BUILDING A FACULTY CULTURE OF STUDENT SUCCESS

THE ASPEN INSTITUTE'S COLLEGE EXCELLENCE PROGRAM

The Aspen Institute's College Excellence Program aims to advance higher education practices, policies, and leadership that significantly improve student outcomes in four areas:

• **COMPLETION.** Do students earn degrees and other meaningful credentials while in college?

• **EQUITY.** Do colleges work to ensure equitable outcomes for minority and low-income students, and others often underserved?

• **LABOR MARKET.** Do graduates get well-paying jobs?

• **LEARNING.** Do colleges and their faculty set expectations for what students should learn, measure whether they are doing so, and use that information to improve?

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INTRODUCTION

Sophia Graff, a beginning algebra professor at Valencia College in Orlando, had an idea. The state of Florida had instituted a mandatory competency test that students needed to pass to enter intermediate algebra, but only a third of her students were succeeding.

As part of an action-research project that was required for all professors seeking tenure, Graff had already tried and rigorously proven that engaging her students in more group assignments increased student learning. She knew it worked in her classroom. Now she wondered what would happen if she provided students with a similar opportunity to prepare for the competency test, in groups.

Graff recruited a dozen other faculty members to help flesh out her idea. They set up a drop-in support table in the rotunda of the math building, where the opportunity for tutoring would be highly visible, and students would understand that they were not alone in needing help. The faculty members volunteered to take turns walking small groups of students through the types of questions asked on the test, clarifying key concepts, and offering test-taking strategies.

The faculty team tracked test outcomes over the course of a year and discovered that the approach worked: student passage rates improved significantly. After listening to students, faculty members thought they could do even better. Students were complaining about the distracting setting, so faculty worked with administrators to secure a room in the same building. Test results improved yet again.

Faculty members spread the word about the efficacy of the program, and their colleagues on other Valencia campuses expressed interest. The college allocated resources to pay faculty to participate. Within five years, similar centers had become a fixture at the main campuses and spread to satellite sites at Valencia. Today, 50% of developmental math students participate in these small-group tutoring opportunities, and 70% of the students engaged in these learning activities go on to pass the competency test.

When colleges have a culture based on student success, they are capable of this kind of innovation. Faculty and staff consistently invent ways to improve student success. Innovators readily find colleagues to adopt and then help improve student success initiatives. And leaders can be counted on to support this good work to help make sure that the most effective student success practices are sustained and scaled.

This guide describes several community colleges that have achieved a culture in which faculty members continuously improve student outcomes, and provides guidance on how others might build and sustain such an exceptional culture.

WHEN COLLEGES HAVE A CULTURE BASED ON STUDENT SUCCESS, FACULTY AND STAFF CONSISTENTLY INVENT WAYS TO IMPROVE STUDENT OUTCOMES.

AN EXEMPLARY CULTURE:
FACULTY IMPROVING STUDENT LEARNING

In 2011, the inaugural year of the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence, the Aspen Institute analyzed student success measures at more than 1,000 community colleges, and investigated practices at colleges achieving the strongest outcomes. The Aspen Prize Jury selected Valencia College as the winner both because it achieves unusually high completion and job placement rates and because Valencia provides an outstanding example of how deep attention to teaching excellence, review of evidence, and ongoing experimentation can drive consistently improving rates of student success.

With multiple campuses and centers in the Orlando area, Valencia teaches more than 50,000 students each year. Although 70% of students begin in developmental education and 46% of the student population is black or Hispanic—groups that tend to experience lower achievement levels—Valencia exceeds national averages for graduation and transfer rates.

- 52% of full-time, first-time students complete or transfer within three years of entry, compared to the national rate of 40%.

- 46% of Valencia's underrepresented minority students complete or transfer, nearly the same rate as other Valencia students, and at much higher rates than the national average (34%).

Although many programs and processes contribute to this success, Valencia's achievement is grounded in large part on a shared culture that is strongly focused on student learning. President Sandy Shugart expressed this culture simply and clearly as the belief that "[i]f students learn well, deeply, and intentionally, more will complete."[1] But while leaders, professors, and staff at many other colleges share the goal of improving student success, Valencia has embedded that goal into a culture that regularly inspires positive improvements inside classrooms and beyond that result in strong student outcomes.

When students do not succeed at Valencia, faculty members routinely respond with theories of change regarding how professors and advisors could amend their practice to improve what students' experience. Rather than viewing poor student preparation and competing life demands as insurmountable barriers to success, faculty members are deeply engaged in analyzing how their own actions can drive stronger outcomes; they understand how their teaching and student learning are inextricably linked.

How did this happen? What are the lessons that can be taken from Valencia's past and present that might inform other colleges' efforts to develop a culture centered on student achievement, one that consistently leads professors to significantly change their practice to improve student learning?

Valencia achieved its culture in substantial part through a process of faculty development that other institutions can replicate. At its core is the Valencia tenure process, which is built around a system that requires faculty members to use data and experiment with their own teaching in ways that will improve student learning, and supports them along the way. **This guide explains how Valencia established its unusual tenure process and how a few other community colleges have followed different paths to creating a deep faculty culture of continuous reform driven by the goal of increasing student success.**

To help determine how to replicate such a culture, this guide describes the change process at Valencia and other colleges in four steps:

Step One

Establish a Broad Demand for Change

Step Two

Build the Team

Step Three

Determine and Execute a Plan for Institutionalization

Step Four

Evaluate, Reflect, and Continuously Improve

The sections that follow explain each stage as it played out at Valencia, and supplements each step with additional examples of how other successful colleges have gone through similar processes. Although we recognize that no two colleges are identical and that the path to change at each will vary, our hope is that the descriptions in this guide—along with discussions of common obstacles and strategies for addressing them—will aid other colleges as they seek to build stronger cultures around student learning.

1   Fain, P. (2012, May 29). Facing Facts. Inside Higher Ed. Retrieved from http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/05/29/taking-stock-completion-agendas-benefits-and-limits#ixzz1yTVhhbxr

STEP 1:
ESTABLISH A BROAD DEMAND FOR CHANGE

DUAL TRIGGERS AT VALENCIA COLLEGE: STUDENT LEARNING AND FACULTY TENURE

At Valencia, the process of developing a new tenure system began with the recognition of two serious problems. At other colleges as well, changes in faculty culture often start with an igniting event, such as the presentation of data showing clear patterns of poor student performance or a critical accreditation report. Building consensus that these negative results must be reversed can be a powerful motivator for reform.

The first stage of change is to create a widespread belief on campus that the status quo is not sufficient, citing data to focus educators and build urgency for reform along the way.

At Valencia College, the broad demand for change began with two challenges: faculty disaffection with the tenure process and a growing understanding that many students were not learning.

The realization that there was a problem with student learning grew out of work funded through federal Title III and Title V grants to create professional learning communities in which faculty members read the literature on learning, discussed problems they saw in their classrooms, and thought about how to improve teaching. As part of this work,

faculty began looking for data that would indicate how well students were learning and were soon confronted with a serious, undeniable problem.

According to Helen Clarke, a professor engaged in those conversations who would go on to become a learning leader on campus, before faculty saw data, "the prevailing attitude was that if the students failed classes, they should just take them again. They would learn the material by being exposed to it a second time." However, data, provided by the institutional research office of the college, pointed to an entirely different conclusion, as students often did worse the second time they took a class. Because faculty members were also reading about and discussing how to improve learning, they not only acknowledged that there was a serious problem but believed that it could be resolved. They began to think of the problem as something that they themselves could change instead of being the immutable result of characteristics inherent in their students.

At the same time, faculty members were unhappy with the tenure process, which as far as they could tell awarded tenure based largely on how many hours they sat in various orientations and met with program heads and administrators. "If an orientation meeting conflicted with a scheduled class," recalls Valencia theater professor Michael Shugg, "we were expected to cancel the class."

> "When we started, we were student-centered. We loved our students. Then we were learner-centered, because that said a little more about their participation. Then we came to understand that students have to learn, and faculty members have to keep learning. We became learning-centered."
>
> –Helen Clarke, founding director of the Teaching/Learning Academy, Valencia College

The process seemed to professors entirely disconnected from their reason for coming to the college: to teach students. The tenure process did not help them become better teachers. Making matters worse, if a candidate was denied tenure, there was no explanation or feedback, leading professors to suspect that tenure decisions were unrelated to their teaching ability. In other words, a process that professors themselves believed should have been based on teaching was disconnected from that goal, and faculty members understood neither why that was the case nor what criteria were being used in place of teaching excellence.

These two elements—dissatisfaction with tenure and a drive to improve student learning—merged to create dissatisfaction with the status quo and an opportunity to shift the culture at Valencia College.

THE IMPETUS FOR CHANGE AT WEST KENTUCKY: STUDENTS' LOW READING SCORES AND VARYING FACULTY EXPECTATIONS

A similar shock about poor outcomes in student learning triggered change at another Aspen finalist, West Kentucky Community and Technical College. West Kentucky serves 9,000 students in a sparsely populated region marked by high unemployment, low educational attainment, and little economic growth.

Although West Kentucky's rate of credential attainment increased by more than 20% from 2004 to 2009, the college still struggles with low graduation rates for underprepared students.

The first time West Kentucky students took the Educational Testing Service's Proficiency Profile, administrators were surprised: Only 40% of their students were capable of basic reading skills, compared to 60% of community college students nationally. Before then, there was no awareness that students throughout the college had such serious reading challenges.

Data helped the administration make a case to faculty that the status quo was unacceptable, and the entire college needed to institute broad change to tackle the challenge of improving student learning. Faculty members across all disciplines were encouraged and trained to teach students a set of specific reading strategies alongside the content curriculum in courses. They were provided opportunities to join "learning circles" with 15-20 other colleagues (full time and adjunct) to discuss how to make this work. For a full year, faculty members in these learning circles met to learn new skills, compare classroom experiences, and share ideas. This program has evolved into a mandatory part of new faculty orientation at West Kentucky.

The same kind of data-driven change was triggered at the departmental level as well. For a long time, West Kentucky's remedial writing instructors were defensive when they heard complaints from English 101 professors that students were arriving in the college-level class poorly prepared. To take measure of the problem, Maria Flynn, the dean of remedial education, assigned each remedial writing instructor the same set of student essays to grade. The teachers gave the essays completely different grades—and two weeks later, when they were asked to mark the essays again, only one professor gave the same grades that she had given before.

Such stark results inspired instructors to change the status quo—in this case, to work together to develop a common, rigorous standard for student competency in entry level English, reflected in a grading rubric that would be used for all assignments in both remedial and college-level writing courses. Although it took time, early interdepartmental antagonism—which meant that many members did not talk to each other, much less collaborate—eventually melted away. "So much of our growth has been driven by taking the ego out of things and really thinking about who matters most, and it's our students," said English Professor Kim Russell. As at Valencia, the focus on students at West Kentucky began with a deep dissatisfaction with the status quo.

THESE TWO ELEMENTS—DISSATISFACTION WITH TENURE AND A DRIVE TO IMPROVE STUDENT LEARNING—MERGED TO CREATE DISSATISFACTION WITH THE STATUS QUO AND AN OPPORTUNITY TO SHIFT THE CULTURE AT VALENCIA COLLEGE.

PREPARE TO CREATE DEMAND FOR CHANGE AT YOUR INSTITUTION

1. **Gather evidence that indicates a specific and pervasive problem in student learning.** For example, gather quantitative patterns that show a problem with how much students are learning within programs or at a college-wide level. For broad demand to be created, these data must relate to student performance beyond a few individual courses to college-wide measures of success.

2. **Plan a campus-wide campaign to share this information with a wide range of people.** Start by using existing campus events, committees, and department meetings to discuss what these data mean. Questions to ask include: Where are students succeeding best? Where are they not succeeding? What is working? What needs attention? How do we explain the divergence between what works and what does not?

3. **Allocate additional resources to support the work.** Although grants and external funds can help jump-start the process, senior leaders can signal their commitment to improvement by visibly reallocating existing resources to begin and advance the work.

STICKING POINTS

HERE ARE A FEW THINGS YOU MAY HEAR ALONG THE ROAD TO CHANGE, AND HOW YOU MIGHT RESPOND.

We have been talking for an entire semester, but the conversation does not seem to be going anywhere. Although the change process can take time, establishing a critical mass of support at the outset will enable success to be accelerated and sustained over the long term. All people need time to ask their questions and come to make sense of the issue themselves. However, it is also important for college leaders to set clear parameters for investigating why the problems exist and set deadlines for devising and implementing solutions.

Everyone is convinced the problem is the students. Present data showing that even under-prepared students can succeed. Ideally, such data includes some from within your institution, but also explore studies from other institutions with similar students that have achieved high or improving levels of student success.

People keep insisting that we cannot improve until we have more money and people. Make the cost of the status quo more apparent by referring back to student success data. Strong leaders make clear that the institution cannot afford existing levels of student failure and will find the money for approaches that are shown to result in higher levels of student success.

People say we already have programs to address these problems. Point to data on student success across the institution, making clear that existing programs—no matter how effective—have not led to high enough levels of student success. Then ask people why existing programs have not been fully effective at eliminating the problem and how they would change them—including what they could themselves do—to further improve student outcomes.

QUESTIONS TO ASK INCLUDE:
WHERE ARE STUDENTS SUCCEEDING BEST?
WHERE ARE THEY NOT SUCCEEDING?
WHAT IS WORKING? WHAT NEEDS ATTENTION?

STEP 2:
BUILD THE TEAM

"I strategically selected a group of people who had buy-in, who really understood what it meant to be learning-centered, and who really knew teaching. I selected people from different disciplines with different personalities."

–Helen Clarke, founding director of
 the Teaching/Learning Academy,
 Valencia College

Once a broad need for change is established, create a core team and support it as they become the architects of and champions for new scalable models and sustained reform.

Instead of assembling a team by simply including one representative from each division or administrative unit, Valencia and West Kentucky recruited and developed groups that had at their center people who were open to examining the effectiveness of existing practices, deeply cared about implementing change to improve outcomes, and were likely to be influential with other faculty and staff. These champions became the leaders and participants in design teams, task forces, and strategic planning groups focused on improving practice. They were the first to implement learning improvement strategies, demonstrating to others what could be accomplished in practice. And, ultimately, these champions became responsible for building a college-wide approach to action. At both colleges, this meant thinking about who on campus needed to be included, framing the issue so it felt vital to these constituents, integrating redesign work into existing college processes, sharing information broadly, and processing feedback.

VALENCIA:
REFORM FROM THE GROUND UP

To begin the process of examining student learning, over 200 individuals at Valencia spent time in learning communities, creating a broad understanding of the challenges. Faculty and staff wrote papers that explored the college's strategic learning goals and were given release time for professional development activities that brought a range of ideas and experts to the campus. Through this process, numerous faculty members were galvanized to believe that faculty development was important. It was from these faculty members that a smaller group engaged and helped lead reform to the next level.

Roughly 20 faculty members formed an informal leadership core that started discussing how to improve teaching and learning across the institution, discussing among other things the limited connection between the tenure process and student learning. With the federal grants ending, they knew that professional development activities might cease; they needed support from leadership to prevent this from happening.

In 2000, Sandy Shugart became president of Valencia College. He enthusiastically supported the ideas of creating a learning college and redesigning tenure, and he asked Helen Clarke to redesign the tenure process with a focus on better teaching (and in the long run, learning).

When Clarke, an English professor, put together a five-member design team, she selected people from a variety of disciplines and campuses who had already shown a commitment to creating a learning-centered college through their work on the federal Title III and Title V grants. They included a humanities professor; the head of professional development, who had a political science background; a math professor; and a longtime counselor.

The design team began its work by discussing the goals of the tenure process, agreeing that preparation for tenure should be a welcoming induction that was supportive rather than adversarial, should invite growth, and should be rooted in the idea that candidates who care about improving their teaching should be given tenure.

The design team did not work alone in fleshing out these ideals. To determine how the final tenure decisions would be made, the team helped organize a tenure summit, led by the Faculty Council president. At the summit, everyone was in the room: the president, deans, academic chairs, Faculty Council members, recently tenured faculty, and some faculty members who were seeking tenure. Developing the tenure system involved many more meetings and took three years because everyone from the president to faculty and staff members reviewed and had input into the plan. Ultimately, though, it was invented by the academic community, and still today, any significant proposed changes to the tenure process must be brought before the academic community at Valencia.

WEST KENTUCKY:
APPOINTING AMBASSADORS

At West Kentucky, once administrators became aware of students' poor reading skills, they began to build a team for reform. Administrators took a deliberate approach, carefully choosing a handful of faculty members to be the first to implement new teaching strategies. These

ambassadors, from a wide cross-section of departments, believed in continuous improvement, were respected and collaborative, and had positive attitudes.

"We were very intentional about how to go about identifying that first group," said Kevin Gericke, an economics professor involved in the initiative. They wanted teachers who were – above all else – open enough to change to have a good chance of implementing new strategies to achieve higher levels of student success in their classrooms. Most important, Gericke recalls, the recruits "had the passion for their students and wanted to learn what they could do to keep helping them."

These early adopters were trained in how to teach reading, using the same approaches regardless of their subject matter, and began incorporating reading skills into their courses. After the first-year pilot, the administration invited the entire faculty to a celebration showing how scores on reading proficiency tests had improved and how students, according to surveys, were reporting greater homework completion and comfort with assignments. Quotes from students flashed on the screen, like "I enjoy reading a lot more because I feel like I understand things better" and "This is one big textbook, but I'm not scared of it now!"

As outcomes kept improving, this sort of presentation was repeated annually, and enthusiasm for the initiative—and thus participation—grew among faculty members. By starting with a few forward-thinking faculty members and then bringing more into the process over time, West Kentucky was able to train nearly everyone in a new way of teaching reading skills.

BUILD, SUPPORT, AND MONITOR THE TEAM

1. **Identify the champions who will lead the effort and establish the design team, paying attention to positions, expertise, and personalities.** Include some who have demonstrated their leadership abilities in other types of improvement efforts. In addition to obvious enthusiasts, identify people who are neutral on the issue, open to change, and–once on board–are likely to be influential with colleagues.

2. **Make sure the team is working well.** Senior leaders need to sit in on meetings at times, check in with team members, and make changes if the team is off-track or getting bogged down, possibly adding new senior leaders to the team to help set deadlines.

3. **Ensure that the group has access to data and to people who can collect, help interpret, and clearly present student success information.** Ensure that the institutional research office is supportive and responds in a timely way to data requests.

STICKING POINTS

We agree on the need to change, but we cannot agree on what to do. Be sure to explore the reasons for disagreement over strategy, invoking data to resolve varying positions whenever possible. In the end, however, leaders must maintain urgency by referring back to shortcomings reflected in student success data, and setting deadlines for developing a strategy.

There is a group on campus that is working to sabotage the process. Rather than view the opposition as a monolithic group, seek to understand concerns of specific individuals. Identify people who may be more open to change and find out more about the nature of their concerns. Look for opportunities to address their concerns, but do not risk the success of the initiative in the process. Sometimes this means spending limited time with naysayers and forging ahead with those on board with change.

The design team is excluding particular constituencies. Accusations of bias or exclusiveness may be isolated to a few unwilling individuals or may signal that a broad consensus has not been achieved. Determine whether entire groups feel left out and, if so, find out the specific nature of their concerns. Then respond in a way that visibly demonstrates that they are being heard. For example, if many members of an administrative unit feel like they have been left out of the conversation, senior leadership should share student success data with them, invite their reflections on the causes of limited student success, and invite them to participate in specific planning activities that implicate changes to their jobs and responsibilities.

DETERMINE & EXECUTE A PLAN FOR INSTITUTIONALIZATION

"The college has specific expectations regarding teaching excellence, expects every member to work to make their teaching better, and will provide the resources needed to enable that to happen."

–Wendi Dew, director of faculty and instructional development, Valencia College

Once the team has been created and initial efforts begun, colleges that have been successful at building new cultures have followed a clear path to institutionalizing change. **Valencia and other excellent colleges demonstrate the importance of creating a plan of action designed to carry out change that significantly alters the faculty culture at each level of the college, employing strategies (including resource reallocation) aimed at solidifying changes so they can be sustained over the long-term.**

VALENCIA: LINKING TENURE TO IMPROVING INSTRUCTION

Ultimately, Valencia agreed on a plan for institutionalizing the new tenure approach that included three components: defining a set of seven educator competencies tenure-track instructors were expected to attain, creating a revamped tenure review process built around a commitment to high-quality teaching and measuring what students learn, and establishing a new Teaching/Learning Academy (TLA), designed to support and guide the faculty through the tenure process. Together, these initiatives make clear to all new faculty members that the college has specific expectations regarding teaching excellence, expects every member to work to make their teaching better, and will provide the resources needed to enable that to happen.

Initially, three years of funding for the TLA was requested and provided through one of the college's internal grant processes. After that, President Shugart decided to support the TLA through a line item in the regular budget, from which funding has been provided ever since.

Valencia's three-year tenure process is centered on what the college calls an Individual Learning Plan (ILP), which each faculty member develops to pursue growth in seven educator competen-cies. Among other elements, ILPs must include at least one action research project, designed by each professor to try to test the efficacy of new teaching strategies. Specifically, all tenure candidates must:

- Prepare Individual Learning Plans during their first year on the job, identifying the educator competencies they aim to improve, and detailing specific things they will do in furtherance of that goal.

- Take 50 hours of professional development seminars, which focus on the seven educator competencies.

- Implement specific changes in their teaching, along with a specific plan to evaluate whether those changes led to higher levels of student success.

- Evaluate whether the changes in teaching result in improved student learning or completion, and submit their research for review by an interdisciplinary and intercampus panel of administrators and tenured faculty.

- Write-up the research and results, presenting findings to other faculty members and including the results in a formal portfolio for tenure review.

The TLA has a staff of facilitators who guide faculty members through this process. They sponsor classes and workshops, work individually with candidates on preparing their ILPs and portfolios, and provide support on pedagogy, course design, and student development. The TLA also trains faculty members who serve on the tenure review panels, some of whom received tenure prior to development of the new tenure system. Involving senior faculty members, who did not receive tenure under the new system, has helped to spread understanding and support of action research at Valencia College.[2]

2   A more detailed description of this structure can be found at: http://valenciacollege.edu/faculty/development/programs/tla/Candidate/

ESSENTIAL COMPETENCIES OF A VALENCIA EDUCATOR

Assessment
Valencia educators will develop student growth through consistent, timely formative and summative measures, and promote students' abilities to self-assess. Assessment practices will invite student feedback on the teaching and learning process as well as on student achievement.

Inclusion & Diversity
Valencia educators will design learning opportunities that acknowledge, draw upon and are enriched by student diversity. An atmosphere of inclusion and understanding will be promoted in all learning environments.

Learning-centered Teaching Strategies
Valencia educators will implement diverse teaching and learning strategies that accommodate the learning styles of students and that promote both acquisition and applications of knowledge and understanding.

LifeMap
Valencia educators will design learning opportunities that promote student life skills development while enhancing discipline learning. Through intentional inclusion of growth-promoting strategies, instructors, counselors and librarians will facilitate the students' reflection, knowledge, and appreciation for self and others; gradual assumption of responsibility for making informed decisions; and formulation and execution of their educational, career, and life plans. As a result, students can transfer those life skills to continued learning and planning in their academic, personal, and professional endeavors.

Outcomes-based Practice
Valencia educators will design curricula that align elements of student learning toward growth in the Student Core Competencies and progression through course sequences, by the demonstration of Program Learning Outcomes.

The goal of outcomes-based practice is student learning. The two key questions posed are "What will the students be able to know or do?" and "How will you know they can do it?"

Valencia has established "what students should know or do" upon their graduation through the Student Core Competencies (Think, Value, Communicate & Act) and Program Learning Outcomes (e.g., General Education Outcomes, AS, AA, Honors, Certificate Programs, etc.). Valencia educators will facilitate student growth in the Student Core Competencies to include thinking critically and creatively across different contexts and domains of human understanding; communicating effectively in different modes and across different settings; articulating and applying personal values, values of various disciplines, and values of others; and applying learning and understanding effectively and responsibly in their lives as students and educated adults. Valencia educators also will facilitate educational growth in and demonstration of essential knowledge, abilities, attitudes and/or dispositions as articulated in Program Learning Outcomes.

Professional Commitment
Valencia educators will stay current and continually improve their knowledge and understanding of their discipline. They will participate in activities that promote Valencia's learning mission, including serving on campus and college-wide groups, attending professional conferences, and/or participating in other community organizations.

Scholarship of Teaching & Learning
Valencia educators will continuously examine the effectiveness of their teaching, counseling, librarianship and assessment methodologies in terms of student learning. They also will keep abreast of the current scholarship in the fields of teaching and learning.

THE GOAL OF OUTCOMES-BASED PRACTICE IS STUDENT LEARNING. THE TWO KEY QUESTIONS POSED ARE "WHAT WILL THE STUDENTS BE ABLE TO KNOW OR DO?" AND "HOW WILL YOU KNOW THEY CAN DO IT?"

In the tenure process Valencia adopted, candidates are not judged based on whether the learning interventions they try succeed or fail, but rather whether they are committed to improving student learning, trying new ideas, measuring learning outcomes, and sharing innovations across the college. Valencia designed the process with the understanding that sometimes faculty inventions work, but sometimes they don't. The tenure process reflects the core belief that efforts to improve–together with rigorous assessments–can lead to understanding and growth as long as faculty members genuinely engage in the process based on a commitment to improve their teaching.

The first group of faculty to go through the TLA process completed it in 2004. Of the 46 faculty members who started,

AT VALENCIA COLLEGE, PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IS FOR EVERYONE

The Teaching /Learning Academy and Valencia's Office of Faculty and Instructional Development provide professional development services to all Valencia educators, including full- and part-time faculty, counselors, and librarians. Combined, the two departments offer more than 300 courses in formats that include face-to-face seminars, online classes, and hybrid courses.[3]

Whether or not they are on the tenure track, all educators have the opportunity to create individual learning plans and participate in action research. This investment provides a clear demonstration that high-caliber teaching and a focus on continuous improvement are essential characteristics of the larger culture. It also helps build a strong pool of candidates for permanent faculty jobs—60% of the tenured hires at Valencia are drawn from the ranks of internal, part-time faculty.

VALENCIA: IMPROVING UNDERSTANDING OF ALGEBRA THROUGH ACTION RESEARCH

When Amanda Saxman was a tenure candidate at Valencia, she chose to focus her action research project on a specific lesson within one of her courses. Students in her Intermediate Algebra class did not seem to grasp parabolas, a concept crucial to the next course in the sequence, College Algebra. Saxman's students would correctly apply formulas in their homework, but then frequently misunderstand when to use the formulas during tests. Saxman decided to replace her typical lecture on the subject with a more hands-on method of instruction.

She developed an innovative lesson based on a story about a castle in a mythical land. The students needed to calculate the time and distance required to catapult boulders over the walls of the castle. After the initial exercises, the class was divided into small groups, in which they had to engage in exercises about parabolas in applied settings.

To assess changes in student understanding, Saxman designed pre- and post-tests that were administered in her class, as well as in another Intermediate Algebra class that did not use story lessons. In addition, she compared post-test scores with final exam scores of her students from a prior semester. When the course was over, she examined her results and extracted implications for her ongoing practice. Students who worked through the story lessons with graphic representations demonstrated a better understanding of quadratics, and the post-test scores of her students in the experimental group were significantly higher than students in the control classes.

At the end of the year, Saxman presented her results to a panel of tenured faculty that included math and non-math professors. Saxman's study and examples of her lessons were then shared on the TLA website and through presentations to her peers.

Her action research project was held up as an exemplar, but even if the intervention had not worked, Saxman would not have failed. She still would have shared with her peers what she learned to inform their own experimentation. Most importantly, the serious, rigorous manner in which Saxman engaged in the project would have aided her tenure review application regardless of the success of the actual intervention itself.

40 successfully completed and earned tenure. In the seven years after that, 174 more candidates earned tenure and 55 did not. Of those 55, 10 did not receive tenure because the Portfolio Panel determined their portfolios were unacceptable or the Tenure Review Committee denied them tenure. Of the 45 who did not make it to the point of submitting a final portfolio, half chose to leave and half were released by the college for performance reasons.

PATRICK HENRY COMMUNITY COLLEGE: INSTITUTIONALIZING TRAINING AND EVALUATION

At Patrick Henry Community College, a 3,000-student college in Martinsville, Virginia, the three-year graduation/transfer rate in 2004 was only 19%, a central reason the college joined the national reform initiative, Achieving the Dream (ATD). Through an ATD grant, faculty looked for data that might explain why student success rates were so low as the starting point for determining how to improve student outcomes.

Data from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement indicated low levels of student engagement in the classroom, leading faculty and leaders to hypothesize that changing this dynamic could improve graduation rates. The college chose to improve student outcomes by adopting cooper-ative learning, an instructional method centered on hands-on group work.

Three faculty members volunteered to go through an external training program on incorporating cooperative learning strategies into the classroom. When they returned from the training, they spent a year conducting informal workshops to teach other faculty members what they had learned. In the second year of the grant, three new faculty members joined the team, and the training expanded. After a few years of this voluntary process, all of Patrick Henry's full-time faculty members had been trained in the cooperative learning approach. The faculty assessment committee charged with improving student learning outcomes began to promote the idea of institutionalizing the change by making the training mandatory.

Today, all full-time faculty members must complete a two-day training in cooperative learning, and the college has incorporated the use of cooperative learning into the full-time faculty job description and evaluation processes. Although adjunct faculty members do not have to complete the training, doing so improves their chances of being invited to return to teach—at least 80% have done so, administrators estimate. By 2009–just five years after beginning the reforms–the three-year graduation/transfer rate at Patrick Henry had nearly doubled, rising from 19% to 35%.

PREPARE TO INSTITUTIONALIZE THE CHANGE

1. **Consider the processes through which change will be institutionalized (for example, changing recruiting and hiring practices, mandating training, altering the faculty evaluation and/ or revamping the tenure process).** Consider whether these strategies are likely to move the college culture or remain pockets of activity isolated from the existing culture. Look for institutional structures that make the program less vulnerable to changes in leadership, the loss of a champion who is doing the work as a volunteer, or the end of grants that support the infrastructure for the effort.

2. **Determine what resources and systems will be necessary to implement and sustain the change.** Develop a strategy for including needed resources in the core budget, including clear reasons why resources may need to be reduced elsewhere to enable broader change that will improve student success.

3. **Build a comprehensive communications plan into the larger planning process.** Update the entire college community on overall progress, including data and stories that indicate whether the change is having the desired effect.

STICKING POINTS

We do not have the resources we need to support students. How can we justify spending money on professional development? Consistently frame decisions as part of an overall effort to improve student outcomes. Make explicit the links between preparing faculty members to be effective teachers and improving learning outcomes for students. Highlight examples where faculty research or training has yielded demonstrable improvements at your institution.

Making programs mandatory increases resistance. Faculty may be resistant to mandates that relate to how they teach. One approach is to make new approaches mandatory for a small group first, such as new faculty, while encouraging and funding voluntary participation by already tenured or senior faculty.

People are interested but do not think they will have time to participate. Find ways to provide incentives for participation. Senior leaders can give high-profile awards and other recognition to those who participate in an exemplary manner. If funds are available to reward those engaged in targeted practices, make larger salary increases possible, offer release time, or create a competitive process for funds to support activities.

DEVELOP A STRATEGY FOR INCLUDING NEEDED RESOURCES IN THE CORE BUDGET, INCLUDING CLEAR REASONS WHY RESOURCES MAY NEED TO BE REDUCED ELSEWHERE TO ENABLE BROADER CHANGE THAT WILL IMPROVE STUDENT SUCCESS.

STEP 4:
EVALUATE, REFLECT, AND CONTINUOUSLY IMPROVE

Valencia and other colleges successful at changing the faculty culture understand that the drive to improve means never standing still. They know that when the culture has evolved so that faculty members continuously strive to improve student success, the college itself must respond by reflecting and supporting that culture. **A college must regularly reflect and determine the extent to which the college culture is driven to improve student success and what needs to be done next to advance a culture that results in even better student outcomes.**

At Valencia College, improvements to the tenure process have led to important changes in its hiring process, including revising its criteria and language regarding what is expected from faculty, based on the educator competencies. Valencia's TLA also continues to improve. For example, when TLA leaders recognized that new faculty members were unclear about what compiling the tenure portfolio would entail, staff created a syllabus for tenure candidates that laid out clear expectations for each year of the program, just as students get a syllabus on the first day of class.

These materials have been paired with a template on how to put together a portfolio and opportunities for tenure candidates to get together and share their implementation plans and portfolios with each other. As the director of the TLA notes, "We are modeling what should be happening in the classroom—-offering incremental supports to the process." Because of its strong culture of continuous improvement, Valencia faculty and leaders are today able to tackle challenges that might prove too divisive at other colleges, including how to handle post-tenure review of faculty performance. They address new problems as they arise, such as how to better engage the increased number of adjunct faculty members in their learning-centered philosophy, as a way to protect and strengthen the institutional culture as conditions change. These are challenges leaders, faculty, and staff believe can be resolved, built on a shared pattern of behavior which demonstrates that they can act—individually and collectively—to improve what they and so many others working in community colleges care about: student success. That, at its core, reflects the incredible strength of the Valencia tenure process.

"We're always working on it. We don't say "We've got that in the can." We're all teachers and want to constantly improve our teaching. We want people who constantly think, "How can I make this better?" We constantly revise. We want that outlook of self-reflection."

–Celine Kavalec-Miller, current director of the Teaching/Learning Academy, Valencia College

Improve

Evaluate
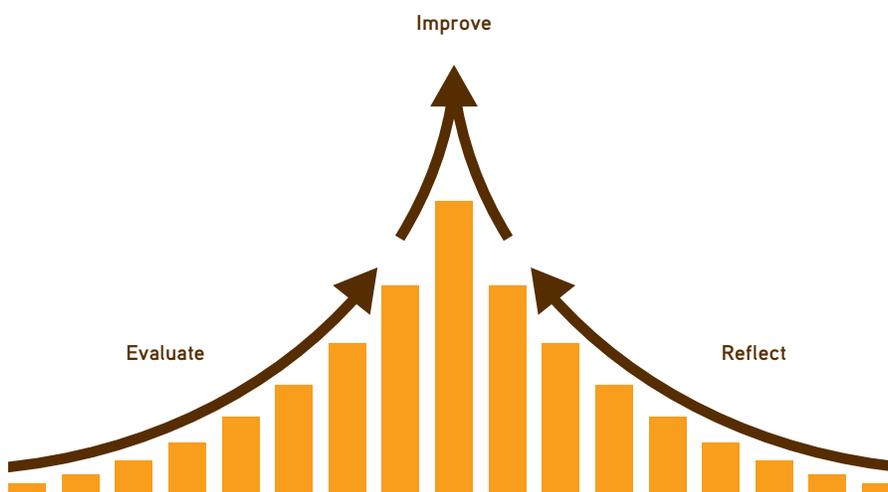
Reflect

REFLECT AND IMPROVE ON THE CHANGE

1. **Consider whether the culture has changed.** Are faculty members talking more about student learning? Are they sharing data and stories about student successes and failures? If the change did not work, what steps are next?

2. **Establish a regular review cycle for the outcomes of the programs.** Consider including not only measures of student success, but ways of assessing the evolution of faculty members' attitudes towards changing their practice.

3. **Don't forget to celebrate successes!** Highlight efforts that have inspired ongoing investigations, even if they did not generate the expected outcomes.

STICKING POINTS

At the beginning, the program yielded great results, but now it just feels like another procedure. Consider whether student outcomes are continuing to improve. If so, visibly celebrate these successes, and use them to remind people that the results come from a deliberate process of improvement. If not, go back to step one and create a sense of urgency and assemble champions for reform.

We just do not have the resources to keep doing this. Colleges that must absorb large budget reductions will have to make some hard choices about the trade-offs necessary to sustain the program. Be clear about the concrete improvements to student success that have accompanied the change and compare these outcomes to results from other initiatives. Also, ask broadly for people to consider how the college operated before and after each program and how that relates to improved student outcomes as a way to evaluate its impact.

Our program was the brainchild of one person, who is retiring. How can we keep this effort going? In the ways noted above, intentionally institutionalizing the effort through strategies aimed at broad participation and securing funds are important if the program is to survive leadership turnover. In addition, current leaders need to ensure that core processes are documented and that the next generation of leaders and champions are being cultivated and taught how the program has been sustained.

CONCLUSION

The four stages described in this report constitute a basic roadmap, by which each college will follow its own course. As administrators begin the journey, we suggest several other considerations and guiding principles.

Creating a culture of continuous improvement requires intentional strategies that–at the outset–aim to establish strong values and plans that are shared throughout the institution and—over time—are diligently pursued. Faculty members can do wonderful work alone in their classrooms, but creating institution-wide reform requires a thoughtful strategy. Change efforts are most likely to be successful when leaders work with the entire college to clearly define a need, ensure that everyone understands the challenges and their role in solving them, and then doggedly make sure that the reforms stay on track. A central part of that strategy must be building the support and ownership of change among faculty and staff, especially those at the front lines of implementation.

Hallmarks of an effective culture are trust and collaboration, where mistakes are seen as learning opportunities and experimentation is encouraged. To be truly integrated into the college culture, the message that student success can and must improve must come from all levels of leadership, from the board and president through the vice presidents, department chairs, deans, and faculty leaders. Supporting and evaluating efforts to implement vital change even if unsuccessful—are important to building the trust necessary for people to risk bold and broad new approaches and develop the stamina to pursue stronger student outcomes over time.

Although change naturally takes time, things can be done to keep it on track. Change is a challenging process, even when it is broadly desired and the conditions are ripe. To ensure that change remains on track, it is important to maintain urgency by regularly referring to data on limited student learning and to set deadlines for acting. When progress stalls or seems to be sidetracked, leaders need to react promptly, revisiting the student success challenge that established the impetus for change in the first place and reflecting on both the progress made and how much is left to do to achieve higher levels of student success.

When seeking to build a culture of continuous improvement in student outcomes, ongoing investigation and experimentation are vital. Colleges that build a culture of continuous improvement tend to pay consistent attention to students' experiences and outcomes, examine practice in light of this information, design improvements, and then start the cycle over again. This requires that administrators, middle managers, faculty, and student services professionals have ready access to good information, have the space and time to meet and discuss data, and regularly practice the habits needed to develop a culture where questioning assumptions and examining results are viewed as business as usual. Leaders can play an important role in the development of this culture by making sure that reliable data are readily available, protecting the resources needed by those engaged in this work, visibly rewarding those who use data as a jumping off point to improve practice, and consistently modeling the belief in inquiry-based change in front of faculty and staff.

Robust professional development is essential. For faculty and staff to examine data and act by implementing alternative approaches, they need support and professional development. If, for example, a college is to mandate classroom action research projects as part of the tenure process, it must understand that most new faculty members have not been trained to engage in this practice and that doing so will be hard work. Professional development clearly tied to the specific change being pursued can significantly increase chances that faculty will adopt change at scale.

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Although nearly every community college is filled with faculty members who care about their students, institutions that broadly and regularly embrace change aimed at improving student outcomes are less common. Transforming institutions into learning colleges cannot be forced by edict, and infrequently grow out of isolated examples of excellence that occur within an institution. But strong leaders who conduct thoughtful strategic planning, follow through on implementation, and engage in intensive collaboration to support faculty members as they improve student learning can foster such cultural change.

We have learned through the Aspen Prize process that colleges can act strategically to achieve this kind of transformation, to the benefit of thousands of students. We hope others can learn from their example, for the benefit of millions more.

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