

# PASS

Promoting At-Promise Student Success

USC Rossier  
Pullias Center for  
Higher Education

## CREATING A STUDENT-CENTERED CAMPUS-WIDE CULTURE: GUIDEBOOK FOR FACILITATING A CROSS-FUNCTIONAL PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

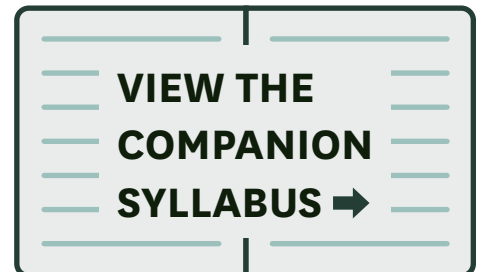
### INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

College and university faculty, staff and leaders have been exploring how to create a campus culture that is student-centered and equitable. Building a **professional learning community (PLC)** that brings together a cross-functional group of educators to learn, imagine and act has the potential to identify ways to improve at-promise students' experiences and outcomes on your campus<sup>1</sup>.

This guidebook, and a companion **syllabus**, are designed to support individuals who will be facilitating a PLC. We begin with an overview of how PLCs have successfully supported institutional culture change in educational contexts. We then share a research-informed framework — ecological validation (EV) — that offers a model for cultivating a validating campus culture that supports all at-promise students by prioritizing seven norms to guide student success. We conclude the guidebook with an overview of the process of building, implementing and assessing a PLC.

### PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY STUDY

The approach presented in this guidebook draws from a longitudinal mixed methods research project — the **Promoting At-promise Student Success (PASS) Project**. In the initial phases of the PASS Project (2015-2020), we conducted research in collaboration with students, staff and faculty who were involved in a comprehensive college transition program. Their insights informed the conceptualization of the ecological validation (EV) framework. In the second phase of the project (2020-2026), we continued to learn from students and educators about their experiences and how to leverage the concepts of EV to improve student outcomes.



We also piloted cross-functional professional learning communities (PLCs) at three universities — a rural campus, a metropolitan university, and a land grant institution — to expand the impact of the EV approach and consequently bolster support to at-promise students. The PLCs were aimed at creating support for at-promise students by altering institutional culture. As researchers, we developed the materials and provided support in facilitating the groups. We conducted interviews, observations and document analysis to understand if, how, and why the groups learned and enacted key culture change concepts. We found the following:

- The cross-functional groups of educators learned about institutional culture change, including the concept of ecological validation.
- The cross-functional groups of educators set up an infrastructure to support institutional culture change and made initial steps to assist the campuses in moving toward a culture of ecological validation.
- PLCs influenced cross-functional collaboration among the members of the group.
- PLCs communicated learning to the overall campus, including within their units and summits they organized for the campus.
- PLCs directly and indirectly influenced unit and campus level policies, practices and structures.

Shifts in policy and practice were observed at the individual practitioner, unit and campus levels.

## CREATING A STUDENT-CENTERED CAMPUS CULTURE: INTRODUCING ECOLOGICAL VALIDATION

Practitioners, policymakers and researchers often speak about the importance of being “student-centered” to create a context where at-promise students can thrive. However, there are few research-informed models that explain what it looks like to be student-centered or the policies, practices and structures that would need to be put in place to achieve this goal. We leverage an approach that illustrates how educators and administrators can create a student-centered context, which we call a culture of ecological validation<sup>23</sup>.

Ecological validation ([link to video](#)) is a research-informed approach to supporting at-promise students that draws from ecological systems and validation theory. We developed this framework as part of a [longitudinal mixed methods study](#) that focused on how educators can create policies, practices and structures that improve at-promise student experiences and outcomes. Ecological validation recognizes that students at an institution engage with multiple people (e.g., instructors, support staff and peers) and have relationships with people outside of campus (e.g., family, work colleagues and peers) who shape their postsecondary journey.

When we speak about a student-centered approach ([link to brief](#)), we describe how educators (e.g., instructors, staff, administrators and others) can develop practices and policies that center the experiences, backgrounds, and needs of at-promise students. This approach entails engaging in collaborative, cross-functional, and reflective practices with colleagues across campus. Relatedly, institutional leadership develops policies, incentives, structures, and expectations to support this work.

## NOTES

## WHY A CROSS-FUNCTIONAL PLC IN HIGHER EDUCATION?

Colleges and universities face complex challenges in their pursuit of effectively serving at-risk students, who are retained and graduate at lower rates than their peers<sup>4</sup>. In addition, many institutions are experiencing declining enrollments, higher levels of educator burnout, and reduced financial support from state legislatures. Addressing these challenges requires moving beyond supplemental programs or minor shifts to existing policies and structures. Instead, campuses need to create institutional culture change, which necessitates campus-wide revisions to policies, practices, incentives, and structures. PLCs can disrupt the institutional silos in higher education by creating the time and space for faculty, staff and administrators to collaboratively reimagine the campus culture in order to improve at-risk student experiences and outcomes.

A PLC involves a cross-functional group of educators in a college or university who come together to learn, imagine and act. The structure and goals of a PLC provide an opportunity to explore how to break down silos by creating campus cultures and organizational spaces where learning and collaboration can thrive. DuFour and colleagues define collaboration as a systematic process where people work interdependently to shift professional practices<sup>5</sup>. Building upon this definition, Eaker and Sells emphasize that PLCs foster collaboration by

bridging organizational boundaries and focusing on openness and expertise-sharing rather than divisions by units<sup>6</sup>.

A point of clarification may be needed to explain how PLCs differ from other groups on campus<sup>7</sup>. Your campus may have a faculty learning community that invites a group of faculty members to learn new pedagogical approaches, explore their teaching practices, and develop new strategies to implement in their classes. While these groups may improve the teaching and learning context for the educators in the group, they do not have a campus-wide or cross-functional focus that could lead to campus-wide change. Your campus likely has a CARE team that includes a cross-functional group of educators who respond to individual student issues that emerge. These teams provide essential support to individual students, but rarely focus on broader issues of institutional change. In addition, you may have cross-functional groups that discuss specific initiatives or goals and address issues that emerge. While these groups allow for cross-functional discussion, they rarely have a learning element and typically concentrate on current challenges instead of imagining a new institutional culture. Ideally, a campus committed to institutional change would leverage multiple tools to advance student-centered culture change like faculty learning communities, cross-functional decision-making groups, and PLCs.

## NOTES

# BUILDING THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

The process of building a PLC involves a few key elements to be successful in reviewing and recommending shifts in campus culture, including selecting facilitators, connecting with leadership, identifying members, and securing resources. In order to foster an environment of collaboration across boundaries that can lead to institutional change, a PLC must have effective facilitators. Facilitators nurture relationships among PLC members and guide the learning process. In addition, the PLC will need to be connected with campus leadership to ensure alignment of goals as well as garnering support for PLC recommendations. The final portions of this section provide guidance related to selecting PLC members that represent the multiple units, roles and perspectives across campus as well as the resources that the group will need to be successful.

## IDENTIFYING FACILITATORS

We recommend having two facilitators who are respected on campus — one person from student affairs and one person from academic affairs. However, a campus could be successful with one facilitator or may include a third facilitator with a different role (e.g., faculty member). The selection process may also consider diversity of identities (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender), leadership roles on campus, and length of time at the institution.

We found that having a leader from student affairs and academic affairs as facilitators sent a clear message that the PLC was a campus-wide effort. In addition, the facilitators reported to different members of senior leadership, participated in different meetings, and had differing networks on campus. With the differing perspectives, the facilitators could be thoughtful about how to structure learning and develop connections to other efforts on campus.

## ROLE OF THE FACILITATORS

Facilitators structure and encourage the learning. PLC members need to feel safe to communicate when they do not understand a concept, comfortable providing feedback to others, and welcome to innovate and think boldly about culture change. Key facilitator responsibilities include:

- Review readings and suggested activities to refine the meeting agendas.
- Locate institutional data or campus examples to contextualize discussions.
- Guide the group through the learning activities and model how to interact with colleagues in ways that protect the learning environment and reflect the agreed upon group norms.
- Model the norms of ecological validation and help members envision how to build a culture of ecological validation on campus.
- Coordinate logistics, including finding a room to meet, managing a calendar of events, and ensuring group members have access to readings, activities and other materials.
- Record key insights, decisions and goals identified by the group (note: this could also be done by having group members rotate who takes notes for each meeting).

## NOTES

## CONNECTING WITH LEADERSHIP

The support of leadership will be important to the success of your PLC. Senior leadership may not commit to implementing all recommendations from the PLC, but having a clear communication channel will ensure that the time and energy of PLC members lead to meaningful results. Here are different strategies to engage senior leadership that could work depending on your campus context:

- Senior leadership may attend the first PLC meeting to launch the effort and explain how they see the PLC as connected to the mission and priorities of the campus.
- Senior leadership may visit the PLC once a semester or year to get an update on what the group is learning and their ideas for shifting campus culture in support of at-promise student success.
- Senior leadership could serve as ex-officio members of the group, which means that they attend when possible and receive the readings and other materials.
- Facilitators may want to set up a quarterly meeting with senior leadership to provide updates, get feedback and learn about ways to connect the work of the PLC to broader efforts and initiatives.
- Facilitators will likely report to a member of senior leadership. During the regularly scheduled meetings, the facilitator and campus leader can discuss what has been happening within the PLC and ways to connect the PLC with other efforts on campus.
- Facilitators may want to create an annual report for senior leadership that provides updates, goals for the next year and potential resources needed.
- Drawing from their interactions with leadership, facilitators can help the PLC explore how their ideas are connected to the campus mission, vision and current initiatives.

## SELECTING PLC MEMBERS

PLC members influence how the work unfolds. Building a PLC with a diverse group of individuals from across campus will positively frame the learning process and the group's ability to assist your campus in creating culture change. We recommend the group be approximately 12-25 people. Consider the following criteria when selecting members:

- Differing lengths of time employed at the institution.
- A mix of faculty, staff and differing levels of institutional leadership.
- Diverse personal identities (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, income background, first-generation college background, and individuals with intersectional identities).
- Representation from places where there are perceived silos at your institution — for example, it may be important to have a representative from each academic college.
- Inclusion of people who do not work in student-facing roles, but influence the student experience (e.g., institutional research, technology, registrar).
- Representation from the different stages of student experiences from recruitment and orientation through career preparation and graduation.
- Individuals who can connect with or are in leadership positions who guide institutional priorities and decision-making.

As the group progresses, the possibility exists that individuals may leave the institution or be unable to continue participating. The group may also recognize that voices are missing and decide to recruit additional group members. Facilitators could benefit from having conversations with senior leaders to understand their perspective and priorities related to filling open positions if/when PLC members leave.

## NOTES

## SECURING RESOURCES

PLCs can function without needing significant funding. Potential costs may include purchasing books, providing incentives for participants, and covering supplies for meetings and events.

### *Reading Materials*

Most readings on the syllabus are either on our website or can be accessed via your campus library. However, we recommend purchasing the following books for the group:

- ***Creating a Campus-wide Culture of Student Success: An Evidence-based Approach to Supporting Low-income, Racially Minoritized, and First-generation College Students*** by Ronald Hallett, Adriana Kezar, Joseph Kitchen, & Rosemary Perez
- ***Administratively Adrift: Overcoming Institutional Barriers for College Student Success*** by Scott Bass

### *Incentives*

PLCs require participants to engage in learning and meetings that extend beyond their current work expectations. You may want to create incentives or recognition for the time and effort that the PLC members will dedicate to learning and action. Here are a few options:

- ***Stipends*** — We found that offering stipends sent the message that the institution valued the work of the PLC. The amount of the stipend matters less than the message that the educators' time, ideas and energy are valued by the institution. Facilitators dedicate additional time to planning and leading the group, which means they could be compensated more than the members of the group.
- ***Workload*** — An institution could explore alternative forms of compensation beyond stipends, such as course releases or reduced work in other areas.
- ***Certificates or badges*** — An institution could offer formal recognition through certificates or badges that PLC members earn. Similarly, individuals who participate in the professional development offered by the PLCs could earn certificates. These badges or certificates could be included in annual review or promotion materials.
- ***Institutional communications*** — Senior leadership could disseminate a message that publicly recognizes the efforts and accomplishments of the PLC members. This could happen within institutional newsletters or an event.

## NOTES



## CREATING THE CONTEXT FOR LEARNING

The PLC has the potential to be a unique space on your campus where a diverse cross-functional group of faculty, staff and leaders learn together and imagine how to support a student-centered culture at your institution. This section provides support for facilitators to create the learning context. Important considerations include determining the frequency and timing of meetings, setting clear goals and expectations, developing the team and cultivating trust, planning for engagement opportunities during the meetings, and using the syllabus our team has created to guide the team's learning.

### FREQUENCY AND TIMELINE OF MEETINGS

Facilitators will establish a meeting schedule. We worked with PLCs who met once a month for two years with a summer retreat to reflect and determine the next steps. Your group may meet more often over a shorter timeframe as a targeted development opportunity, such as an intensive academy or series of sessions over the summer that are followed by action over the next two or more semesters. The frequency, length and location of meetings will vary and should be responsive to the preferences of the group. Decisions about how and where to meet should consider the goals for any particular meeting. For example, a meeting to foster relationship building might be better in person, whereas figuring out event logistics could be online; a meeting to brainstorm a strategic plan might require a half-day retreat, whereas reflecting on a case study to learn a new concept might only need a lunch hour. When considering the PLC calendar, it is helpful to backwards plan.

The facilitators will need to communicate regularly and clearly about the meeting agendas, action items, and what has been accomplished. The group will need easy access to materials, including readings, meeting notes, tasks to be completed and campus data used for activities. For example, the PLC may want to create a Google Drive or place documents on a Blackboard or Canvas page that is accessible by all group members.

### SETTING CLEAR GOALS AND EXPECTATIONS

Campus employees rarely have time to learn together, build trusting relationships, and imagine solutions to the persistent problems that undermine at-promise student success. Having permission to dedicate time to learning is countercultural in higher education work settings. Therefore, establishing expectations to protect the learning context will be critical to enable members to feel comfortable innovating, brainstorming and imagining new ways of doing work. Establishing goals related to culture change and systemic thinking is not sufficient — you will need to help the group envision these goals. Goals should be spelled out in recruitment materials, noted in the initial sessions, and reinforced in the curriculum each session.

Culture change is an elusive and challenging goal. In our research, some PLC members wrestled with thinking about significant institutional change since their careers to this point had only involved minor shifts in policies or practices. Naming how the nature of transformational work runs counter to the culture, systems and traditions of higher education will be important. The readings in the syllabus are helpful resources to develop a shared vision of what culture change work looks like. The goal of culture change requires the facilitators to remind members not to slide back into their typical immediate problem-solving mode.

PLC members may tend to primarily think at a unit, division or college level because they are not used to focusing on the campus level. Facilitators can guide them to think systemically by engaging in discussions and activities that explore the broader campus context. In addition, the members should be encouraged to utilize the norms of ***ecological validation*** to be strengths-oriented, proactive, holistic, identity-conscious and developmental in their interactions with students as well as when reviewing and revising policies, practices and structures.

The group may want to create community norms during the first meeting to guide how the PLC functions. Possible norms include:

- Engage deeply in activities, including completing readings in between sessions.
- Create and protect a safe/brave learning space.
- Normalize “unlearning” in order to explore new ways of engaging in work.
- Recognize that everyone in the group contributes to the team’s success.
- Embrace opportunities to apply learning to individual and unit level work.
- Provide permission for the group to take time to learn before acting.
- Ask questions to understand each other’s perspective.
- Disconnect from email and phone (if possible) during meetings.

### **TEAM BUILDING AND CULTIVATING TRUST AMONG PARTICIPANTS**

A vital component of establishing an effective PLC involves cultivating trusting relationships among the group members. In the first few sessions, it will be important to help PLC members get to know each other, model community norms, and encourage positive relationship development. While members may know each other from previous interactions, they may not fully understand what each group member’s work entails or their individual backgrounds, identities and perspectives. Building relationships will set this group context apart from most committees or task forces that focus exclusively on task completion.

While facilitators will take the lead in creating a trusting space, team building will happen between PLC members as they engage with each other and learn about ecological validation. Creating time and space for conversations about differing backgrounds and perspectives will enable the group to understand how each person approaches new ideas and issues.

Participants need to trust each other in order to develop a productive collaboration. Key conditions for fostering trust include:

- Creating transparency regarding process and goals.
- Carving out time for relationship-building activities (even when people might feel pressure to jump into action-oriented work).
- Capitalizing on individuals’ strengths to develop activities that facilitate trust building.
- Holding accountability for commitments made.
- Reflecting on the process and goals of the PLC as well as checking on the well-being of group members.
- Sharing a commitment to a common goal (e.g., promoting at-promise student success) can anchor the time that the group spends together.
- Engaging formal team development by bringing in a facilitator with skills in team building to work with the PLC may also be an option that the group considers.

### **ENGAGEMENT WITHIN MEETINGS**

The cross-functional engagement and learning that occurs within PLCs makes them unique and impactful. The syllabus provides examples of activities that enable educators from across campus to engage with each other. We encourage facilitators to explore ways to ensure the sessions are as interactive as possible. The facilitators should work from the assumption that the team has completed the readings and do not need a presentation overviewing the key ideas. We found that the more productive aspects of the PLC meetings involved the group members exploring how to draw from what they learned to reflect on their current practices and imagine new ways of enacting their goals.

A key strategy to ensure that group members engage in the discussions is to find ways to contextualize the content. Facilitators can bring in examples or data from your campus that relate to each module. This could be an email from a student with all identifiable information removed, a campus or unit policy, local news article, or a professional experience (e.g., meeting, conversation). More formal data might include looking at a campus climate survey, student retention data broken down by student subgroups, or other forms of student or educator data that exist on campus. You might also bring in case studies or



research studies from other campuses — several are listed on the syllabus.

Facilitators will also want to vary the structure of activities to include pair, small group and full group engagement. Given that people may naturally engage with people they know, the facilitators may consider mixing people into pairs or small groups that include people who do not typically work together. The syllabus has multiple different activity options for each module.

### **SYLLABUS TO GUIDE LEARNING**

Drawing from piloting PLCs as part of the PASS Project, we developed and refined a syllabus to guide learning and action focused on improving at-promise student experiences and outcomes. Our [website](#) has additional resources related to facilitating the PLC.

While the guidebook and syllabus provide structure, we encourage you — as the facilitator — to explore how to contextualize each learning module to reflect the needs and goals of your campus. For example, you may use additional readings, campus reports or local news to frame discussions. You might adjust an activity or spend more than one meeting on a module if your team needs time to engage with the concepts.

### **NOTES**

## SHIFTING TO A COORDINATING GROUP

The first stage of the institutional change process outlined in the syllabus focuses on learning as a PLC. The second stage involves shifting from primarily learning to becoming a **coordinating group** that focuses on spreading the learning across campus. As a facilitator, you play an important role in supporting the group as it evolves into a coordinating group and developing a sustainability plan. The primary role of your group will be to coordinate the multiple efforts, initiatives and goals that exist across campus in order to improve at-promise students' experiences and outcomes. As a facilitator, you will assist the group in continuing to draw from the concepts of ecological validation to as they do this coordination work. The **coordinating role of the group** involves six key processes:

- **Communicating** — Communicate with campus stakeholders about the ecological validation approach and share progress made by coordinating across efforts/units.
- **Mapping and Auditing** — Engage with multiple forms of campus data to inform and assess how ecological validation is enacted and sustained. Use data to identify areas of need among students and/or barriers that result from campus organizational policies and practices.
- **Exploring Networks and Connection to Leadership** — Develop sustained networks and distributed leadership for culture change and embedded ecological validation.
- **Reviewing Processes, Policies and Practices** — Review existing processes, policies and practices for alignment with ecological validation.
- **Developing Campus-wide Professional Development and Learning** — Facilitate learning opportunities for group members and campus related to how to enact a culture of ecological validation.
- **Evaluating, Sustaining and Planning for Future Work** — Reflect on what has been accomplished by the coordinating group and develop a plan to continue the work.

### NOTES

## ASSESSING AND SUSTAINING THE WORK

Facilitators will also support their groups in developing a sustainable effort to continue the cross-functional learning and action. We developed several tools that may be useful for your group to engage with throughout the process, but could be particularly useful during the final stage as the group is assessing what has been accomplished and making decisions about how to proceed. Some units or campuses may also want to leverage these tools for accreditation reports.

- ***Individual Reflections on Ecological Validation:*** This tool will enable group members to reflect on their individual work. We listed this tool as a supportive resource during the learning process in the first stage, but it could be completed during the end of the second stage to reflect on growth. The tool could also be integrated into the professional development sessions that your coordinating group creates for the campus.
- ***Unit Reflections on Ecological Validation:*** This tool will enable your group members to engage with their units and/or colleges to reflect on how their collective work embodies ecological validation. We highlighted this tool during the learning process, but it could be leveraged at different points throughout the process. The tool could be integrated into professional development sessions and/or shared in other ways.
- ***Campus-level Reflections on Change:*** This tool provides an opportunity to reflect on the campus culture and where there could be areas of growth. The tool could be used in different capacities by the campus and/or college leadership.
- ***Envisioning and Planning for Next Steps:*** This reflection tool is designed to help your group prepare for next steps after concluding the final module. We recommend developing a presentation or report to share with senior leadership in order to get support for continued work by the group.

### NOTES

Be sure to celebrate the successes of the group. Too often in higher education, educators move from one important issue to the next without pausing to reflect on their accomplishments. We recommend that you create space to name and celebrate the accomplishments of the group. You may also want to coordinate with leadership to find a public recognition of the group's work (e.g., campus communications story or during an event). If possible, the group members may appreciate a letter from the leadership thanking them for their work — which could be included within their personnel file or promotion materials. As the facilitator of the group, you could also write a formal letter to each member.

At the conclusion of the second stage, the coordinating group could evolve in different ways depending upon the needs of the campus. While the group will have accomplished a lot by navigating the modules, there will likely be additional work to do. The ultimate goal is to be a learning organization that continues to grow. To leverage and sustain the work, we provide a few ideas for the group to consider as they move forward:

1. The group may evolve into a formal committee that supports the work of senior leadership. Once a quarter or semester, the campus leadership could share ideas, initiatives or challenges with the group to get feedback and recommendations by leveraging both their cross-functional roles and training in ecological validation.
2. The group could become a task force or standing committee that reports to senior leadership once a semester or quarter with updates and recommendations related to creating and sustaining efforts to improve at-promise student experiences and outcomes.
3. The group could focus on coordinating across programs, departments, initiatives and other efforts on campus. By having a cross-functional group discussing the different efforts on campus, they could identify potential collaborations as well as gaps in support.

4. The group could support the campus in making data-informed decisions by working with institutional research to identify inequitable outcomes and then exploring how to incorporate new policies, practices and structures to address the issues. The group would then monitor the campus data to understand if, how and why the outcomes were improving and make recommendations for continued growth.
5. The group could convene educators from across campus to continue learning and exploring how to collaborate.
6. The group could become a space where faculty, staff, leaders or units bring an issue or idea that they want to workshop with a cross-functional team. For example, a unit may want to create a new service or support for a subgroup of students with inequitable outcomes. The group could review the idea and then provide feedback about how to integrate what they learned into the unit's plan. In addition, they could explore how to connect the unit to other educators and groups on campus that may be doing similar work.

You will want to assist your group in exploring and determining what the group may look like moving forward. The following reflection questions could prove helpful in this exploration process:

- ★ What will membership look like? How will people rotate on and off the group? How will the group remain cross-functional with representation from across campus? How long will people be members of the group?
- ★ When new members join the group, how will they be oriented to the learning that has occurred related to institutional change and ecological validation?
- ★ How will the group continue to prioritize learning?
- ★ How will the group remain connected to campus leadership?
- ★ How will the group assess if it is successful?

## NOTES

## ENDNOTES

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# USC Rossier

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## ABOUT THE PULLIAS CENTER:

### ***Promoting Equity in Higher Education***

One of the world's leading research centers on higher education, the Pullias Center for Higher Education at the USC Rossier School of Education advances

innovative, scalable solutions to improve college outcomes for underserved students and to enhance the performance of postsecondary institutions. The mission of the Pullias Center is to bring an equity-focused, multidisciplinary perspective to complex social, political, and economic issues in higher education. The Center is currently engaged in research projects to improve access and outcomes for low-income, first-generation students, improve the performance of postsecondary institutions, assess the role of contingent faculty, understand how colleges can undergo reform in order to increase their effectiveness, analyze emerging organizational forms such as for-profit institutions, and assess the educational trajectories of community college students.

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### **RECOMMENDED CITATION:**

Hallett, R. E., Corwin, Z. B., Hypolite, L., Kezar, A., & Nagbe, M. (2024). *Creating a campus-wide culture that supports low-income, racially minoritized, and first-generation college students: Guidebook for facilitating a cross-functional professional learning community*. Pullias Center for Higher Education, University of Southern California.