knowledge in an environment that gave them a suitable option to demonstrate it.	Provide students with different options to demonstrate their knowledge of the content. For example, offer them the choice of presenting in a primarily visual manner (such as a written paper, detailed drawing, Venn diagram, poem, or graphic organizer), an auditory medium (like a video, podcast, or class debate), a kinesthetic medium (perhaps something interactive and hands-on), or even specific instructions for, say, any work that revolves around metaphor and analogy. Howard Gardner's "Universal Design for Learning" strategies provide insights for suggesting such options.

From analyzing and modifying instructional practices to grading policies, we owe it to all students, and particularly those who are resource-poor, to continually improve our practices. It is not necessarily about evaluating and judging the instructor; it is about reflecting on our

practices to see if we can create spaces of hope instead of fear. Hope will breed student success, whereas fear will sow the seeds of self-doubt and failure.

CONTINUALLY IMPROVING INSTRUCTION

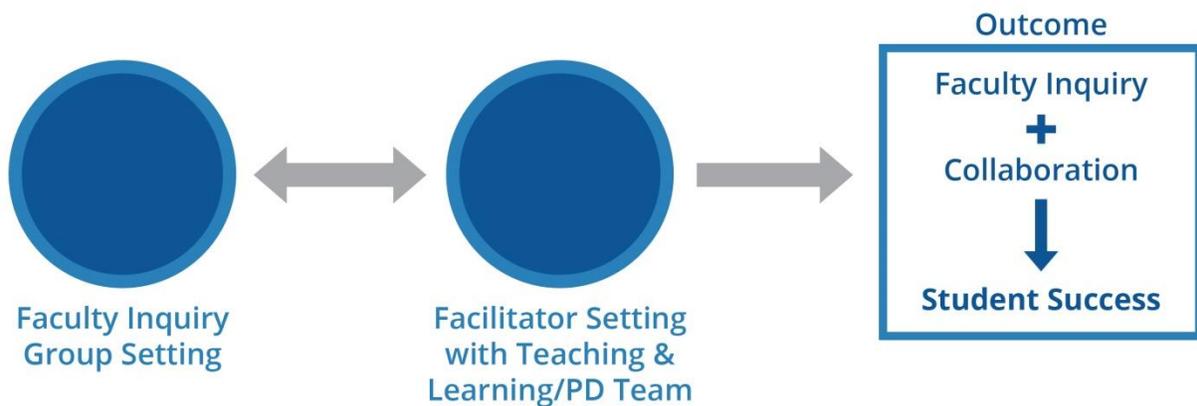
Four components are necessary for faculty to engage in meaningful and productive inquiry to continually improve instruction:

1. Settings
2. Inquiry Process
3. Learning Cycle Framework
4. Facilitators

Settings

A setting is simply a time and place for educators to get important work done. A setting comprises a series of meetings sewn together by sustained collaboration and teamwork around specific goals.

Figure 20. Settings



A faculty inquiry group (FIG) is a group of collaborating job-alike faculty members that uses inquiry to continually improve their craft to increase student success and equity. Ideally, each FIG would have a facilitator. These facilitators should also have a setting along with existing professional development and/or a teaching and learning team to support and learn from one another.

Inquiry Process

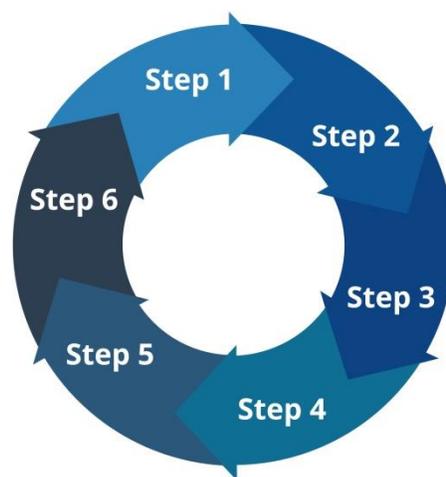
It is worth noting decades of solid research on instruction.⁹ One key finding in particular: instructional practices are not THE main ingredient of improved student achievement. It is the level of focus on using them well with reflective cycles of inquiry combined with clear goals and indicators, frequent productive meetings among collaborating instructors, and facilitation.

Most of the research on instruction is informed by K-12 education. That said, please do not discount K-12 research. Community college personnel dislike it when universities treat community colleges in a similar fashion. Four-year universities have a tremendous amount they could learn from community colleges. Likewise, community colleges and higher education in general have tons they could learn from K-12 research on instruction. The closest to the above K-12 research description in higher education are faculty inquiry groups. Unfortunately, I have seen FIGs become unproductive student-blaming sessions divorced of genuine reflective inquiry and courageous conversations about equity and instruction.

To truly reside at the intersection of data analysis and instructional analysis that improves the quality of instruction and student success, collaborating faculty should meet for at least two hours twice a month. I know, it is a tall order, but the pros of meeting to collaborate and learn from one another to increase student success far outweigh the cons of meeting regularly. Faculty should consider using the following steps:¹⁰

1. Identify and clarify specific and common student needs (learning gaps and equity gaps) to work on based on student learning outcomes, course success data, and latest student work artifacts.
2. Formulate a clear objective for each need; identify related student work to be analyzed.
3. Identify and adopt a promising instructional practice to address the need.

Figure 21. Six-Step Cycle



⁹ Tharp, R. and Gallimore, R. (1989) *Rousing Minds to Life: Teaching, Learning, and Schooling in Social Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press.

Goldenberg, C. (2004). *Successful school change: Creating settings to improve teaching and learning*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Saunders, W.M., Goldenberg, C.N., & Gallimore, R. (2009) Increasing achievement by focusing grade level teams on improving classroom learning: A Prospective, Quasi-experimental Study of Title 1 Schools. *American Educational Research Journal*, 46, 4, 1006-1033.

Ermeling, B. (2010). Tracing the effects of teacher inquiry on classroom practice. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 26 (3), 377-388.

¹⁰ Thanks to Dr. William Saunders of UCLA and the nonprofit Talking Teaching Network for developing steps for improving instruction, which I was able to adopt for higher education.

4. Plan and complete necessary preparation to test the selected practice in the classroom.
5. Deliver the instruction and analyze student work with FIG members to (a) see if the objective is being met, (b) better understand the need, (c) evaluate the effectiveness of selected practice.
6. Reassess, continue, and repeat the cycle or move on to another need.

Each FIG team should be as job-alike as possible. It is not necessarily bad to have cross-functional inquiry among STEM and social science/humanities faculty, but over time faculty will hunger to work on content that is most relevant to them.

Learning Cycle Framework

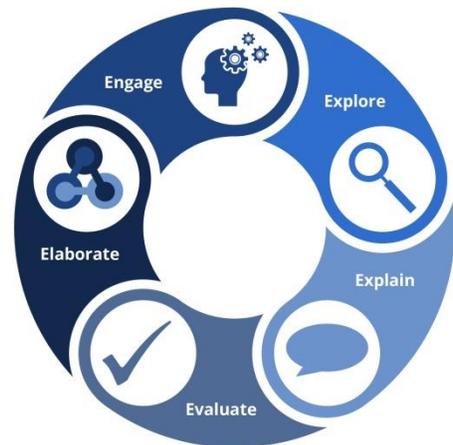
The “5E’s” is an instructional model based on the constructivist approach to learning, which says that learners build or construct new ideas on top of their old ideas. Each of the five E’s describes a phase of learning, and each phase begins with the letter “E”: engage, explore, explain, elaborate, and evaluate. The 5E’s allows students and instructors to experience common activities, use and build on prior knowledge and experience, construct meaning, and continually assess their understanding of a concept.

For example, a faculty member wrote about the importance of the first five minutes of class.¹¹ What he described is the “engage” part of the 5E model.

Surprisingly, the 5E model is still not widely known and/or applied in education. Therefore, I gathered boxes in my garage and searched old files on my computer about the 5E’s (I used to train educators on the 5E’s at many institutions 10 years ago via a federal grant), but then I came across a couple of online resources with a simple and straight-to-the-point description of the 5E’s by the nonprofit public media organization, WGBH, and by NASA.¹²

For Step 3: Identify and adopt a promising instructional practice to address the need, faculty could leverage the 5E Learning Cycle to plan and deliver instruction. Let us say the faculty inquiry group decided to adopt a culturally responsive teaching practice.

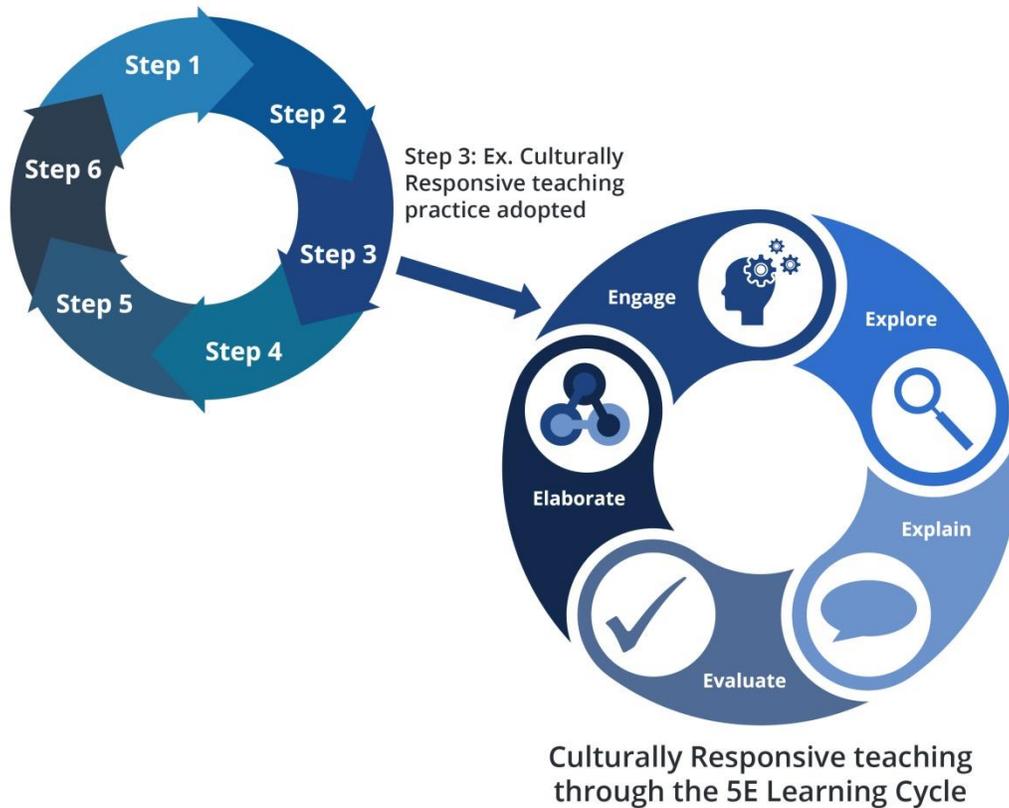
Figure 22. 5E Learning Cycle



¹¹ Source: <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Small-Changes-in-Teaching-The/234869?cid=cp79>

¹² Source: NASA: <https://nasaclips.arc.nasa.gov/teachertoolbox/the5e#collapseOne>
WGBH Corporation for Public Broadcasting: <http://enhancinged.wgbh.org/research/eeee.html>

Figure 23. Instructional Practice Continuous Improvement



Here's the 5Es general description thanks to WGBH and NASA, which I modified for an online learning environment.

ENGAGE: This phase of the 5E's starts the process. An "engage" activity should make connections between past and present learning experiences. Prepare activities that are highly engaging (e.g., thought-provoking visuals, videos, use of polling, etc.). Students should become mentally engaged in the concept, process, or skill to be learned.

EXPLORE: The purpose of this stage is to get students involved in the topic; providing them with a chance to build their own understanding.

Give students the opportunity to get directly involved with the topic. Students could create groups via Google Docs or Facebook Group pages, and if working synchronous, via the Zoom breakout rooms feature. As they work together in groups, students build a set of common experiences which prompts sharing and communicating. The instructor acts as a facilitator via online comments, chats, or real-time if synchronous, guiding the students' focus. The students' inquiry process helps to drive the instruction.

EXPLAIN: This phase helps students explain the concepts they have been exploring. They have opportunities to verbalize their conceptual understanding or to demonstrate new skills or behaviors. Students could create YouTube videos, demonstrating knowledge via Google Docs,

Blogs, Learning Management Systems chat features, etc. This phase also provides opportunities for faculty to introduce formal terms, definitions, and explanations for concepts, processes, skills, or behaviors

ELABORATE: The purpose of this stage is to allow students to use their new knowledge and continue to explore its implications. Through new experiences, the learners develop deeper and broader understanding of major concepts, obtain more information about areas of interest, and refine their skills. Elaborate is the stage where instructors also help students apply their knowledge in other topics.

EVALUATE: The purpose of this stage is for both students and instructors to determine how much learning and understanding has taken place. It's an on-going diagnostic process that allows the instructor to determine if the learner has attained understanding of concepts and knowledge. Evaluation and assessment can occur at all points along the continuum of the instructional process. Some of the tools that assist in this diagnostic process are: rubrics, instructor observation, student interviews, portfolios, project and problem-based learning products--all that could be completed via a variety of software applications. (See assessments section above).

The constructivist educator sets up problems and monitors student exploration, guides student inquiry, and promotes new patterns of thinking. Ultimately, students begin to think of learning as accumulated, evolving knowledge.

When faculty implement the culturally responsive teaching practice (as shown on Figure 23), they would return to Step 5 where they analyze student work with FIG members to (a) see if the objective is being met, (b) better understand the need, (c) evaluate the effectiveness of the selected practice.

Facilitators

When choosing a FIG facilitator, consider an individual who:¹³

- Is willing to serve and to devote the time and energy necessary for the FIG to meet its goals and objectives;
- Is respected by FIG members as a passionate educator with a student-centered, equity-minded approach (or a very promising educator in the case of newer faculty);
- Has the skill to conduct the meetings in a timely manner, stick to the written agenda, facilitate buy-in and ownership from FIG members, and reach consensus when there are differences of opinion;
- Understands (or is willing to learn about) new strategies for improving student success and equity and can explain it to the FIG team and guide it through the inquiry process;

¹³ Thanks to Dr. William Saunders for facilitator considerations.

- Has a positive attitude in general and does not dwell on the negative; and
- Has the skill to keep FIG meetings from drifting off focus to gripe sessions.

It will not be possible to have all faculty participate in instructional inquiry. It needs to start with the coalition of the willing. No one has more credibility with a faculty member than another faculty member. If word catches on that improving one's practices is a worthwhile, productive learning experience that gets results for students, let it catch on organically. It is time to move beyond compelling workshops and general ideas about reflective inquiry and do the hard but meaningful work of instructional improvement.

“The college president, vice presidents, and academic senate president are the lynchpins in transformational change work.”

Factor #6: Effective Leadership Challenges

The college president, vice presidents, and academic senate president are the lynchpins in transformational change work. If they do not get along, are unkind, are entirely ego-driven, and/or lack self-awareness and emotional intelligence, then student learning outcomes will continue to be stagnant or move at a snail's pace. It goes back to Factor #1: Lacking a Culture of Kindness (or Not Prevalent). As the saying goes, when the fish rots, it starts from the head. To be fair, college leaders often inherit a brutally dysfunctional and toxic culture that can take years to heal and manage. Because leadership is the lynchpin, this section provides the most approaches.

Strategies to Address Factor #6

FIVE QUESTIONS EVERY COLLEGE LEADER NEEDS TO ASK

I like to use humor when possible. A few years ago, I shared this visual which received a tremendous amount of attention. Some college leaders told me they printed it and have it on their office walls. College leaders need to answer these five questions when they consider the inputs that are being injected—externally or internally—into the institution.

Figure 24. Five Critical Questions

5 QUESTIONS TO ANSWER BEFORE LAUNCHING INITIATIVES

Purpose: What is this sh*t?
(Why should we pursue it?)

Assess: How do we know this sh*t wil work?
(What will make the planning & implementation process successful?)

Leadership: Who will make sure this sh*t happens?
(Who will be the champion to thoughtfully shepherd the work?)

Expertise: Who is going to assist with this sh*t?
(Who will assist to improve the quality of the work?)

Impactful Meetings: Where and when will this sh*t take place?
(What are our settings?)

Just say "no" to false starts & sh*tty planning

To mitigate implementation challenges, I developed what I call the "Five Process Elements" (aka Five Questions) to help college leaders ensure a seamless transition from planning to implementation. To explain the process elements, I will highlight an actual case study of a major multi-million-dollar grant initiative in STEM.

PROCESS ELEMENTS: PURPOSE, ASSESS, LEADERSHIP, EXPERTISE, IMPACTFUL MEETINGS

Purpose

Why should we pursue this initiative? (What is this shit?)

The first process element, Purpose, is about thinking through what would galvanize the college to pursue an initiative, regardless of whether it is internal or externally imposed. What's the elevator speech? What can be articulated, verbally and/or visually, so that people are motivated to take time from their busy schedules to contribute to the planning process?

It was quite simple for my STEM case study example. Over 90% of students, especially those who were disproportionately impacted, failed to persist in STEM.

Sometimes it only takes a statistic to help galvanize an organization.

Of all the process elements, I found that Purpose is often the most challenging and time-consuming for colleges to articulate. This is one of the main reasons Guided Pathways got off

on the wrong foot at so many campuses! Many colleges are so used to focusing on the initiative dollar amounts and/or mandates that they neglect the right messaging to the broader organization and/or community.

Task: Write a 1-3 sentence elevator speech and/or impactful visual of why the organization should implement the initiative.

If educators take quality time to perform this task, they will create a common language throughout the organization for a specific initiative (especially one that is labor-intensive). Anyone involved with the initiative should understand why they are contributing their valuable time and effort to the planning of this endeavor. Stating that participation is mandated is insufficient. People need buy-in and a sense of ownership to make any initiative viable and sustainable.

Assess

What will make the planning and implementation process successful? (How do we know this shit will work?)

The second process element, Assess, is about helping educators understand what indicators of success they should be looking for as they move through their planning. For my case study example, they were continually checking for:

- Faculty member buy-in and ownership;
- Data that supports the initiative; and
- Multi-divisional coordination and contribution.

This institution had a history of writing multi-million-dollar grant proposals through consultants who did not coach them to ensure that they had buy-in/ownership for many of the interventions incorporated into the proposals. The college also had a habit of focusing on how to fill budgets as opposed to focusing on the data to ensure that the interventions were directly aligned with the school's needs. Lastly, because this STEM initiative included the natural sciences, physical sciences (including math), and student services areas, it was critical that these divisions coordinated with one another to contribute to the process.

Helping an institution list anticipated challenges could help avoid a tremendous waste of time. For example, I worked on a major federal initiative, Promise Neighborhoods. This initiative required many partnerships within the community to create cradle-to-career services. One of the key partners was the City. Therefore, a key indicator of success for the planning process was to ensure buy-in from the City. The City was at first enthusiastic about participating, but once it learned that the federal government required a dollar-for-dollar match, it bowed out. We learned this in the early stages of the process. All work ceased immediately. Imagine if we had not listed City buy-in as an indicator of success in the early stages? It would have been a waste of time and effort.

Task: List what indicators of success to look for as the college proceeds with planning.

Think about examples such as timely data collection, buy-in from key stakeholders, issues of capacity, and so on. The key is to be aware of anticipated challenges in order to be better prepared to address them.

Leadership

Who is the champion to thoughtfully shepherd the work? (Who will make sure this shit happens?)

The third process element, Leadership, focuses on helping an organization identify who will be the leader(s) to shepherd the hard work, dealing with everything from maneuvering internal politics to continually gauging indicators of success. In my case study example, the lead point of contact had been directing STEM efforts in the past. This individual had support from higher levels of the organization and from faculty. It was an easy pick.

Leadership identification varies depending on the college. It can often be completed rather quickly. However, in many instances when I asked, “Who will be the lead for the organization to prepare this initiative?” I have received deer-in-the-headlight looks. In fact, some responded, “We thought that was you!” I cannot dictate the interventions and how they will implement them. I remind them of how often initiatives fall apart during implementation because key stakeholders never agreed to the interventions (i.e., lack of buy-in/ownership).

Task: Decide who will provide effective leadership to shepherd the hard work ahead.

Keep in mind that the best person to choose for this leadership role does not necessarily need to be an expert in the content area of the initiative. Consider this person’s skills and personality. Can this person facilitate a meeting? Can this person listen to other people’s ideas without shooting them down? Is this person highly organized? Does this person have a strong record of follow-through? Does this person communicate in a timely manner?

I have been in situations in which the leader chosen is highly knowledgeable about the content area of an initiative but quite frankly could not, for example, facilitate a meeting effectively. In fact, being a content expert made him feel like he needed to dominate the conversation, shutting down the rest of the group. He was more concerned with hearing himself talk than listening to what other people had to say.

I am not suggesting that someone be excluded from a leadership opportunity who is an expert in an initiative’s content area. What I highly recommend is to remember other key qualities when choosing the initiative team leader(s). One institution took this advice to heart and actually decided on a different leader than it had originally planned. These subtle but powerful suggestions will make the planning process much more productive for everyone.

Expertise

Who will assist to improve the quality of the work? (Who is going to assist with this shit?)

The fourth process element, Expertise, is about helping educators identify who will make the quality of the work better. In my case study example, the Expertise identified was the Information Technology Director and myself. Institutions often need to decide to onboard an external person for a specific initiative. For example, if the institution is creating a program in logistics but has minimal experience in this area, an expert can significantly improve the quality of the work. In terms of grants, sometimes the expert is a grant writer who has a strong track record in a particular focus area, or perhaps a generalist who can make an effective argument regardless of the topic. In terms of a comprehensive initiative such as Guided Pathways, an external perspective and coaching support has proven vital to ensure that the organization continually works on clarity, coherence, and consensus.

Task: Identify what expertise is necessary to improve the quality of the work.

Expertise does not always need to be external. In my case study, the internal IT person was identified because the institution wanted to make investments in technology for the STEM initiative. The IT director ended up providing a dose of reality as he reminded the institution that it lacked the capacity and infrastructure for some of the technology suggestions.

Impactful Meetings

What are our settings and how do we make the best use of meeting time? (Where and when will this shit take place?)

The fifth and final process element, Impactful Meetings, is one of the most highly underestimated tasks one can undertake. If not done well, the planning and implementation process can easily fall apart. In my case study, we established a STEM grant team meeting with key stakeholders. The key to a successful primary team meeting is the pre-meeting meeting.

Task: Create a team(s) composed of key stakeholders and a setting—a pre-meeting meeting—to support the team meeting. What does this look like in your context?

The pre-meeting meeting helps ensure that the team meeting is as productive as possible. This is where the agenda is crafted, where the group will troubleshoot, and where next steps are followed through from the team meeting. When establishing these meetings, consider:

- Who should participate in each of the settings and how will they be invited;
- How frequently should each setting take place;
- Who will be in charge of coordinating schedules;
- Who will take minutes; and
- Who will facilitate the meetings.

I believe that excellence can often be defined by doing the ordinary extraordinarily well. The five process elements help to make better sense of inputs that are injected into the institution. If possible, the tasks should be drafted in one session, and revisited throughout the planning and implementation process.

THE THREE-MONTH REALITY CHECK COLLEGE LEADERS NEED TO SOLVE

Another approach is to overcome what everybody knows to be true but hardly anyone says at the college: a typical campus only has about three months to work on initiatives! Yes, three! Here's another visual I shared that received much attention.

Figure 25. The Three-Month Reality Check



In other words, October, March, and April could be devoted to quality work at a typical campus. That's it! How do we problem-solve the time constraint challenge? Don't be a typical campus! Consider the following summer and winter session activities:

Online options:

1. Hold virtual mini-retreats.
2. Attend webinars with colleagues and have a post-webinar debrief.

3. Participate in online meetings with colleagues from other campuses to share promising practices.
4. Provide modest stipends for faculty to attend important planning meetings.

In-person options:

1. Hold mini-retreats. Perhaps someone could host at their home!
2. Attend workshops with colleagues.
3. Have lunch with colleagues from other campuses to share promising practices.
4. Provide modest stipends for faculty to attend important planning meetings.

Campuses that halt important priorities over the summer and winter session inevitably lose momentum. Key decisions do not have to be made during the summer and winter, but find ways to be productive in those critical months.

In terms of the other months, consider the following tips:

- When creating structures specific to major priorities such as Guided Pathways and equity work, ensure that the workgroups are scheduled to meet at least three times per month.
- Do not shoot for 100% workgroup attendance. Sixty to seventy percent is fine, and DO NOT spend a lot of time in the meeting bringing people up-to-speed on what happened at the previous meeting (that is what emailed meeting minutes are for).
- It can be highly situational, but for the most part, DO NOT seek unanimity at workgroup meetings. General consensus is fine.
- Use video conferencing technology to give people flexibility to meet.
- Make sure there is a share-back to a larger body and across workgroups so that workgroups do not become silos.
- Ensure there is a preparation meeting with an agenda. People are likely to disengage from the work if their time is wasted with unproductive meetings.
- Start and end the meetings on time. Honor those who made it to the meeting on time, and respect that people need to get to other meetings on time.

As leaders shepherd priorities at their campus, consider the following leadership dispositions,¹⁴ which can mean the difference between the work continuing or stalling:

- Toughen and thicken your skin.
- Grow and refine your patience.
- Guard and maintain your hope.
- Exercise, but monitor, your license to lead.

¹⁴ Thanks again to Dr. William Saunders for his words of wisdom.

- Disinvite and dis-involve your ego.
- Fear not the evaluation of your efforts.
- Clarify, re-clarify, and remember your focus.
- Leverage pedagogy (Keep asking yourself as you articulate activities and goals, "How do I teach this well?").
- Treat people with kindness.

We need to think creatively about how to make the best use of our time and leverage leadership dispositions in order to maintain momentum. There is too much at stake if we fail to problem-solve decades-old time constraint challenges.

“Doers, simply, do the work.”

“DOERS VS INPUTTERS” DYNAMIC

What exacerbates the three-month timing challenge is that leaders rarely take stock of who will actually be a "doer" vs an "inputter" in a committee, task force, or workgroup. People volunteer or are assigned to a body, but more often than not, no one knows from the very beginning who will do the work and who would provide input only.

Doers, simply, do the work. They make sure there is a preparation meeting for the primary meeting, set up the agenda, facilitate the meeting, and (here is where the hard work comes in) follow up on all next steps resulting from the meetings, which is the critical in-between meetings work. Inputters help improve the quality of the work. They provide suggestions, advice, and guidance, but rarely do any of the work. Unfortunately, I've seen too many situations where inputters comprised 80%-90% of the group and doers only 10%-20%. This situation leads to resentment and burn-out among the doers.

“Inputters ... provide suggestions, advice, and guidance, but rarely do any of the work.”

How do we address this challenge? Here are two tips for consideration. First, if the meetings and work have commenced already, add "doer vs inputter" to the agenda. Have a collegial discussion (without alienating the inputters, as they may be doers in other groups) about how to distribute the work more evenly across the team. If the doer and inputter composition remain unchanged, then at least the team will have a realistic expectation of how much work will get accomplished. More people could be asked to join the team, focusing on recruiting doers.

Second, if a committee, task force, or workgroup, is in its formative stage, create a logic model as a team to discuss long-term outcomes and what outputs, activities, and resources will be needed to achieve the agreed-upon outcomes. From there, take the activities and set the expectation that people will need to contribute to the work in order to complete activities. Ask people what activities

they would like to work on and complete. Rather than asking people from the very beginning who wants to be a doer and who wants to be an inputter, give everyone a chance to respond to the work that is required. One may be surprised at how many more doers one gets by going through this process. If there is still a significant imbalance of doers and inputters, continue to recruit more doers as the team continues forming.

Do's: Take stock of doers and inputters in current committees, workgroups, task forces, etc., and make adjustments accordingly.

Don'ts: Ignore the fact that there are probably a multitude of doers who are experiencing burn out at your campus. Do not make them feel bad for speaking out. It reinforces their reluctance to say anything in the first place because they do not want to be perceived as a "can't hack it" employee.

If a group fails to be intentional about addressing the doers vs inputters dynamic, priorities will fall by the way side and students will end up paying the price.

AVOID THE “BEST PRACTICES” TERM

I have found “best practice” to be a useless term because it often stalls the work of change, especially when its used ad nauseum by college leaders. Unfortunately, the administration/faculty dynamics at many campuses are such that faculty sometimes perceive “best practices” as top-down language indicating that the leadership knows what is “best.” In addition to perceptions, here are two reasons why leaders should reconsider the term “best practices.”

Best Practices Are Relative

First of all, a “best practice” at one college does not always apply to another. For example, I have seen faculty-to-student mentoring at one campus produce positive results but not at another campus. Mentoring could be considered a “best practice,” but in this case, mentoring was a better fit within the culture of the organization and therefore more effectively implemented at one institution compared to the other.

In addition, sometimes it is the littlest things that make the biggest difference. I enjoy qualitative research, such as digging through interviews and/or focus groups to gain a deeper understanding of why the quantitative data is telling us something is not working effectively. For example, I conducted a focus group with students that produced one emerging theme: they did not like the receptionist at the counseling center. They offered numerous examples of her unkind nature. The “best practice” the institution tried to employ was an early alert system whereby faculty would alert counselors early on in the semester if students were struggling with academic and/or nonacademic issues. Over time, the institution could not figure out why this “best

“
...a “best
practice” at
one college
does not
always apply
to another.

practice” was not working effectively. It turns out that students had a negative feeling toward this service because the point of entry to it (the receptionist) was unpleasant.

An argument can be made that if the practices above were followed exactly as intended, they could in fact work effectively and still be referred to as “best practices.” But there lies part of the problem. Each institution will interpret, modify, or unwittingly do something to the practice that will essentially redefine it. In addition, the culture of an organization itself could have a significant impact. To return to the mentoring activity, peer-to-peer mentoring worked much better than faculty-to-student mentoring because faculty members felt better equipped to train, monitor, and coach peer mentors than to perform the mentoring themselves. Students at this particular institution also felt more comfortable being mentored by peers than by faculty members.

“Evidence-Based Practice” vs “Best Practice”

An evidence-based practice should go through a rigorous research study demonstrating a statistically significant outcome and be published in a highly reputable peer-reviewed journal(s). However, there are two challenges with evidence-based practices: scarcity and replication. There are not enough evidence-based studies to choose from, and any modification to the practice should not be considered evidence-based anymore. Nonetheless, many leaders still refer to “evidence-based” practices as “best practices.” An “evidence-based” practice is just that: a practice based in evidence. That is it. It should not be called a “best practice,” because “best” denotes that the practice cannot improve and/or that it will fit perfectly anywhere it is implemented. Even the most rigorously tested evidence-based model needs continued study, especially in different settings.

If an evidence-based model demonstrates increases in student achievement in high-income area colleges, should it be considered a “best practice” for low-income area colleges to implement? If an evidenced-based model produces positive student outcomes in colleges serving high-income populations where there might be minimal leadership turnover, should it be considered a “best practice” for colleges enrolling low-income students, where there might be high leadership turn over?

The U.S. Department of Education has encouraged potential grant applicants to implement student interventions from statistically significant studies. One recommended study described a coaching model for students. The research on this model is solid. I have heard many educators call this student coaching model a “best practice” or “high-impact practice.” The problem is that the model includes an external, for-profit entity that provides a proprietary student coaching curriculum primarily for private four-year universities. How are institutions supposed to replicate this “best practice”? They could purchase the service, but the intent of these grant opportunities is for institutions to implement interventions internally that are eventually institutionalized.

I have been encouraging leaders for years to consider using the term “promising practice” in lieu of “best practice.” A “best practice” gives the impression that it is a one size fits all approach, often given undue credit by people who interchange “evidence-based” with “best

practices,” and many self-proclaimed “thought leaders” have pushed this term for self-promotion reasons.

If explained with honesty and integrity, a promising practice should inform us of the following:

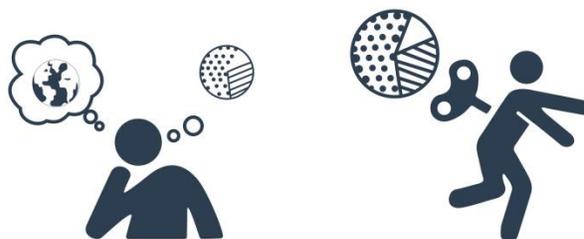
- That an intervention, practice, activity, framework, process, program, or project was initiated and produced positive results. (Note: While the overall goal is to increase student outcomes, preliminary positive results could be about improved organizational processes, efficiencies, or other areas.)
- Step-by-step of how the practice was implemented.
- Challenges to implementation and lessons learned.
- Any related research and/or evaluation, if available.

This should give us sufficient information to implement a practice for our unique context without any promises or guarantees that it will produce unrealistic organizational improvements and/or student outcomes. If the practice is in its infancy and has minimal data to support it, perhaps “promising” is too strong a word to describe it. Perhaps consider using “emerging practice.”

DATA-DRIVEN VS DATA-INFORMED

I appreciate the visual in Figure 26 to the right because it shows the difference between being data-driven and data-informed. In the president’s cabinet, or executive team—whatever it is called—I often see a lot of data-driven decision-making. It results in an almost robotic, “let’s go with what we know and implement immediately!” mode of operation. Data-informed decisions take time because they require one to be much more thoughtful.

Figure 26. Data-Informed vs Data-Driven



Understanding the differences between these terms can have a long-term impact on how a campus addresses equity and student success. Below are a series of examples of the different decisions that might arise from a data-driven process versus a data-informed process.

Example 1

Data-driven decision-making:

COVID-19 student surveys show that 78% of students have access to a working computer at home, and 55% of students state they have adequate internet access to be successful online.

Work with companies to provide free broadband access.

Data-informed decision-making:

Further investigation shows that 28% of African-American students have access to a working computer at home and 12% have adequate internet access.

What's the strategy now?

Example 2

Data-driven decision-making:

Visits to the math tutoring center are up. In addition, students are having longer tutoring sessions.

Fantastic metrics! No changes needed.

Date-informed decision-making:

Math tutoring center metrics are up. Does that mean the tutoring center is having a positive impact on math course success rates for students participating in tutoring? Additional investigation shows minimal impact.

What's the strategy now?

Example 3

Data-driven decision-making:

Enrollment is down by 15% compared to the previous year.

We should increase marketing efforts via radio ads and increase outreach efforts to all feeder high schools.

Data-informed decision-making:

Enrollment is down. Further investigation reveals that the Latina/o/x student population in the service area is 55%, and the college Latina/o/x student population is 27%. Furthermore, Latina/o/x student enrollment is down by 30% compared to the previous year and down roughly 15% with all other groups.

What's the strategy now?

Example 4

Data-driven decision-making:

The student success rate across all English courses at the college is 50%.

Data-informed decisions take time because they require one to be much more thoughtful.

Invest in supplemental instruction.

Data-informed decision-making:

English success rates are low, but further investigation shows Pell recipients are struggling the most.

Should the campus continue to focus on students as the problem? Is our standard and expensive tutoring strategy the best option to remedy these achievement gaps? Are there policies and practices that are hindering equity and student success?

What's the strategy now?

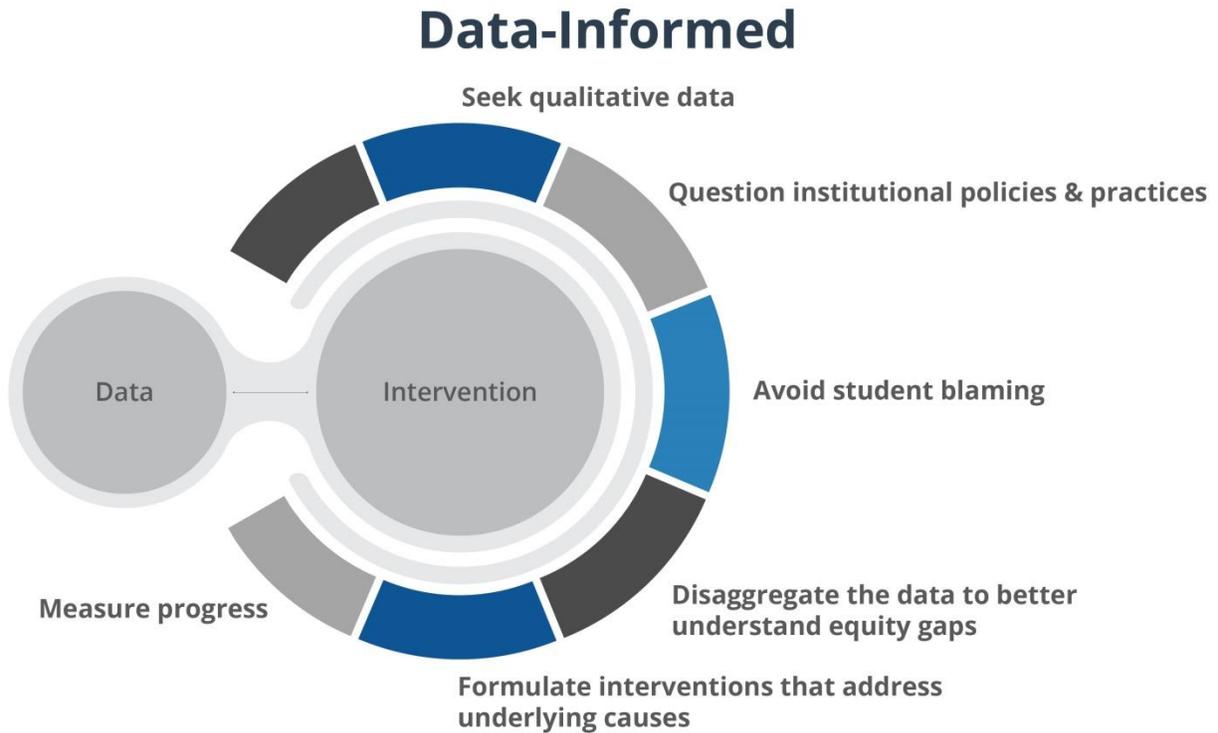
Data-driven decision-making is important, but without further investigation and follow-up, we might miss the critical elements at hand. The risk of a purely data-driven culture is that it can result in wasted time and expensive interventions that fail to address the underlying challenges. Data-driven decision-making can often look like this:

Figure 27. Data-Driven Model



There is often a direct line from data analysis to standard go-to interventions. Data-informed decision-making is much more "colorful." Depending on the campus, it looks something like this:

Figure 28. Data-Informed Model



College leaders set the tone for a data-informed culture that informs what critical questions need to be answered in order to get at the root of the problem. In addition, a data-informed culture can reduce complacency when the data “looks good,” such as in the math tutoring center example.

LEAD WITH KINDNESS

One enduring skill I learned three decades ago in the military is how to make my shoes shine, as the little orphan Annie would say, “like the top of the Chrysler building,” through a skill called “spit shining.” The process involves rubbing a pair of shoes in a small circular motion with a soft cloth, shoe polish, and a touch of water (I do not actually use spit). The shoe-shining motion helps to clear my mind as I think of nothing else (no worries, concerns, or anxiety), but to make my shoes look beautiful and last longer because of the care I am putting into them. I do not take short cuts such as applying “instant shine” Kiwi-brand bottles.

We can often tell the difference between something that was neglected and/or done quickly and something that took time to nurture. Metaphorically, we can

Figure 29. Neglect vs Care



Neglect

Care

think about shoe care in the way we care for our coworkers, subordinates, colleagues, peers, and even those above us in the organizational chart. As I stated from the very beginning, a prevalent issue as colleges embark on transformational change is how people treat one another. Bullying exists at campuses, and many personnel feel powerless because they are often (but not exclusively) experiencing the bullying from the highest levels of the institution.

I have seen my good share of people struggle mightily with the role they were assigned or decided to take on. To pour salt on the wound, I have also seen those in the upper echelons of the organizational chart nod their heads with disappointment as they tell the story of an employee who failed to execute.

Employing external attributions (looking outside oneself) tends to be easy. It is those internal attributions (focusing on our own behavior) that leaders need to reflect on. Some employees fail because, among other issues, they are unwilling to continually improve. However, people in positions of leadership do not often do enough to turn on their internal attributions “button” in order to self-reflect on whether they sufficiently helped a team member to succeed. Did the team members who partially or completely failed to execute receive the appropriate amount of time, attention, and nurturing needed to make them successful (i.e., shine)? A leader may have the ends in mind (e.g., a vision for success), but if the support needed to ensure the means are well executed are absent, leaders should not be surprised when the vision is unsuccessful. For a pair of shoes to shine brilliantly, there is a process that involves quality care, patience, and persistence.

With a focus on external attributions, it is rather easy (and commonplace) for people in positions of leadership to point fingers. Instead, let us consider focusing on internal attributions in order to be honest with ourselves when things go wrong. Did the team members receive the quality mentoring and coaching support needed to help ensure that they were successful? Note that mentoring and coaching should not be equated with micromanaging. The former can allow people to make mistakes along the way, but it is also supposed to prevent team members from failing fantastically. Micromanaging is typically the result of a bad hire and in some cases (unfortunately) someone’s approach to management (which more often than not results in low employee morale).

Institutions of higher education are embarking on redesigning the way they serve students. Will leaders from across the institution provide planning and implementation support and treat team members with kindness, or take a bullying approach (demeaning, yelling, slamming things, and threats) when things go wrong? The culture of the organization and its ability to

“ With a toxic culture of external attributions— that often leads to bullying— improving student equity and success is almost impossible. ”

improve practices and student success is at stake. With a toxic culture of external attributions—that often leads to bullying—improving student equity and success is almost impossible. So, again, let us treat people with kindness.

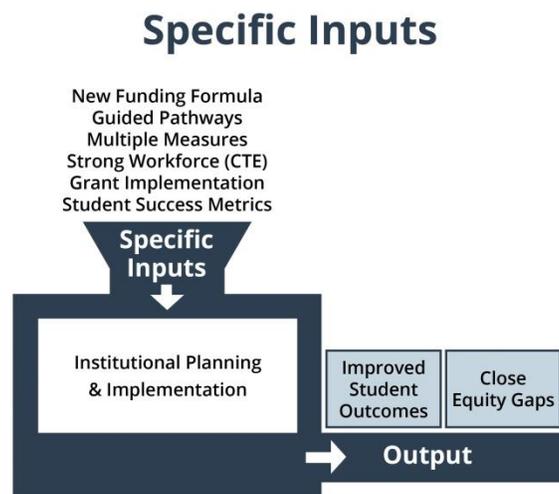
Bringing it All Together

I liken my work to cooking. I will help calibrate the oven, ensure the pots, pans, and other tools are in order, and even help sequence how to cook a delicious meal. However, I do not provide the food. That is up to the college and the experts (e.g., experts in racial equity, instructional technology, scheduling, facilities, etc.). Having worked for years in both K12 and higher education settings, I know the dish will not be that good when the food is cooked in a broken oven, and with cooking tools that are out-of-date. I'm the process and structures guy. The experts bring in the content.

As I stated in the beginning, there are no silver bullets in education. Improving student success and equity is about a college's ability to continuously improve. The good news is that colleges want to genuinely improve. Let us review how.

Improving student success and equity is about a college's ability to continuously improve.

Figure 30.



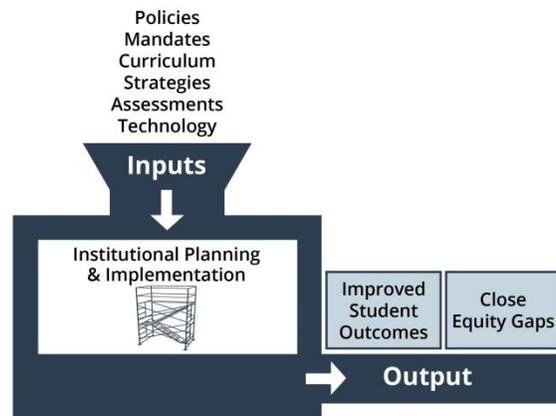
Given all the inputs, why aren't degree and transfer rates significantly higher and remarkable reductions in equity gaps?

Repetition can be an effective teaching tool. Allow me to repeat. Why do inputs rarely turn into campus-wide significant increases in student outcomes and equity gap reductions? A weak

structure and support system that hinders the most important foundational and recurring action colleges need to undertake: continuous improvement.

Figure 31.

Answer: A Weak Structure & Support Hinders



A weak structure and support hinders continuous improvement of the institution

In Figure 31, the structure and support image inside the planning and implementation box represents what is needed to be addressed in order for college educators to make better sense of all the inputs injected into their institution and how to have what I like to call the Three Cs: Clarity, Coherence, Consensus.

Figure 32. Six Factors



1. Lacking a Culture of Kindness (or Not Prevalent)
2. Unproductive Committee Structure
3. Lacking a Student-Centered Framework
4. Silos, Silos, Silos
5. Lack of Faculty Teaching Preparation
6. Effective Leadership Challenges

The table on the next page summarizes the approaches that collectively help to set the conditions for continuous improvement work. My goal was to provide the necessary visuals and language to explain *why* colleges struggle and to provide practical approaches to address the challenges. In the end, the devil is in the details with the suggested approaches. It will take an enormous amount of hard work, innovation, and exceptional leadership from across the campus to bring all of the suggested approaches together to get results for students.

Six Factors	Weak Structure & Support	Approaches
<i>Why Colleges Struggle to Implement Priorities</i>	<i>Issue</i>	<i>Learned...</i>
1. Lacking a Culture of Kindness (or Not Prevalent)	Support	Four strategies to be kind
2. Unproductive Committee Structure	Structure	A process to improve the committee structure
3. Lacking a Student-Centered Framework	Structure	How to leverage student journey frameworks
4. Silos, Silos, Silos	Structure	How student services and instruction can effectively collaborate
5. Lack of Faculty Teaching Preparation	Structure & Support	How to continually improve instructional practices
6. Effective Leadership Challenges	Support	<p>Note: This section has the most approaches because leadership is the lynchpin.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Five questions to answer before launching priorities • The three-month reality check • To recognize the doer vs inpointer dynamic • To avoid the term “best practices” • To understand the difference between data-driven and data-informed decision making • To lead with kindness

Now, all you have left is everything.

About Dr. Al Solano



What I do:

I use my expertise in coaching, facilitation, training, and project management to support institutions of higher education to effectively plan and implement homegrown practices that increase student success and equity.

How I do it:

I'm a strong believer in kindness. A meaningful test of success in life is how helpful we are in contributing to our fellow human being's happiness.

I help institutions with what I call the "Three Cs": Clarity, Coherence, Consensus. Without setting the conditions for relentless clarity and coherence, consensus ultimately fails to occur and priorities such as closing equity gaps and nurturing a culture of continuous improvement fade and never take root.

I believe that for institutions of higher education to be productive places of learning for students, they must also be for college personnel. Therefore, institutions that are eager to get results, embed me in their key settings so I can coach them through the hard work.

Why I do it:

In addition to a relentless focus to improve student success and equity, to understand the "why" is to understand my story.

I was a New York City kid whose first language was Spanish with mediocre high school grades who ends up at Cornell University thanks to the California **community college system**.

I was a returning student after serving in the Marine Corps. The humanitarian deployment to Somalia in '92 had a significant impact on me and sparked my **interest in education**.

I started my career in K12 teaching and school management, including serving on a research, development, and implementation team (founded by Stanford & UCLA researchers and school practitioners) that coached principals and teachers nationally.

I began working at colleges in the early 2000's, leading large-scale grant planning and implementation efforts that increased student success.

I've run my private practice for over a decade, serving 30+ institutions to support the planning and implementation of small, medium, and large-scale initiatives.

Along the way I earned a doctorate in education from UCLA. I appreciate research and scholarship, but I'm first and foremost a practitioner. My most meaningful training for my work was growing in NYC, constantly working to resolve conflict and facilitate conversations as a kid. The benefits of martial arts has played a significant positive role in my life. My good sense of humor is often the pole that adds balance to the steps as I walk tight ropes.

Words on Coaching

There has been a lack of clarity about coaches versus consultants. For the record, I'm not a consultant. Consultants have a tendency to tell institutions what to do. My approach is to help educators plan and implement homegrown practices. This way, there is a greater chance of buy-in, ownership, and sustainability. In addition, countless educators have shared with me that they have had coaches for their college, but they were more like cheerleaders; not embedded in the work to help keep the momentum going.

Getting results sometimes requires ongoing external coaching from an expert facilitator. Depending on the campus, it can sometimes take courage to ask for external assistance. Therefore, campuses need to thoroughly vet who they bring in to help. Some initial questions campuses should consider:

- What's the coach's approach?
- What references does she or he have, and do they include a significant number of faculty?
- What's his or her record of getting results?



Contact me about coaching at al@continuous-learning.com

Coach AI Quotes

A selection from 30+ quotes from over the years

“

Institutions achieve student success
when college educators help each other succeed.

A college is like a living organism. Treat it with toxicity,
it produces negative outcomes. Treat it with kindness,
it produces positive outcomes.

We make students' lives unnecessarily difficult in the name of rigor.
Maintain rigor by improving pedagogy and thinking creatively how to
assess student learning. This is even more important as institutions
remain remote for an indefinite amount of time.

Colleges lose critical initiative momentum when leaders neglect to
behave like teachers and faculty neglect to behave like leaders.

Institutional conservatives (ICs) protect the status-quo.
Ironically, too many ICs are social justice proponents
who care about equity outside the academy, but not within.

Consensus is impossible without clarity and coherence.
Use the "Three Cs" in all college endeavors:
Clarity, Coherence, Consensus.

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