PASS

Promoting At-Promise Student Success

Challenges to Expanding and Spreading the Work of Professional Learning Communities

The **Promoting At-promise Student Success** (PASS) Project is a longitudinal mixed methods research-to-practice partnership with three University of Nebraska (NU) campuses. During the first stage of the project, we identified the concept of Ecological Validation (EV) to explain why and how at-promise students experienced academic and psychosocial success in a comprehensive college transition program. The second stage of the project included developing cross-functional learning communities on each of the campuses to explore how to leverage the concept of EV to create broader institutional change in the hopes of improving outcomes for all at-promise students.

We have written about what facilitates the process of PLC members spreading what they have learned in order to expand the implementation of ecological validation. In this brief, we outline the key challenges that PLCs experienced and highlight how participants navigated them. In addition, we share insights to help others identify these challenges and move past them. The PLCs in our study found ways to move past these challenges by working collaboratively with each other and other educators across campus.

Getting Senior Leadership Buy-In

Support of senior leadership helped facilitate learning and the process of spreading ideas across campus. Campus leaders often have a multitude of priorities to address and are increasingly turning over their positions at a rapid pace, with five to six years being the average term in a position. As a result, it can be difficult to get on senior leaders' radar to obtain support or to navigate frequent turnover of leaders. Without senior leaders at least symbolically supporting student success work, it is hard to obtain traction on campus and garner new resources to engage in needed professional development, or for faculty and staff to rethink their approaches to work. At a minimum, symbolic support through leaders noting the importance of the PLC work can encourage members to invest time and effort into learning. Even better though, is if senior leaders make EV a priority and allocate funding and human resources in support of its expansion into campus culture.

Campuses were able to navigate this challenge and secure senior leadership buy-in in several ways:

- Connecting EV to other campus priorities such as accreditation
- Aligning EV work with strategic plans and priorities within them
- Managing up and sending information that convinced senior leaders to alter their priorities
- Having a relatively senior-level PLC facilitator who had access to senior leadership and could have regular meetings with them

Feeling Disempowered to Lead from the Middle

Another leadership-related barrier was PLC members feeling disempowered within the campus hierarchy and not believing they were able to effectuate change. Even though many studies demonstrate that change can happen from the bottom-up or through mid-level leaders, many people involved with the PLCs in our study doubted their ability to lead change. To navigate this challenge, PLCs can structure activities and opportunities that allow members to see themselves as leaders, to believe change is possible, and to see the power in collective or shared leadership. Please see our *Developing Shared Leadership Within Professional Learning Communities for Transformational Change Aimed at At-promise Student Success* brief about PLC-related activities, processes and structures that can help overcome the challenge of campus hierarchy and general feelings of disempowerment.

Lack of Institutional Incentives

Campus incentive systems, particularly for faculty, are often not aligned with many of the activities that research shows promote student success (e.g., mentoring, teaching excellence, proactive advising, cross-functional collaboration). Trying to spread and obtain more buy-in from faculty, staff and administrators for work they will likely not be rewarded for can be challenging. And, in some cases, the reward systems de-incentivize this work by prioritizing tasks that are not aligned with student success. There are always those who enjoy the intrinsic rewards (and believe in doing this for students) — these people can and should be some of the first people to join such efforts. However, to expand and sustain involvement will mean addressing reward and incentive systems to encourage participation more broadly. Campuses can start with more easily-achievable goals such as creating awards or recognition and celebrating those who are doing the work. We found these actions went a long way toward gaining support among more faculty and staff. In addition, awards and recognition often involves a public explanation of why the individual received the award — these serve as practical examples of how to do the work. However, long-term educator evaluation systems need to be shifted in support of EV. Staff systems are often easier to adjust more immediately compared with faculty reward systems. Campuses also began to change their hiring and orientation processes to include EV, which supported the hiring of people oriented to this work who were open to considering and championing new reward systems.

Understanding that Seemingly Small Changes Can Lead to Culture Change

Many faculty and staff perceived institutional change to primarily be large-scale efforts that were led by a senior leader. They did not necessarily understand how they could lead change within their spheres of influence, which included their individual, unit-level, and campus-level committee work. As a result, some of the members felt disempowered from leading change efforts. However, they came to understand how institutional change can occur when a cross-functional group of educators leverage the concept of ecological validation to create changes within their various units across campus. This process is called incremental transformation. Communicating how each change can be connected to a much bigger shift in the environment was a powerful way to obtain engagement.

Moving Deep Learning Out to Other People

PLC members underwent an in-depth learning experience. They felt it would be impractical to require everyone on campus to engage in six to eight months of deep learning, which included two to three hour-long monthly meetings as well as reading a book, research articles and case studies. At the same time, they were concerned that providing a one-off training or a superficial overview of EV would not shift beliefs, behaviors or practices. PLC members moved past this challenge by designing shorter but immersive learning experiences, offering to mentor people who came to professional development sessions, and providing multiple professional development offerings over time to help deepen knowledge. They also leveraged materials we had created as well as some they developed to encourage educators to continue the work within their unit-level meetings.

Ineffective Collaboration

Fostering effective collaboration across campus given institutional silos can prove challenging. A university's decentralized structure, faculty burnout or overload, lack of trust across units—often stemming from minimal institutional support for relationship-building, and past failed collaboration efforts,—further undermines attempts to work together. By bringing faculty and staff from different units together, the PLC was able to facilitate building relationships with colleagues and learning about their roles, creating a space for critical dialogue, expanding understandings of support for at-promise student success, and validating faculty and staff efforts to foster at-promise student success. Furthermore, the PLC's structure and effective facilitation strategies enabled the group to build trust and cultivate meaningful relationships, and consequently create plans that emphasized the culture of EV with the larger campus, all with the goal of improving at-promise student outcomes.

Short-staffing and Burnout

The COVID-19 pandemic, budget issues and ongoing political and cultural attacks on college campuses have led to fewer people being employed to do and complete the same amount of work, and many educators experience burnout in higher education. This environment makes it hard to ask colleagues to do more. Staff and faculty cannot fully overcome this very real and on-going challenge. But PLC members discussed how embedding EV does not add to one's work and is about rethinking one's approach. Emphasizing that this approach does not mean more work helped some campus educators embrace EV. Others were convinced by the benefits of enacting EV that were communicated by PLC members. So having a strong communications plan can help overcome this challenge. Our website housing briefs about developing a **communications plan** and the role of **coordinating groups** as well as a longer **article** on moving towards institutional culture change.

Assessing and Showing Progress on Such a Largescale Effort

Many staff, faculty and administrators noted that they could better expand the effort and involve others if they demonstrated how they were making progress and how they would continue to assess and communicate results moving forward. Many educators have seen reform efforts come and go with little accountability or follow-through, making faculty and staff leery to get on board with new change initiatives. We developed several instruments that help with assessing progress. One **tool** is designed for individual-level reflection; another **tool** identifies the degree to which EV is implemented in units across campus. A third **tool** focuses on making progress as a PLC and moving towards a sustainable group.