

## TRANSFORMATION ADVISORY GROUP

# Lessons From the Field

### Introduction/Overview

In October 2019, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) launched the Transformation Advisory Group (TAG), a peer-learning group composed of mid-level student success leaders from AASCU's six Frontier Set institutions. The Frontier Set is a national collaborative of 29 colleges and universities and two state systems of higher education. Established in 2017 and supported by funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation,<sup>1</sup> its purpose is to identify, understand and share what works to accelerate student success, especially for low-income and first-generation students, students of color, and working adults.

TAG is anchored in the goal of generating actionable insights about the nature of student-focused, equity-conscious, whole-institution reform being pursued by AASCU institutions. It began its work by settling on a definition of institutional transformation as "profound and pervasive change that realigns institutional structures, cultures, and the business model in order to address evolving student needs and mission."

To build a new kind of learning collaborative aimed at shedding light on the complex work facing mid-level leaders of access-oriented universities, TAG co-created a learning agenda focused on sharing insights across very different contexts and lifting up insights for the wider field (see the appendix for the complete learning agenda). The group has three core guiding questions:

1. What can we learn about comprehensive institutional transformation from the transformation and continuous improvement journeys of AASCU's Frontier Set institutions?
2. How are these institutions organizing themselves and their work to comprehensively remake structures and practices on behalf of significantly better and more equitable outcomes for students, and what do the similarities and differences in their journeys tell us about transformation more generally?
3. How can the learning that comes with concerted effort to answer the above questions be shared to accelerate transformation in other access-oriented four-year institutions and beyond?

The group's first collaborative learning endeavor focused on harvesting crosscutting lessons about the nature of institutional transformation by examining a discrete and diverse change effort undertaken by each institution. The individual case studies covered a wide range of topics including remediation/placement reform, faculty development around high-impact teaching practices, institutional policies around financial challenges facing students, and implementation of math pathways.

Given the sensitive, often political nature of the challenges described in the case studies, the group agreed that the case studies themselves would not be shared publicly, but could be de-identified and used in specific, relevant learning environments. The following table describes broadly the problem and outcome addressed in each case study.

<sup>1</sup> This report is based on research funded in part by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

## Case Study Snapshot

INSTITUTION	PROBLEM	OUTCOME
A	Academic probation policies resulting in far too many students being dismissed, exacerbating equity gaps	Coordination across multiple units to reform policy and establish a multi-prong support strategy for “at-risk” students, which has resulted in significantly fewer students being dismissed
B	Long-standing “weed out” gateway course raising barriers to equitable student success	Faculty-led, large-scale course redesign resulting in significantly more students passing the gateway course
C	High number of students placing into developmental education, limiting access to credit-bearing classes	Implementation of supplemental “bridge” program offered during intersessions to accelerate remediation and provide access to credit-bearing courses
D	Far too many students whose programs do not require algebra taking and failing (and retaking and failing) algebra unnecessarily	Misleading course numbering and misinformed departments identified as sources and addressed by reordering courses in the catalog and modifying degree plans to help more students enroll in the right math course for their program
E	Problems with the degree auditing tool leading to students receiving inaccurate information about which courses to take, progress toward degree and GPA	Source of inaccuracy identified and fixed through the collaborative effort of multiple units and levels of leadership
F	Relatively small unpaid tuition bills triggering holds on student accounts, resulting in far too many students in good standing stopping out	Policies reformed and “rescue grants” established to help students in good standing remove registration holds

## Five Crosscutting Themes: Insights for Transformation

As TAG members explored each other’s case studies, five crosscutting themes emerged despite the diversity of topics. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit the U.S. and threw colleges and universities into an unprecedented crisis, the group revisited the five themes to explore their relevance during the crisis. As the group’s members reflected on the lessons gleaned across institutions, they found that the crosscutting themes not only remained relevant in a COVID world but also are perhaps even more important to understand now.

What follows is a summary of the crosscutting themes that emerged from discussion of the case studies.

**1) Even seemingly simple problems live in multiple places across an institution. Solving them requires new forms of collaboration across a wide range of long-standing silos of professional practice, each with its own culture and imperatives. Silo-spanning skills are perhaps the most important skills for systemic problem-solving.**

*Problems cannot be understood and their solutions cannot be pursued without the insights and energy of people willing to engage across deeply entrenched silos.*

Despite having technical components, all the challenges were deeply adaptive: The problem lived in multiple places and required the insights of people at multiple levels across multiple silos to solve. This means that skills associated with creating adaptive space for problem-solving were essential, including effective communication and coalition-

building, emotional intelligence, and a willingness to create space for vulnerability and blame-free collaboration across diverse workplace cultures.

**2) Accessing, translating and using data is an evolving practice at institutions. Data-informed decision-making is not widely or consistently practiced across an institution, but its power to shape and inform holistic strategies and tell compelling stories is clear.**

*Accessing the right data, translating it for multiple audiences, and using it to understand and solve problems is an evolving practice and varies within and by institution.*

In every case, the path from problem identification to solution was made steep and difficult in part because of challenges related to effective data use. Data-informed decision-making was present in each case study and was used to make the case and/or demonstrate the negative impact of the identified problem. However, the varying degrees to which data were accessible and usable created different challenges for each change-maker and student success leadership team. The cases made clear that, when it comes to effective data use, institutions struggle with both capacity (often evidenced by lean institutional research departments overwhelmed by primary compliance-oriented responsibilities) and bridging silos to gain access to the needed data (often evidenced by vital data living in multiple places within an institution). In addition to the technical challenges associated with data use, institutions struggle to use data more widely, beyond those directly involved in the change efforts, to foster positive curiosity and broad urgency for student-focused change.

**3) In contrast to the traditional view that equates “leadership” with the work of the most senior administrators, problems negatively affecting students can only be addressed with the insights of frontline faculty and staff and through the development and exercise of leadership from the middle.**

*Insights from frontline faculty and staff, and robust leadership from the middle, are necessary for problems to be understood and effectively solved.*

Leadership at multiple levels is required to solve the problems, which belies the notion that strong leadership from the top is enough to effect change. From the adjunct faculty member featured in one case study who exercised leadership by drawing attention to a problem affecting students, to mid-level division leaders agreeing to create space to engage in cross-silo collaboration with peers in other areas, leadership is best understood as something to be cultivated at every level and distributed widely.

**4) Each discrete problem that is identified and solved by an institution reveals a host of other policies and practices that are raising barriers to student success, particularly for historically marginalized populations of students. This “Hydra” challenge shows the pervasiveness of obstacles facing institutions determined to remake policies and practices at scale for more equitable student outcomes.**

*Solving a discrete problem unearths the depth and breadth of other problems yet to be addressed, illuminating the systemic nature of challenges facing students and the need for comprehensive reform.*

In every case, the unpacking of one discrete challenge led to the identification of a host of additional challenges with policies and practices adversely affecting students. By solving or addressing a problem with seemingly clear boundaries, each institution learned more about the depth and breadth of other challenges still to be addressed. In revealing new work to be done to remove barriers to student success, student success leadership teams gained clarity about the systemic nature of challenges facing students and the need for nothing short of comprehensive, transformational reform.

**5) While institutional transformation is much more than the accumulation of small wins, it is through tackling discrete problems that faculty, staff and administrators build the muscles and appetite needed for**

**ongoing, systemic, whole-institution reform. In times of crisis, those muscles get worked in new ways, and understanding what this means—particularly for mid-level leaders—is ongoing work to be done.**

*Tackling discrete challenges builds the muscles and appetite needed for ongoing, systemic, whole-institution reform.*

While institutional transformation is far more than the accumulation of discrete “wins,” it is through the practical work of tackling discrete challenges that faculty, staff and administrators build the habits, skills and structures for ongoing cross-silo collaboration in service of improved outcomes for students. In every case, the immediate problem addressed resulted in newly established practices and infrastructure for communication and collaboration. With each discrete challenge tackled, that infrastructure for adaptive problem-solving is strengthened. From improved data use, to new meeting structures, to new infrastructure, the benefits of taking on a discrete challenge are much greater than they may initially seem.

## The Deeply Adaptive Nature of “Transformation” Work

As TAG members explored and discussed the crosscutting themes, a single thread emerged to weave and connect through each: the deeply *adaptive* nature of complex, student-focused problem-solving. In his seminal work, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, Ron Heifetz argues that while technical problems can be solved with the insight and effort of a few experts, adaptive challenges—the really hard problems facing organizations and our society—cannot be understood, much less solved, without the creative energy and collaborative insights of a wide range of actors in multiple positions at several levels within an institution.<sup>2</sup> Each theme illustrates the deeply adaptive nature of the problems facing colleges and universities seeking to remake themselves in service of better outcomes for their students.

**“The most common leadership failure stems from trying to apply technical solutions to adaptive challenges.”**

**– Ronald A. Heifetz, Marty Linsky, Alexander Grashow\***

### Technical Problems

- ▶ Are easy to identify and define.
- ▶ Have a clear solution (tried & tested).
- ▶ Are solved by expertise or authority (by fiat).
- ▶ Require small changes within clear boundaries.
- ▶ Have technical solutions that people are naturally receptive to.

### Adaptive Challenges

- ▶ Both the problem and the solution(s) are difficult to define and require the insight of multiple actors.
- ▶ Solution requires the insight of those closest to the problem.
- ▶ Expertise and authority aren’t enough to get it done.
- ▶ Adaptive challenges raise hard trade-offs and require careful consideration of values as well as facts.
- ▶ People are naturally unsettled by adaptive challenges because of the inherent uncertainty.

\* Ronald A. Heifetz, Marty Linsky, Alexander Grashow, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009), 19.

<sup>2</sup> Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

## Conclusion and Discussion Questions

As TAG looks ahead to its next collaborative work, issues related to equity-mindedness and what it means for AASCU institutions to operationalize a commitment to equity will take center stage. Future learning endeavors and subsequent field-facing briefs will dig deeper into issues related to “leading from the middle” and the role of AASCU institutions in Delivering America’s Promise by committing to and encouraging “profound and pervasive change that realigns institutional structures, cultures, and the business model in order to address evolving student needs and mission.”

To help foster dialogue, deliberation and improved action during these complex and uncertain times, we suggest that student success leadership teams use the following discussion questions to structure conversation across silos between mid-level leaders throughout the institution:

1. Rank the five crosscutting themes in order of their relevance to the current status of your student success work. In your discussion group, compare your top three with those of your colleagues and discuss what the similarities and differences in your viewpoints tell you about each other’s experiences before and during the pandemic.
2. Do you have examples of small wins (or not-so-small wins) that illuminate themes outlined in this brief? How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected, both positively and negatively, your ability to make progress on key student success priorities?
  - What characteristics about (or lessons from) these wins can be leveraged to strengthen your work on behalf of students?
3. What does “leading from the middle” mean to you, and what does it take or entail? Has your viewpoint been affected by the pandemic?

---

## Contributors

### Principal Researchers and Authors

**Alison Kadlec, Ph.D.**  
Founding Partner, Sova  
alison.kadlec@sova.org

**Tiffany Yoon**  
Strategic Operations Manager, Sova  
tiffany.yoon@sova.org

### Project Administrators

**Jacquelyn R. Jones, Ph.D.**  
Senior Director, AASCU's Frontier Set & Student Success Strategy  
jonesj@aascu.org

**Nyala Watkins**  
Program Manager, Student Success, AASCU  
watkinsn@aascu.org

**Melissa Welker**  
Director, AASCU's Frontier Set  
welkerm@aascu.org

### Contributing Authors

The report was prepared in partnership with the following TAG members:

**Nurdan Aydin, Ph.D.**  
Associate Provost for Academic Affairs  
New Jersey City University  
naydin@njcu.edu

**Jonikka Charlton, Ph.D.**  
Associate Provost for Student Success and Dean of University College  
University of Texas Rio Grande Valley  
jonikka.charlton@utrgv.edu

**K. Laurie Dickson, Ph.D.**  
Vice Provost for Curriculum, Assessment, and Accreditation  
Northern Arizona University  
laurie.dickson@nau.edu

**Andrew Hamilton, Ph.D.**  
Associate Vice Provost for Student Success and Dean of Undergraduate Studies  
University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
ahamilton@uncg.edu

**Brian Loft, Ph.D.**  
Associate Vice President for Faculty and Student Success  
Sam Houston State University (Texas)  
loft@shsu.edu

**Ralf Peetz, Ph.D.**  
Associate Provost for Undergraduate Studies and Student Success  
College of Staten Island, The City University of New York  
ralf.peetz@csi.cuny.edu

**Samantha Raynor, Ed.D.**  
Assistant Vice Provost for Strategic Student Success Initiatives  
University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
sraynor@uncg.edu

**Beimnet Teclezghi, Ph.D.**  
Professor of Mathematics  
New Jersey City University  
bteclezghi@njcu.edu

---

## APPENDIX

To build a new kind of learning collaborative aimed at shedding light on the complex work facing mid-level leaders of access-oriented universities, TAG co-created a learning agenda focused on sharing insights across very different contexts and lifting up insights for the wider field. Below is the complete learning agenda.

### **TAG Learning Questions**

1. Do institutions have a shared definition and vision for student success?
  - a. Is there strong, persistent and effective leadership to lead transformation?
2. Do institutions have the capacity to generate and understand data to support the transformation process?
  - a. What level of exposure/familiarity with student success research is needed for campuses to understand their challenges and contextualize potential responses?
  - b. What do AASCU institutions know about the equity gaps of their student demographic disaggregated by locale, race, and income and how does that influence decisions?
3. What role does the policy environment of the state and system play in institutional decision-making?
4. How do AASCU institutions define and understand their contribution/role in their community, the nation and the higher education ecosystem overall?
  - a. What do AASCU institutions know about the impact on the social and economic mobility of the students they serve?
  - b. Given AASCU institutions' commitment and role in enabling access and creating opportunity for the region's underserved populations, what additional barriers and challenges do they face that other institutions may not?
  - c. Given AASCU institutions' commitment to regional development, how can they engage local/community and state partners in the transformation process?
  - d. What role do local and regional economic (workforce) factors play in decision-making?
5. How do AASCU institutions create urgency for transformation? How do campuses balance innovation and experimentation with positive pressure to improve outcomes?

## About the American Association of State Colleges and Universities



The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) is a Washington, D.C.-based higher education association of nearly 400 public colleges, universities, and systems whose members share a learning- and teaching-centered culture, a historic commitment to

underserved student populations, and a dedication to research and creativity that advances their regions' economic progress and cultural development. These are institutions Delivering America's Promise.

## About Sova



Sova is a mission-driven organization dedicated to advancing genuine socioeconomic mobility for more through higher education and workforce development. Sova works to accelerate the pace and improve the quality of large-scale change aimed at

achieving significantly better and more equitable outcomes for today's learners. We help leaders working to improve student success outcomes avoid pitfalls as they move from strategy to action, from solution to implementation, and from pilot to scaled intervention. To learn more, visit [www.sova.org](http://www.sova.org).

Published December 2020

Copyright © 2020 by American Association of State Colleges and Universities



1717 Rhode Island Avenue, NW • Suite 700 • Washington, DC 20036  
ph 202.293.7070 • fax 202.296.5819 • [aascu.org](http://aascu.org)