

TRANSFORMATION ADVISORY GROUP

Lessons From the Field

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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,¹ 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. 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.

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 are also perhaps even more important to understand now.

Five Crosscutting Themes: Insights for Transformation

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.

¹ 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.

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.
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.
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.
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.

The Deeply Adaptive Nature of “Transformation” Work

When we look across the crosscutting themes, a single thread weaves 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.² 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.

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

Discussion Questions

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

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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.

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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.

Published December 2020

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1717 Rhode Island Avenue, NW • Suite 700 • Washington, DC 20036

ph 202.293.7070 • fax 202.296.5819 • aascu.org