

ACADEMIC Leader



Creating Systemic Culture Change and Solving Vexing Problems on Campus: The Promise of Professional Learning Communities in Higher Education

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Ongoing challenges in higher education require innovative thinking, but we have few structures in place to support learning to address these challenges. While we have standing groups (e.g., committees and councils) and episodic groups (e.g., task forces), few groups focus on learning together to improve practice

across the campus. One exception is faculty learning communities, which are becoming more common as a way for instructors to come together and read about a pedagogical strategy, such as active learning, and work collectively to alter their approach to teaching.

But we lack professional learning communities (PLCs) that bring together administrators, faculty, and staff from across campus to learn together to improve campus operations and work—such as student retention, workplace climate, mentoring needs across groups, and leadership development. PLCs are common in K–12 education and other workplaces but have not been used as frequently in higher education. The tradition of ongoing committees and task forces rarely provides for deep and continuing learning that could propel innovation.

The Promoting At-Promise Student Success (PASS) Project at the University of Southern California’s Pullias Center, in collaboration with University of Nebraska practitioners, is facilitating PLCs at three Nebraska campuses aimed at implementing culture change to help students succeed. We leverage our research-based approach of [creating a culture of ecological validation \(EV\)](#) to frame both the learning and implementation stages of the PLC ([link to pass site info on EV](#)). A culture of ecological validation involves providing holistic, strengths-oriented, proactive, identity-conscious, and developmental support for low-income, racially minoritized, and first-generation college students (i.e., [at-promise students](#)). The framework argues for educators engaging in reflective practices and using collaborative approaches that include cross functional work with educators across campus.

To effectively change culture, campuses need all stakeholders—administrators, faculty, and staff—to think differently about how they do their work. PLCs provide an avenue for deep learning that can equip institutional change agents to spread this culture-transforming idea broadly across campus. At each of the three campuses, we brought together PLCs ranging in size from 11 to 20 key faculty, staff, and administrators to learn about EV for a year, to rethink their work within their units, and to reimagine how each campus functioned so that it would support EV.

Novel ideas emerged from the learning stages of the PLC. Participants are

- examining how to audit and map existing advising resources to identify gaps in support and pockets of success;
- exploring how to collaborate across current student support efforts;
- providing professional development about EV for faculty and staff;
- rethinking hiring and onboarding processes to include EV;
- reviewing messages across units for validating language; and
- creating new assessment tools.

The groups are evolving into a coordinating committee that will connect EV work across campus, conduct assessment and mapping activities, and monitor and identify gaps. The groups are confident that such ideas would not have emerged without the time and space the PLCs have provided.

From observing and analyzing data from the PLCs, we identified key insights that may be useful for other institutions interested in creating cross-functional learning communities focused on improving at-promise student experiences and educational outcomes:

1. **Select individuals from across campus who represent diverse stakeholder groups.** The group should be varied in terms of personal identities, roles, and direct and indirect student support offices and include a mix of administrators, staff, and faculty.
2. **Give the group permission to learn before acting.** Campuses rarely have time to learn together, build trusting relationships, and imagine solutions to the persistent problems that undermine at-promise student success.
3. **Empower the group to identify issues and opportunities.** The group needs a close connection to campus leadership to give them confidence that the work they are doing will lead to action. As the group develops initial recommendations, the executive leadership should engage in a discussion and brainstorming session to explore how to advance these ideas.
4. **Select facilitators who are trusted by campus and connected to executive leadership.** The facilitators are positioned to create conversations across the silos and political contexts that exist on campus. We recommend having two individuals who are respected across campus, have access to campus data, can facilitate difficult conversations, and understand how to build relationships among a diverse group of individuals.
5. **Attend to group dynamics.** Everyone in the group should be encouraged and empowered to share their perspectives without consequences. Initial activities should involve norm setting and team building to establish trust between group members. Given the power and political dynamics of having staff, faculty, and administrators in one space, these issues need consistent attention.
6. **Encourage systemic thinking.** Faculty and staff are generally positioned to focus on their particular units but rarely get to take part in conversations about how to make campus systems more collaborative, identity-conscious, strengths-oriented, holistic, proactive, and developmental.
7. **Create a shared language and understanding of the problems, challenges, and solutions.** The ecological validation readings we used allowed the groups to engage in meaningful conversations about what was working on their campus as well as areas for growth. The group will likely need several months of learning to get to this point. Taking the time to learn increases the likelihood of identifying meaningful solutions to some of the persistent issues facing higher education institutions.
8. **Access campus data.** To have meaningful conversations about the campus context, the group will need access to campus-wide data. In addition, the group members may need training related to reading and interpreting data.
9. **Consider current context while reimagining structures, policies, and practices.** The current campus context needs to be considered, but this should be done in ways that do not squelch creative thinking. Collective bargaining, limited resources, and campus politics will need to be engaged at some point but not during the learning and brainstorming stages.
10. **Apply learning to spheres of influence first, then brainstorm how to integrate complex ideas at the campus level.** When individual group members begin by exploring the concepts (for our part it was EV) within their programs, departments, or other work contexts, they get to see the benefits of doing this work and can start imagining new ways to create campus structures, policies, and practices.

We are continuing our research on PLCs over the next few years, so stay tuned for more at the Pullias Center for Higher Education at the University of Southern California.

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