

## Promoting At-Promise Student Success

### Creating a Constellation of Student Support Using Ecological Validation

This activity draws from the work of Ehrmann<sup>1</sup> and builds upon your conversations about creating a campus-wide culture of ecological validation. Ehrmann highlights the work of institutions that focus on 3fold gains, which means decisions are made in alignment with improving access, quality and affordability simultaneously. Drawing from case studies of campuses that have increased access, quality and affordability, he finds that an important part of the change process is aligning student support efforts that exist and encouraging cross-functional collaboration in order to provide holistic student support. In addition, he argues for leveraging campus data to understand and prioritize current issues that impact student success.

Ehrmann illustrates the importance of assembling a constellation of student support that connects services before adding any new programs, initiatives, or efforts.<sup>2</sup> The basic argument is that offices, units, initiatives and other efforts on campus should be connected in ways that create a constellation of support instead of being disconnected. The goal is to shift from silos to more holistic, integrated and collaborative approaches to student support. The process also enables a cross-functional group to identify a shared understanding of the problem that frames action and assessment of progress. A constellation of support is more effective than continuing to add more disconnected and siloed supplemental programs, which is an approach that has not necessarily been effective in moving the needle on improving student success.

Three elements are important to consider:

1. First, institutions start with one or multiple data points to identify a challenge and continue to monitor related data to understand how changes they make influence the outcomes being examined. Institutions typically identify an issue for a relatively large group of students as a starting point and source of data that could be used to assess progress. For example, Georgia State University (GSU) identified several stumbling blocks that increased the time to graduation, which resulted in students running out of the financial aid they needed to complete their degree. GSU started with data related to this outcome and continued to monitor if improvements occurred as they adjusted programs, policies and practices. Institutions we worked with began by identifying a subgroup of students (e.g., transfer, racially minoritized, first-generation college) with low retention and/or graduation rates. Through analysis of the data, they recognized that the retention the first year was a significant issue that they wanted to address.
2. Second, institutions identify the current programs, policies, supports and other services that are related to the identified challenge before adding new efforts. The campus may have supplemental programming in multiple different spaces that do work related to the identified issue. The process requires understanding why the current efforts are not collaborating and what may motivate the educators leading those programs to shift their practices. (The process may also enable the group to identify pockets of success that could be scaled across campus. For example, a supplemental program may be enacting a strategy that could be shared more broadly to improve student outcomes.)

<sup>1</sup> Ehrmann, S. C. (2021). *Pursuing quality, access, and affordability: A field guide to improving higher education*. Routledge.

<sup>2</sup> Ehrmann, S. C. (2021). Improving Quality, Access, Affordability: How three institutions are getting it done. *Liberal Education*, 107(2), 44-52.

3. Finally, institutions explore how to build a constellation of current programs and efforts through the lens of ecological validation. The campus creates a “constellation” that focuses on getting current efforts to work in concert toward cumulative 3fold gains instead of creating additional isolated and disconnected efforts that rarely yield significant influences on outcomes. In particular, institutions explore how to create a constellation that is strengths-oriented, proactive, identity-conscious, holistic, developmental, collaborative and reflective. We recommend using the Ecological Validation Model of Student Success as a way of envisioning how to center students within the institutional culture. The process also involves understanding the institutional context and how to bring together educators for the different programs to engage in conversations about collaboration. Campus leadership may need to be involved to encourage educators to shift current policies and practices.

For this activity, your group will create a constellation of support based upon campus data in order to achieve 3fold gains.

- Step 1:** Locate and share campus data that highlights a specific outcome (or set of outcomes that the institution wants to improve. For example, “50% of first-generation college students do not graduate in six years.” The data shared should be something that could be addressed by using a collaborative approach of educators (e.g., staff, faculty, administrators) from across campus.
- Step 2:** Explore why the outcome may be lower than expected or desired. Based upon the formal and informal data (e.g., educator experiences with students), what might be causing or influencing the outcome? Is there additional data that may be needed to fully understand the issue? Pay special attention to the institutional structures that may be impacting the outcome (e.g., particular policies, processes, or practices). The PLC members may want to connect with other educators on campus and/or students if they need additional information.
- Step 3:** Create a broad list of the resources, programs, services, policies, and other areas on campus that currently do (or could) assist with improving this outcome. Identify resources and programs that have the potential to impact a significant number of students. (Some of the more boutique programs that serve a handful of students may be useful as a source of information, but may not be able to significantly address the issue because of limited capacity.) The lists may include offices on campus such as the registrar, financial aid, advising, housing, and faculty as well as the student affairs programming such as summer bridge, first-year seminars, and support for specific subgroups of students.
- Step 4:** Explore how to build a constellation of the resources, programs, services, policies and other areas on campus. (Since resource allocation is often connected to these questions, we recommend having someone who is seen as neutral guide the discussion.)
- How could these different program elements work more closely together in order to provide holistic and developmental support for students instead of siloed support?
  - How could successful aspects of the different program elements be expanded within the current resources being used?
  - How could the constellation assist in achieving the 3fold gains of quality, access and affordability?
  - Where are their overlaps or redundancies in support? Where are there gaps in support?
  - Are there relatively “easy” adjustments that can be made as a starting point?

- Step 5:** To refine the constellation, consider how the connections between the different elements reflect the seven norms of ecological validation: proactive, holistic, strengths-oriented, identity-conscious, developmental, reflective, and collaborative. Be sure to critically consider how to integrate these norms into the constellation – for example, simply informing other departments about changes in policy would not be considered true collaboration.
- Step 6:** Identify a pilot effort that could be implemented. In particular, consider connecting or refining efforts with the potential to have the greatest impact on moving the needle on the outcome of interest.
- What resources that currently exist could be used?
  - How could collaboration or cross-functional engagement be encouraged and supported to build the constellation?
  - Who would be part of the pilot?
  - How would success be measured?
  - Who would need to approve of the effort?
- Step 7:** Implement the effort. During the implementation process, gather formal and informal data to evaluate the effort’s success. What resources that currently exist could be used?
- If student outcomes improve, identify the next step to build upon the effort’s success.
  - If student outcomes do not improve, explore why that may be the case and use that information to guide how to move forward. Return to Step 6 in order to identify another opportunity to move forward.
  - Continue with the process of building the constellation of support until the student outcome has significantly improved. The process can then be implemented again to address another student outcome of concern.

For more information about the PASS project, please visit our [website](#). Please note that resources for practitioners are located [here](#) and materials related to Professional Learning Community can be found [here](#).

**Suggested Citation:**

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## Constellation Activity Worksheet

1. Locate campus data that illustrates a specific outcome your institution wants to improve. How your group interprets the data will shape how you understand and name the problem. Spend time engaging with the data in order to come to agreement regarding what the problem is and why it exists. If needed, gather additional data and/or insights from students and/or educators with knowledge about the issue.
2. After reviewing the data as a group, identify the issue that you would like to address and why this issue is a priority.
3. What are the current challenges that may be contributing to this outcome:
4. Start by listing out all of the programs, services, supports and other resources on campus that currently work with these students or address the issue. Think broadly. Focus on what currently exists – not what new things need to be added (see chart below).
5. Briefly describe each item listed with a focus on how it connects to the issue identified.
6. Identify potential ways that collaboration or connections across campus could be made to build a constellation.
7. Graphically portray the constellation of resources and programs on chart paper.

<b>List of Programs, Services, Supports and Other Resources</b>	<b>Briefly Describe What They Do</b>	<b>Note Potential Connections or Ways to Collaborate</b>