PASS

Promoting At-Promise Student Success

Developing Shared Leadership Within Professional Learning Communities for Transformational Change Aimed at At-promise Student Success

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. The learning process involved leveraging the concept of EV to create a shared language and understanding of the current challenges on campus, which led to Professional Learning Community (PLC) participants to consider changes that were aligned.

Shared leadership among faculty, staff and leaders is needed to facilitate collaboration; and institutional change is needed to improve at-promise student experiences and outcomes. However, shared leadership does not exist on most campuses; instead, hierarchical leadership tends to permeate higher education. Based upon our study of PLCs, we found that one of the key outcomes of cross-functional PLCs is the development of shared leadership by helping participants to see their responsibility for student success. In addition, we documented how the PLCs enabled participants to see themselves as part of broader leadership processes aimed at facilitating unit- and institutional-level change. PLCs de-emphasize leadership as only being possessed by those in senior leadership positions and instead highlight leadership as a process that anyone can engage in to support institutional change.

Shared leadership within PLCs does not eliminate the need for positional leaders (e.g., president, chancellor, provost, deans), but places them within the context of a collective process. Positional leaders can support or hinder shared leadership, for example, by how they provide human or financial resources, build trust, or mentor others. Positional leaders also play key roles for the institution and can facilitate institutional change through shifting institutional-level policies, practices and structures; altering rewards; and setting priorities. In this brief, we describe the importance of senior leaders in supporting the process of faculty and staff learning and enacting shared leadership.

But how can a campus create shared leadership? Our research identified what learning needs to occur to enable faculty and staff to be part of shared leadership and how to design a PLC to develop these outcomes. Our research identified three key developmental outcomes that occured in the PLCs for individuals to target as they design their own PLCs. The research also identified how the PLC activities and processes contributed to these outcomes. The ultimate goal of this work is to facilitate the process of encouraging faculty and staff to embrace their responsibility for improving student experiences and outcomes as well as feeling empowered to enact change.

Leadership Development Outcomes

PLC members experienced a shift in *perspective* (seeing themselves as leaders), *cognition* (learning to think together), and *action* (acting in a coordinated and collective way), that helped a shared leadership process emerge. This shared leadership approach fostered changes that occurred throughout campus as staff, faculty and lower-level leaders felt empowered to enact changes within their spheres of influence in a coordinated way.

The process tended to unfold, first, in a shift of perspective and secondly a shift to cognition. This led to coordinated action; however, each of these processes also influenced each other. For example, embarking on coordinated action deepened the PLC members' perspective that they were leaders on campus. Through the shifts in perspective, cognition and action, shared leadership was created and supported on the three campuses. Here we provide further explanation of each element of the process:

- *Perspective shift:* Each member came to see themselves as a leader who could support change to improve student outcomes. Other people across campus also began to see them as leaders. Members began to see themselves as part of a broader leadership group across campus through developing a sense of shared ownership and a commitment to creating change as part of a collective.

- *Cognitive shift:* PLC members shifted to believe that they could generate better ideas when they worked together rather than alone. They appreciated learning from each other—faculty learning from staff and staff learning from faculty, for example. They engaged in new approaches to planning, brainstorming and strategizing, which garnered insight from the collective, rather than relying mostly on their personal views as they had previously. Cognitive shifts were largely facilitated by the overall PLC learning processes and activities that included developing a shared understanding of the issues. Cognitive shifts encouraged collective exploration of how to move forward.

- *Coordinated and collective action:* PLC members shifted their actions as leaders to engage in cross-functional and collaborative approaches to their work. The PLC members moved toward collective action whenever possible to advance culture change and student success. PLC members approached action in two ways: taking the ideas to their individual spheres of action (e.g., advisor using ideas to train other advisors, or housing director changing policies and practices), and identifying efforts that would be collectively enacted (e.g., developing campus-wide summits or developing recommendations for senior leadership). The key was that actions were coordinated regardless of if the PLC members did the work individually or collectively.

PLC Structures, Activities and Processes that Support Developmental Outcomes

The design of the PLC influences if and how shared leadership emerges. A PLC where members feel that the work is pro forma—and that senior leadership already knows what they plan to do—would not facilitate shared leadership. Table 1summarizes how each structure, activity and process was able to lead to the developmental outcomes. Some structures, activities and processes were able to contribute to multiple outcomes. We highlight how to design PLCs that support perspective and cognitive shifts leading to collective and coordinated action that could improve student experiences and outcomes on your campus.

- *Perspective shifts* were facilitated by virtue of members' inclusion of the PLC—merely creating PLCs on campus and inviting people to participate helped individuals see themselves as leaders and position them to be seen as leaders. Second, co-facilitators honored the expertise of PLC participants and provided opportunities for everyone on the PLC to explain their role and contributions, which empowered PLC participants to believe they had skills and resources of value. They were also provided opportunities to lead subgroups, meetings and various parts of the PLC curriculum that honed their leadership skills. The co-facilitators intentionally worked to

diminish hierarchy within the group, which allowed people who were not in formal leadership positions on campus to see themselves as leaders. Lastly, the PLC members presented at events that the PLC hosted for the full campus, featuring them as experts in a cross-campus context which built their confidence and empowered them even further.

- *Cognitive shifts* were facilitated through the PLC's cross-functional composition, allowing people to interact and talk with people they normally would not have the opportunity to interact with. The subgroups provided members with opportunities to learn with and from others in roles quite different from their own. Additionally, several specific activities included on the syllabus helped facilitate the cognitive shift. Cross-functional activities in which PLC members were asked to brainstorm a student issue (e.g., retention, immigrant students fear to seek counseling, high DFW rates in courses) stretched their understanding by including other perspectives, which helped broaden their thinking and appreciation of other people's views. Another activity in which members explained their roles and brought their expertise to the group helped them appreciate different campus roles in ways they had not before, and allowed them to see how these other perspectives were needed in order to effectively address student success issues. PLC participants also reviewed campuswide data, discussed processes like accreditation, and had institutional level conversations, which assisted them to think at a broader institutional and systems level and educated them about how the overall university worked.

- *Collective action* was facilitated through the cross-functional PLC composition and outreach and professional events outside the PLC that connected members to far more people than they had known before. By the end of the PLC, each PLC member had a campus-wide network. All the PLC structures (e.g., group composition) and activities (e.g., discussion of roles, review of student data/brainstorming student problems) broke down silos which had prevented cross-functional work and allowed members to act with others in different roles. The success of PLC professional development events also made members feel empowered to act in collective ways. Therefore, being able to test out and have success working cross-functionally allowed PLC members to trust that they could do work in this new way and succeed. The facilitators' work to diminish hierarchy in the group also allowed people who were not in positions of power to act as leaders, not feeling constrained by traditional structural barriers. Once mentally freed from traditional power structures, PLC members noted that they were much more likely to proactively take actions in support of student success with their colleagues and not to wait to be told by someone in a position of authority about how to execute on their role.

The below table captures the ways that the PASS PLC syllabus (including a robust EV curriculum) and the facilitator guide (both available for your use on our website) structure a process that allows shared leadership to emerge and creates the capacity for change.

PLC Structures, Activities and Processes that Align with Shared Leadership Outcomes

PLC process and structure	Perspective shift	Cognitive shift	Action shift
Placement on the PLC itself	X		
Co-facilitators honored the expertise of PLC participants	X		
PLC members had opportunities to lead subgroups, meetings, and curriculum	X		
Co-facilitators diminished hierarchy	X		X
Sharing power with and empowering PLC members	X		X
PLC members presented at full campus events which featured them as experts	X	X	
Cross-functional composition of PLC		X	X
Subgroups learned from others in different roles		X	
Deepened understanding of campus roles		X	X
Engagement in cross-functional activities		X	
Creation of a large net-work of colleagues		X	X
Institutional level conversations and processes— campuswide data, accreditation		X	
Designed and facilitated professional development events			X
Fostered relational trust		X	X
Creation of a vision of collective leadership			X

Illustration of Shared Leadership

Below we provide one example of a PLC member who underwent the three developmental shifts and share some of the PLC structures (e.g. group composition), processes (e.g. subgroups, summit planning), and activities that led to his growth. This narrative includes data excerpts from interviews and can be shared with facilitators to help them see the type of shifts they can steward in order to create shared leadership.

Saul

Saul worked in advising for over a decade prior to being invited to co-facilitate his campus' PLC. He was recently promoted to a mid-level administrative position where he helps direct the efforts of multiple, pivotal student services departments. Like other similarly positioned leaders on his campus, Saul wears multiple hats, not only as part of his formal position, but also as a member of many committees, such as one focused on student retention and another using a case management approach to help students in need of emergency support. Saul was a bit surprised when a senior leader on campus asked him to co-facilitate the PLC along with a faculty colleague. Having recently earned his education doctorate and given his extensive experience serving at-promise students on this campus, Saul was a strong fit for co-leading his campus PLC—even if he caried a little doubt about whether he was positioned on campus as a formal leader just yet.

Perspective shift. While Saul described his faculty co-lead as a "natural born leader," he acknowledged that he was still growing into his own identity as a campus leader. He reflected about how his facilitation of meetings pushed him to develop as a leader:

> So just the way my brain operates in a group setting–I'm an internal processor, you know? So sometimes another person might think of an idea in the moment and spit it out, it might come to me two days later or when I feel like I've formulated the thought to where I can share what I think. So sometimes I wonder if I'm facilitating enough or if there are meetings where, for example, you might say to yourself, 'why am I talking so much?'

Saul shared that he worked on his early vulnerabilities in the first year of the PLC; moving from "a semi-nervous person" to someone with more confidence in his abilities as a leader.

For Saul, his perspective of himself as a leader, particularly as he learned to share leadership responsibility with fellow PLC members, really started to change halfway through the second year of the PLC. Partly, this was due to the creation of subgroups focused on particular topics, such as advising, professional development, and campus data use. He relates his emerging leadership skillset to his growing capacity to facilitate the meetings and coordinate collaboration among PLC members:

> I think there's probably just more opportunities for other members of the PLC to take on their own leadership role within the group. I guess I'm thinking more specifically about the last couple meetings. It's more about, "What is your smaller team working towards?" "What progress have you made since the last time we got together?" That kind of stuff, so there's more of a—I mean—it's always been a group of leaders, despite, you know, [faculty co-lead] and I being the leads…I guess there's just more leadership opportunities spread around than there was last year.

Here, Saul reflects on how the subgroup structure they enacted provided "more leadership opportunities" among a group of people he describes as those who have, "always been a group of leaders." Saul's shift in perspective about his role as a leader was connected to his ability to successfully work with other leaders in the group.

Cognitive shift. Working with the PLC subgroup on how to improve campus advising provided an opportunity to bring in other (non-PLC) campus leaders into the conversations. Saul helped coordinate the logistics of the subgroup meeting and learned quickly that the power of their influence on the topic was based on their capacity to think together as a shared group, even across different perspectives:

> *We had three members from the PLC, including myself…and we added three more faculty and another staff person to the group. And so, we've got together and developed a solid one-page outline of what we would like to accomplish that would take support from above and below, and all sides, because it would have an impact on general studies curriculum. It would also have an impact on advising a little bit. And so we needed lots of different buy-in from lots of different groups. Like the people that we added from outside of the PLC, even one person where we thought, okay, we want someone who's going to be sort of skeptical, not like a naysayer, but skeptical. And he was like 'all in' almost immediately. So, it was encouraging to have those conversations.*

This quote underlines how the different views of group members led to cognitive shifts in how people thought about improving the first-year student experience.

Saul entered the PLC with a particular belief about what should happen to student advising, based on a rather siloed view of the campus, especially as a former advisor. But over the course of the three-year experience, he learned from his fellow members and faculty colleagues that the issue was more nuanced than he previously thought, leading him to see the value of collective thinking:

> *So obviously we've talked a lot about advising throughout this time, and I have more of an appreciation and a value of faculty advising than I did, particularly in the first year than I did before. I think at the outset, if you would've said, as we're talking about EV and advising, I would've said, "Well, yeah, the goal to have students experience EV and advising will be to have professional advisors in the first year and transition to faculty in subsequent years." And now I think something that's more collaborative between the two is a better way, and that realization initially came from conversations with a faculty PLC member. So, I would say that has impacted my thought process and approach heading into developing a grant for the advising program. I tried to go into that process with an open mind, but it's hard not to have your prior experience leaning one way or another. After spending time with the PLC members, it was easier to be open-minded because I think I had more of an appreciation for everyone's role in the advising process than if we had just had this planning grant kind of fresh on its own without any PLC in advance.*

For Saul, his cognitive shift occurred related to a topic he has experienced personally as a professional and felt passionate about going into the PLC. Being a part of the PLC, especially through the subgroups, created an opportunity to gather new and nuanced information about specific topics and helped him become "more open-minded" as he learned from the leadership and expertise of fellow faculty and staff in and outside of the PLC.

Action shift. With a new perspective on himself as a leader on campus followed by a cognitive shift which established greater trust and appreciation for the leadership abilities of his colleagues, Saul changed his actions from the sole "gets stuff done" individual, to a member of a PLC collective who aimed to change campus culture together. Though Saul had been described by fellow PLC members as the "unassuming, approachable, kind, gets stuff done, wants no glory" type, by the end of the second year, it became clear that his "gets stuff done" approach could be expanded across the shared leadership efforts of his PLC. This was most apparent when the PLC coordinated their first public-facing symposium event. The PLC split into subcommittees focused on invitations, content planning for a co-created agenda, and developing participant materials. While the co-leads facilitated communication across the groups, the packed room of attendees was a result of the PLC's collective efforts.

Inspired by the first successful symposium at the end of the second year which allowed all members to co-lead various core elements (e.g., invitations, registration, student panel, vignettes activity), the PLC began hosting follow up sessions. For example, Saul and another PLC member co-facilitated EV information sessions in-person and on Zoom throughout the fall. Then, in the spring, other PLC members co-facilitated brown bag sessions focused on key topical areas (e.g., advising, recruitment and retention, teaching) while including non-PLC members such as faculty and admission representatives given their areas of expertise. The collective success of these events in the third year inspired the PLC to host another summer symposium which was so well attended that some people had to stand. The belief behind this shared approach to offering public-facing events and learning opportunities across campus according to Saul was:

> It's been like, "Hey, we have learned a lot about this concept [Ecological Validation]. If we educate as many people as we can around campus about this concept, then we're likely to see more of those micro changes that we've talked about this semester."

His reflections about the need to educate as many colleagues as possible about this concept through the PLC efforts offer insights into how his actions moved from that of an individual, mid-level leader when he started the process, to a member of a shared leadership group. Saul went on to describe the value of the collective action taken by the PLC: "We've modeled a way that you can bring a bunch of people together and try to influence change on campus."

Key Takeaways

1. Shared leadership is an important part of creating cross-functional work to support at-promise students.

2. PLC planners should try to develop the three developmental outcomes to ensure shared leadership is created—*perspective shifts* (seeing themselves as leaders), *cognitive shifts* (learning to think together), and *collective action* (acting in a coordinated and collective way).

3. PLC planners can create structures, processes and activities that help support these key outcomes. The syllabus and facilitators guide (available **here**) provide clear guidance on these processes.

4. Sharing the narrative of the PLC member's (Saul) evolution in this brief can help facilitators to envision the developmental shifts that they are trying to help occur in the PLC.