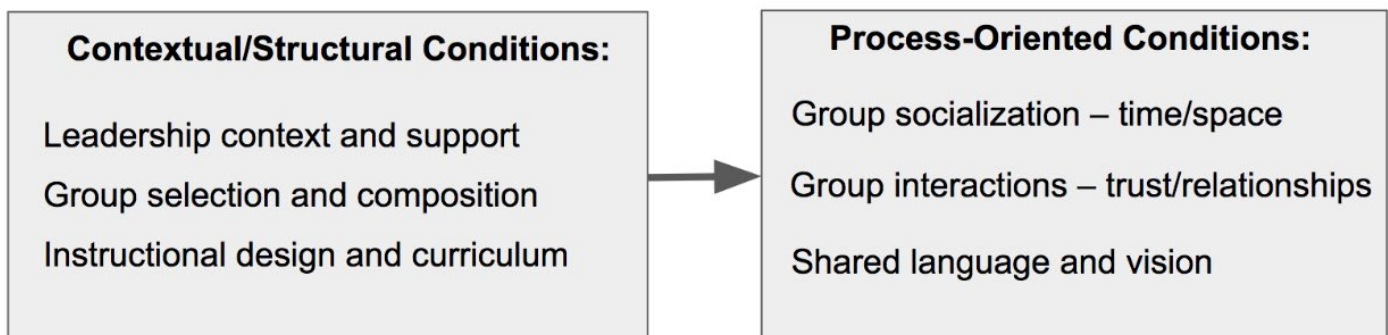# PASS

Promoting At-Promise Student Success

Facilitating Learning in PLCs Designed to Promote 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.

One of the main goals of cross-functional Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) is to promote learning among participants in ways that can help improve their professional practice. However, learning within PLCs occurs within a broader social environment that influences whether and how learning can occur. In our research on PLCs aimed at creating a culture of EV in the NU system, we found certain conditions facilitate learning and—if missing—impede it. These conditions include structural (i.e., aspects of the design), contextual (i.e., aspects of campus), and process (i.e., aspects of interactions) elements. Structural and contextual conditions involve leadership support for the PLC; group selection/composition; and instructional design and PLC curriculum. Process-oriented conditions were group socialization, including time and space; group interactions, specifically around building trust and relationships; and shared language and vision. Structural and contextual conditions laid the foundation for a cross-functional group of diverse educators to learn together within the PLC. With these conditions in place, facilitators could create process-oriented conditions that supported ongoing learning. This brief can be paired with the syllabus and facilitator's guide to help design your PLC for success. You can read more details about each condition below.

Diagram 1: Conditions for Learning Within a PLC Focused on Creating an EV Culture

Contextual/Structural Conditions:

Leadership context and support

Group selection and composition

Instructional design and curriculum

Process-Oriented Conditions:

Group socialization – time/space

Group interactions – trust/relationships

Shared language and vision

Leadership Context and Support

Senior leadership support was critical to ensure PLCs that were designed to create culture change could be successful in their work. In fact, senior leadership support was so important that it seemed a foundational condition. The PLC was more open to learning and fully engaging in inquiry-based activities when they believed that leadership supported the work they were doing. A perceived lack of senior leader support for their work constrained members' learning and limited their ability to imagine potential alterations to the current campus environment. There were several ways that senior leadership support was communicated to—or felt by—PLC members. These included senior leaders' direct written or spoken messages to the group, senior leaders' occasional attendance at PLC meetings, communicating through the facilitators to PLC members, or PLC members hearing senior leaders talk about the PLC in campuswide settings. While senior leadership support was important to create a positive context for learning, it was just as important that the effort not be perceived as being driven from the top down. The PLCs embraced by a shared leadership approach involving faculty, staff and administration.

Group Selection and Composition

Another important condition for learning was having a compositionally-diverse cross-functional team with individuals at different levels of leadership, from different departments and programs, and with varying lengths of time working at the institution. This diversity of perspectives enabled the group to think beyond their silos and begin to imagine campus-wide change. At the NU campuses, PLC creation began with the senior leadership at each campus helping to identify two leaders—one each from academic affairs and student affairs—to serve as co-facilitators of the PLC. This intentional selection aligned with the goal of breaking down the silos that existed between student affairs and academic affairs.

Intentionality about demographic composition of the group, coupled with activities that focused on deepening understandings of how students from diverse backgrounds experienced campus, opened an opportunity for members to share their personal experiences and reflections on navigating campus structures and processes. In doing so, members could learn from colleagues whose experiences were different from their own with regards to race, socioeconomic position as an undergraduate, and/or first-generation college status.

PLC members consistently noted how much they valued learning about the different offices on campus. Many of the members had little understanding of what faculty or staff in each office did, which constrained their abilities to imagine new ways to collaborate with educators across campus to create a culture of ecological validation. There were several opportunities for the PLC members to explain their roles to one another beyond their titles that were listed on the university website. These conversations about their work promoted deep and broad learning about how the campus functioned and led the group to explore new ways to connect across different offices.

Instructional Design—Curriculum

The PLC's curriculum and activities were designed to help members move from focusing on their individual and unit level work to thinking in cross-functional and systems-oriented ways. These include a resource mapping activity, a social networking activity, institutional data activities that focused on cross-unit challenges, and detailed discussions of PLC members' roles and unit work so that points of collaboration could be identified. These activities led members to devise new ways of conducting their work. For example, on one campus, the mapping and social network activities and discussion about individual roles on campus led members from the registrar, financial aid, and student support offices to explore how they could better collaborate to support at-promise students.

Process-Oriented Conditions

Group Socialization

The PLC groups needed to ensure appropriate socialization to their culture-changing tasks by grappling with why institutional change was needed. Until there was group consensus on the need for more than adding supplemental programming or tinkering within siloed units rather than cultivating broader changes to support students, learning among PLC members was hampered. The group thus engaged with learning differently from their day-to-day work, moving from a reactive or immediate problem-solving approach that was common in their other committee work to taking time to learn without pressure for immediate answers or action. This approach enabled them to think more ambitiously about culture-changing shifts. PLC members remarked on the benefit of this learning space being long-term and big picture, rather than reactive or immediately problem solving-oriented. They saw this approach as aligning with the goals of culture change and creating ecological validation.

Two approaches were used by facilitators to socialize the group toward this culture change orientation. First, facilitators would remind the group about their focus on learning and culture change. We observed how the facilitators made people aware of this orientation when they jumped to problem-solving mode too quickly or tried to rush the group into decision making. Instead, they worked to reiterate the groups' set expectations of learning first before moving to action. A second approach was bringing in activities that helped make members aware that culture change was necessary and that the usual efforts of tweaking existing practices within siloed units would not be adequate. Members described how these activities were critical in developing their awareness about the need for culture change (e.g., reviewing data about historical trends and lack of success with at-promise students, listening to students on panels describe their challenging experiences on campus, or mapping gaps in student support).

Group Interactions (Trust and Relationships)

Group interactions framed their capacity to envision and learn different ways of doing work that were counter to the status quo. This process required developing and strengthening trust within this cross-functional group of educators with differing backgrounds, experiences, and disciplinary training and goals. In order to feel comfortable learning about issues that challenged the current campus culture, people needed to feel safe and able to be vulnerable — relationships and trust were essential. The PLCs held orientation sessions to get to know each other, set up ground rules (e.g., privacy, listening to understand, disconnecting from email to focus on learning, asking clarifying questions) and participate in relationship-building activities. They also engaged in activities that allowed them to get to know each other more personally. For example, PLCs members shared their job title, educational experiences, and history with the campus. They then discussed what they did and the constraints of their work, which helped them get to know each other as individuals and was important to building trust and relationships. The facilitators were critical to building an environment of trust and safety by treating everyone equally, affirming everyone's views, and encouraging questioning. The facilitators modeled the process of being open and vulnerable, which facilitated learning.

Shared Language and Vision

Over time, the individuals within the group created a shared language and understanding of what issues could be addressed through cross-functional action. Engaging with common readings during the learning process helped to create a foundation for shared language. Groups were provided a one-page summary of key terms and definitions to help facilitate the development of this shared language. During the meetings, facilitators used these terms to guide conversations. Opportunities were created to practice explaining the concepts and connecting them to the members' current work. The learning process was also connected to the trust established within the group — the members would ask for clarification when they did not understand an idea or how someone was applying the concept.

When the PLC members started to read about ecological validation, few could put the readings into their own words or speak with confidence about the concepts. By the end of the second year, the group developed a shared understanding and definition of EV. This shared language facilitated their learning as they had a common way of thinking about student outcomes and experiences. There were several ways that they supported the development of a shared vision and language about EV, most prominently the curriculum and activities were based on norms of ecological validation, checking for understanding about the EV concepts, and applying ecological validation in their work and in their units.