

Cross-functional Professional Learning Communities in Higher Education

Postsecondary campuses are facing complex and varied challenges including low retention and graduation rates of at-promise students (e.g., low-income, racially minoritized, and first-generation college), declining enrollments, diminished perceived value of higher education, reduced financial support from state legislatures, and weakened morale and greater burnout among faculty and staff. Solutions to address these challenges require moving beyond the creation of new supplemental programs or making minor adjustments to existing structures. Rather, effective change entails moving toward institutional culture transformation. In addition, campuses are exploring how to integrate new technology systems, create new accountability systems, and address racial inequities that exist in policy and practice all while tackling other important issues. These sorts of complex growth areas require campuses to reimagine their institutional culture, which involves shifts in policies, practices, incentives, and structures across campus.

Many efforts to address these complex issues have involved first order changes that do not fundamentally shift underlying beliefs, values and approaches of faculty, staff or administrators (Kezar, 2018). For example, supplemental programs may be created to support a small group of racially minoritized or first-generation college students, but the campus-wide culture remains the same. While the interactions within these supplemental spaces are often positive, students may continue to endure challenges navigating the rest of campus while not feeling a sense of belonging, mattering and/or validation. These efforts performatively allow campuses to argue they are making attempts to support students without changing the day-to-day practices, policies or operations across campus (Smith, 2016). Despite increases in college enrollment, retention and graduation for at-promise students, postsecondary institutions still fall short in ensuring equitable retention and graduation rates compared to peers who are White, continuing generation, and from middle or upper class backgrounds because the institutional culture has not shifted (Smith, 2016).

Cross functional professional learning communities (PLCs) have potential as a useful strategy in addressing complex challenges that campuses experience by disrupting the institutional silos and creating the context for faculty, staff, and administrators from across campus to collectively learn and collaboratively reimagine campus culture (Eaker & Sells, 2016; Kezar, 2018). This brief provides an overview of how PLCs can be used in higher education. We discuss the origin of PLCs and compare them to other improvement processes in the higher education field. We then explain what a cross functional PLC is and why postsecondary institutions may benefit from using them. We end with some guiding questions to help campus stakeholders decide if this approach would be useful for your campus. For institutions that choose to use this approach, please see our guidebook that chronicles the process of designing and implementing a PLC.

Defining a Cross Functional Professional Learning Community

PLCs are common in K-12 education (DuFour et al., 2008) and involve bringing together a group of educators who engage in collective learning in order to improve educational practice. Even though PLCs have been utilized less frequently in higher education settings, they offer potential as a useful tool for postsecondary institutions that are looking to address complex social issues and advance institution-wide culture change by breaking down the silos that exist between different offices, programs, departments and colleges across campus. A postsecondary cross functional PLC is a group comprised of a diverse (e.g., individual identities, years at the institution, tenure status) group of educators with different roles on campus (e.g., staff, faculty/instructors, administrators) who engage in structured and collective learning with a focus on creating campus-wide change related to a specific topic area.

PLCs often read a book or series of articles to learn about a new approach or to stimulate reflection on their work and how to best support students. Relevant readings, coupled with structured and engaging activities, enable educators to explore both campus-specific data and examples from across the national higher education landscape. This learning process allows PLC participants to identify key issues to address on their campus and determine opportunities to pilot new approaches that aim to shift institutional culture. Given their varied roles across campus, cross functional PLC participants report back to the group about what they learned, which allows for the group to learn from their collective efforts as they implement new strategies. The longitudinal nature of a PLC moves away from one-off professional development events that generally have little impact on long-term educational practice or student outcomes.

Comparing Cross Functional Professional Learning Communities to Other Improvement Processes

In higher education, some campuses have created faculty learning communities (FLCs). FLCs are typically a group of faculty members who focus on collectively exploring and improving their pedagogy (Cox, 2013). Unlike the cross functional PLCs that we discuss in this brief, these groups typically only include a small group of faculty members who are interested in improving their teaching, advancing learning, and increasing opportunities for student success. While they may improve as instructors, the influence of their engagement is localized to their classrooms instead of impacting the full campus. FLCs do not focus on organizational learning or campus-wide culture change; rather, they focus on individual learning and growth.

Communities of practice (CoP) may organically form as educators learn with and from each other without necessarily creating a specific structure or desired outcome. These groups often are not cross functional and do not focus on campus-wide culture change because they are localized within a department or program. For example, practitioners in career services may engage in a CoP focused on addressing the needs of improving access to internships for students in all majors; across campus or the housing department may explore how to create programming in the residence halls that reduce homesickness the first semester. Some studies show the potential of these groups to influence culture change (Kezar et al., 2018).

The concept of using cross functional teams to address institutional issues has gained some traction in higher education (e.g., [Equity Scorecard](#), [Achieving the Dream](#)). Inquiry teams often focus on thinking systemically about ways to adjust campus structures and culture by engaging with data, reflectively considering practice, and engaging problem-solving activities related to critical campus-wide issues. Inquiry teams require educators to develop trusting relationships in order to have conversations about developing new approaches that could improve campus culture. Kezar (2018) notes the importance of having diverse representation on the team which allows the group to see issues from different personal and professional vantage points. Including institutional research professionals and reacting to institutional data can also help the group make progress. In addition, campus leadership needs to create a culture that enables vulnerability and discourages blaming individuals to facilitate a productive context for learning (Smith, 2015). Inquiry teams can help move data and information out of silos, which allows for broader campus engagement and improves the likelihood of getting buy-in to implement the learning from the inquiry group (Smith, 2015).

While cross functional PLC's have similarities to FLCs, CoPs, and inquiry teams, there are also differences. Table 1 provides an overview of how these different approaches relate to each other in terms of goals, structures, size, supports, role of leadership, processes, and composition.

Table 1: Varied approaches to Postsecondary Improvement Practices

	Faculty Learning Community (FLC)	Community of Practice (CoP)	Inquiry Team	Cross Functional Professional Learning Community (PLC)
Goals	Help faculty to improve teaching and learning	Help faculty and staff improve their particular functional area	Use data to address an institutional challenge	Help faculty, staff, administrators and other key stakeholders to address a campus wide institutional improvement goal
Structure	Faculty meet regularly usually for a year	An organic group in a functional work area that communicate but have very little to no structure beyond maybe occasional convened conversation; no specific time span	A team - often with cross campus representation - that examines data, asks questions, usually over a specific multi-year time period of 2-3 years	A cross functional group of campus stakeholders that meets for a finite time period to learn and then focuses on implementing changes – usually for 3-5 years due to aim of culture change
Size	10-12 faculty	Group is as large as the functional area – could be 4-5 people to hundreds	Usually 10-15 faculty, administrators and staff	10 to 25 cross functional members with at least one facilitator; optional: senior leadership as ex-officio members
Supports	Center for teaching and learning often provides sample syllabus and socialization to leads; extra pay for faculty	Sometimes a campus office, like human resources, may provide access to training sessions	Senior leadership provides access to data, inquiry questions, and facilitators to help guide dialogue	PLC co-leads create curriculum, activities, and train facilitators; senior leadership supports the goals and process
Role of Leadership	Leadership does not play a significant role	Leadership within the unit helps to kick off interest and guide informal learning	Senior leadership facilitates data access and cross campus connection	Shared leadership necessary for success at senior, middle, and grassroots levels

Processes	Syllabus designed, facilitators trained, and regular meetings where faculty read together and then apply to their teaching practice	Organic learning while working	Data is collected and shared, teams meet and analyze data; team shares insights with campus	Syllabus designed, facilitators trained; first learning and then work to envision and enact culture change or deeper changes
Composition	Faculty only	All interested members in unit or institution	Senior leadership identifies key group members for inquiry team based on goals of team	Cross functional diverse (i.e. demographics, role on campus) group of faculty, staff and administrators; potential to be campus cultural change agents

For further information about PLCs, including a guidebook to running PLCs and a sample syllabus, please visit pass.pullias.usc.edu.

DEFINITIONS

Cross Functional Professional Learning Community is a diverse (e.g., individual identities, years at the institution, tenure status) group of educators with different roles on campus (e.g., staff, faculty/instructors, administrators) who engage in structured and collective learning with a focus on creating campus-wide change related to a specific topic area. Group composition involves significant intentionality, especially regarding recruitment and selection, as well as meaningful and ongoing support from campus leadership.

At-promise postsecondary students refers to students minoritized by the higher education system broadly, with a particular focus on low-income students, first-generation college students, and/or racially minoritized students (Bettencourt et al., 2023). Our use of at-promise aligns with prior scholarship that challenges deficit language and centers the strengths, assets, and potential of minoritized students (Cheese & Vines, 2017; Ford & Harris, 1991; Swadener, 1990). At-promise emphasizes the responsibility of educational systems to address inequality through their commitment to minoritized groups (i.e., “the promise”) by recognizing and addressing the complex and interlocking phenomena (Collins, 2009; Crenshaw, 1991) that negatively impact individuals beyond any one identity group.

Questions to Guide Practice

- What campus-wide challenges are your college/university facing that could benefit from discussion within a cross functional PLC?
- How might a cross functional PLC create the space for your campus to engage in the learning process to reimagine how to address critical issues that influence students' experiences and outcomes?
- In order to create and sustain a cross functional PLC, who will be your campus champions (e.g., buy-in and support from upper- and mid-level administration)?
- How and from where will you identify and recruit educators to participate in the PLC?
- What resources do you have to support a cross functional PLC (e.g., space, time, reading materials, stipends)?

OVERVIEW OF STUDY

The Promoting At-promise Student Success (PASS) Project is a longitudinal mixed methods study that focuses on how to improve academic and psychosocial experiences and outcomes for low-income students, many of whom are also first-generation college students and racially minoritized. The first stage of the project (2015-2020) focused on exploring the experiences of students in the Thompson Scholars Learning Communities (TSLC), which is a set of programming designed to offer comprehensive academic, personal, and social support services at three University of Nebraska campuses. The second stage of the project (2021-2026) focuses on understanding the experiences of at-promise students who received TSLC support as well as those who did not. We created professional learning communities at each of the campuses (Kearney, Lincoln and Omaha) that focused on learning about previous research findings and exploring how to create campus-wide culture change in support of at-promise student success. Each PLC lasted three years and included two campus-based educators (one from student affairs and one from academic affairs) who served as co-facilitators. The PLCs had approximately 10-20 members who represented different roles (e.g., faculty, staff, administrators) from various offices, programs and colleges across campus. As an action-oriented study, the research team provided support in developing the learning materials and co-facilitating meetings. We also conducted interviews, surveys, observations, and document analysis throughout the three years of the study.

This brief is based on findings by the research team members of the PASS Project. Authors listed on the suggested citation contributed to the development of the ideas presented in this brief. We are indebted to the University of Nebraska practitioners who collaborated with us through the PLCs and related research. For more information about the PASS Project, please visit PASS.Pullias.USC.edu.

Suggested citation

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