

Integrating Student Vignettes into Professional Development

Faculty, staff and administrators often find that student experiences play an important role as they reflect on and revise policies, practices and structures. One tool that can be leveraged to integrate student experiences into professional development and reflection is vignettes. The [Promoting At-promise Student Success](#) (PASS) Project focuses on understanding how educators in higher education support students in achieving their goals and navigating challenges. Our research consistently found that student vignettes were a powerful tool to inform educators' learning and planning. As a result, we developed a series of vignettes that could be used by educators in multiple contexts. In developing the vignettes, we avoided focusing on overly unique or specific situations that may rarely happen. Rather, we focused on relatively common issues that students and educators shared with us while conducting interviews. In this brief, we provide an overview of why and how to use vignettes within informal and formal professional development contexts.

What is a vignette?

Vignettes are short scenarios that highlight a specific challenge or situation that students may experience. Vignettes enable educators to reflect on students' experiences without the student needing to retell their story or relive a trauma in real time. Vignettes offer an opportunity for educators to explore potential ways to support the student and reflect on potential shifts in policy and practice. Educators review a vignette and then engage in a collective conversation about how to navigate the situation outlined within the vignette.

PASS vignettes begin with a purpose statement which previews the key issues that will be addressed in the vignette. Next, a short, descriptive vignette illustrates an issue students may experience while pursuing their college education. The final section includes questions to guide discussion among educators. Questions focus on: (a) understanding the key issues presented within the vignette and (b) inviting educators to reflect on potential shifts in policy or practice.

Student vignettes are one tool that educators can leverage to integrate student experiences to inform their work. We recommend considering multiple ways to integrate student voices and experiences into professional development and planning processes. Other approaches include:

- **Student panels**—invite 3-5 students to share their experiences related to the focus of the professional development session. Prior to the panel, students should be given information about the topic and potential questions they will be asked. If possible, students should be compensated for the time they dedicate to this service.
- **Student representative**—invite a student—or several—to join a professional development session and share their perspectives as the discussions and planning unfold. When students are invited in this capacity, they should have a clear understanding of their role. Will they have equal voice in the discussion and decision-making? Student advisory boards can also serve as valuable mechanisms for garnering feedback on policy and practice. Consider compensating students for this service.

- **Student artifacts**—educators can bring anonymized emails, assignments, or other materials that highlight an issue that a specific student is facing to guide discussion and planning. Identifiable information should be removed to protect the student’s identity. While the initial discussion may focus on supporting the student, there can be a broader discussion about how this artifact can inform broader shifts in policy and practice.
- **Student survey or reflections**—educators can ask students to respond to a short survey or write a response to a prompt, which could be synthesized and shared to guide discussion.
- **Student review of documents**—a group of students could review a draft of a policy or other document to provide feedback and recommendations.
- **Student interviews or focus groups**—educators could informally interview students or conduct a focus group related to a specific issue that will be the focus of professional development or a working group. To reduce workload, each educator could gather insights from 1-2 students and bring that information to inform learning and discussions. Interviews and focus groups would not need to be recorded and transcribed, unless educators thought that level of detail would be beneficial for the professional development session.

Why use vignettes

While educators often benefit from engaging with student experiences and perspectives during professional development conversations, it is not always easy or appropriate to have students attend those events. Many students who experience challenges may not have time to attend professional development opportunities and the training session may be scheduled at times when students are not on campus (e.g., spring break, summer break, January term). At other times, educators may find it difficult to have honest conversations about the challenges their campus is facing if students are present. In addition, asking students to lay out all the details of their personal situations in a public space in front of individuals they do not know can be challenging for many students—and at worst, cause additional harm. Vignettes provide an opportunity for educators to explore student experiences without exposing the details of an individual student’s situation. Furthermore, if educators choose to design their own vignettes, the process of curating stories and writing up a vignette has the potential to deepen learning around student experiences.

Vignettes have been designed to be used in multiple contexts, including:

- **Individual**—educators engage with vignettes in order to reflect on how to improve their practice.
- **Unit level**—a program, department, or other unit on campus incorporates vignettes into regularly scheduled meetings or a professional development session to reflect upon and potentially shift unit-level policies and practices.
- **College level**—a college integrates student vignettes into monthly meetings to assist educators in considering a specific issue and facilitate the process of improving student support. This could include breaking educators into working groups to engage with vignettes that focus on different issues and bringing recommendations back to the full group for discussion.
- **Campus event**—a campus-wide event that brings together a cross-functional group of educators (e.g., faculty, staff, administrators and others) to explore broader policies, practices and structures consider the student vignettes from the perspective of their different professional positions and explore broader shifts that could improve student experiences and outcomes.

- **Professional learning communities**—educators develop a [professional learning community](#) that includes engaging with vignettes as a learning tool. Similarly, educators select a book to guide professional development and incorporate vignettes as a way to explore how to integrate the ideas from the book into their practice.
- **Leadership retreat**—campus, college or program leaders engage with vignettes to inform the development of a strategic plan or to reflect on areas of potential growth during retreats or regularly scheduled meetings.

Engaging with student vignettes tends to be particularly useful for guiding cross-functional conversations and assessing how to refine policies and practices that impact multiple units. Cross-functional groups can explore how to collaboratively support students and improve their experiences (please see the PASS project’s research on [Professional Learning Communities](#)). In our research, we leverage the concept of [ecological validation](#) to support cross-functional work. Educators found that having a unifying framework to assess the student vignettes helped facilitate productive conversations and led to revisions in policies and practices across campus.

While engaging with vignettes as a professional development tool may lead to discussions about shifting policy and practice, the process may also reveal that some educators are unaware of the current resources and processes that exist to support students. An action step that could emerge in this context would be to provide training and guidance for educators related to helping students access these current resources.

How to use vignettes

Vignettes generally focus on complex issues that require time to reflect. In addition, educators may have differing ways that they process information. We encourage distributing the vignettes prior to the professional development session to give individuals time to fully engage with the vignette and begin brainstorming how they might approach the situation.

As educators begin to collaboratively discuss the vignette, we recommend beginning with educators sharing what they see as the key issue to address before exploring next steps. Educators will have a difficult time identifying a collaborative action plan without a collective understanding of what is happening in the vignette.

Educators can approach using the vignettes in different ways, including:

- Educators may find that the vignettes as written meet their needs. The vignettes could be shared in their current form.
- Educators may want to make adjustments to reflect the specific institutional or unit context. For example, the names of specific offices could be included within the vignettes or details may be removed/added.
- Educators may want to narrowly focus on a specific issue that is not explicitly addressed within the vignette. These details or context could be added to the vignettes.

Where to find vignettes?

The PASS website offers a series of vignettes to stimulate dialogue and inform change efforts. We also encourage educators to tailor the posted vignettes to their own institutional context or create unique vignettes of their own.

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