

TRANSFORMATION ADVISORY GROUP

Lessons From the Field

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,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.

Mid-level leaders have always been in a difficult position when it comes to managing complex student success change efforts. Lacking formal levers with which to effect change, but pressed nonetheless to translate senior leadership's priorities into implementation plans while also building support from below, the job of the mid-level leader has always been challenging. Yet, they are arguably the most important change agents in an institution, and they also have some of the most salient perspectives on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this brief, we focus on elevating the experiences and learnings of the TAG members. This document is the product of 10 deep-dive conversations and written reflections exchanged between April 2020 and December 2020. While we focus here on putting into words the unvarnished experiences of those who have been tasked with leading from the middle during unprecedentedly difficult times, we also want to highlight that the pandemic has created new avenues for progress and new sources of hope for mid-level leaders committed to fostering and accelerating transformational change on behalf of better and more equitable outcomes for today's learners.

Key Reflections: Finding Silver Linings Through Tough Times

Vital Lessons Learned Amid Exhaustion. The protracted nature of the pandemic has led to a generalized state of anxiety and exhaustion. For mid-level leaders, pressures from above and below are mounting as patience wanes all around them. And yet the pace of change in the context of great uncertainty remains breakneck. Resilience is depleted, and frustration is difficult to keep at bay. Mid-level leaders, who hold primary responsibility for working with staff and faculty to advance directives from above, are put in a difficult position. They are managing their own exhaustion, fear, and frustration while trying to maintain positivity, trust, and productivity for their beleaguered colleagues and others throughout the institution. The stakes are especially high for mid-level leaders because it is influence, not formal authority, on which they depend in order to make and sustain change.

The silver lining here is that the honest acknowledgment of the exhaustion created by the pandemic has led to greater overall attention being paid to fostering social and emotional intelligence in the workplace. The pandemic

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.

Staff and faculty have put forth considerable effort to ensure that our students had the support and care they needed during this time. We paid a lot of attention to our students. We paid less attention to the well-being of our staff and faculty. The brunt of this work fell to mid-level leaders and these leaders are experiencing the most wear and tear, the most fatigue mentally, emotionally, and physically.

has helped to shine light on the critical role of cultivating a culture of care and has created an opportunity to take a clear-eyed, realistic look at the institution's work as a whole. Never has the need to set and manage priorities been more apparent, and never has the inextricable connection between progress and the well-being of those in the institution been more evident.

A Strengthened Sense of Purpose Amid Impossible Balancing Acts. Planning and implementation for reopening has required an impossible balancing act with mid-level leaders at the fulcrum. Senior level leaders are balancing daunting financial challenges with imperatives around student safety, while frontline faculty and staff are balancing the stresses of directly supporting students with anxieties about their own job security and health. Mid-level leaders stand at the intersection. In the context of COVID-19—in which social distancing has forced a reliance on virtual and formal, written communications while all but eliminating the informal networking that used to characterize the workplace—mid-level leaders have precious few opportunities to connect with colleagues in ways that promote their own emotional health and well-being. Without space for authentic connection, the spirit of mutual support that these leaders must cultivate as part of exercising influence is more elusive than ever.

The silver lining here is that the pandemic has laid bare the immense inequities woven into the fabric of our society, as well as the artificial barriers that stand in the way of student success—especially for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students. With a vaccine rollout underway and broader audience focus on racial equity and justice, mid-level leaders are well-positioned to deepen working partnerships across the institution and exercise their influence to lead equity-centered change on behalf of their students.

New Muscles Built Around Familiar Pain Points. Developing effective communication structures and practices is extremely difficult under normal circumstances, and the visibility and impacts of communication gaps and breakdowns have been greatly intensified by the stress of COVID-19. While many institutions did a good job with early crisis communications, the quality of communication around decisions made by senior leaders affecting faculty, staff, and mid-level administrators deteriorated as the pandemic unfolded. This is no doubt partly the result of the many pressures facing senior leaders as they have been overburdened with managing a crisis of unprecedented scope and duration. But it is also the case that mid-level leaders depend on this communication with more senior administrators in order to provide leadership to faculty and staff. COVID-19 has exposed—and even exacerbated—key communication breakdowns that have negatively impacted mid-level leaders most.

The silver lining here is that the experience of navigating the crisis has resulted in deep learning and the building of new muscles. Mid-level leaders will emerge from the pandemic with renewed awareness of what they and their colleagues can accomplish when working together with common purpose. They will also have gained more skills in the use of data, the management of teams and projects, and the leveraging of their influence to shape conversations among and decisions by more senior leaders. In short, mid-level leaders will come away stronger and smarter. Having experienced a crash course in seizing opportunities to accelerate innovation, these critical changemakers are now better equipped to make a difference than they were before the pandemic.

Transformative Innovation Amid Scarcity. Across many institutions, the pandemic prompted seemingly impossible innovations, particularly with respect to cross-silo collaboration, the widespread use of technology, and the identification of and reckoning with deeply problematic institutional policies and practices. In many cases, reforms that might have taken years to achieve—such as equitable placement of students through the use of multiple measures and the abandonment of high-stakes placement tests—were implemented in a matter of weeks or even days. With mid-level leaders orchestrating disparate changes across diverse functional areas, institutions experienced unprecedented change in a compressed time frame. While the positive outputs of these innovations cannot be denied, they are also not boundless. Without diligent attention, the practical constraints discussed in the prior three reflections will limit the ability of mid-level leaders to redouble gains made over the last year.

The silver lining here is that certain policies and practices are receiving long-overdue attention, and there now exists a precedent for change that mid-level leaders may build upon. As institutions look forward to finding and defining the next normal, they can draw on lessons learned from leading and managing large-scale, counter-cultural change through crisis. And they may point toward this precedent as they make the case for continued progress.

Staff have shown an incredible willingness to shift online, most remarkably among those who would have fought tooth and nail not to do so before the pandemic. Some of them are now the biggest champions for the value of offering some key services like advising online. There's also been a strong bond built between staff in different divisions which have been seriously siloed in the past. Most especially with the relationship between Admissions, Recruitment, Orientation, and Advising. Having to pivot to virtual orientations and work so hard to get students to be responsive and participate led to almost daily interactions as they had to rely on one another to do their jobs well. Those bonds will outlast the pandemic.

The Most Important Silver Lining: Next-Level Attention to Equity

Nobody knows better than those at access-oriented four-year universities how our society and higher education are being fundamentally challenged by both the COVID-19 crisis and by renewed critique of the structural racism that has shaped this country for over 400 years. At universities serving the largest numbers of students from historically marginalized and minoritized communities, mid-level leaders work at the intersection of the health, economic, and sociopolitical crises that define our country's present moment. The work they do each day chips away at the systemic barriers standing in the way of equitable student success. The most important silver lining here is that the crises of the past year provide both the justification and the opportunity to sharpen the focus on the relationship between student success reform efforts and the moral imperative of race equity.

Expanding equity consciousness. As the country faces a period of reckoning around issues of racial and economic justice, mid-level leaders are engaging in next-level reflection about their personal journeys. The ability to reflect on one's personal learning journey is a positive indicator of ability to lead from the middle while centering equity, and we see among these leaders a clear commitment in this direction.

Clarity around purpose and opportunities. Mid-level leaders will emerge from the pandemic clear-eyed about the necessity and difficulty of grounding their work in a commitment to equity. The pull of the status quo is tremendous, and leading real equity-focused change comes with many challenges. However, mid-level leaders of AASCU institutions are uniquely positioned to foster shared understanding of the moral and business imperatives of leveling the playing field for students from low-income backgrounds, returning adults with complicated lives, and Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and other underserved students.

Equity work is not going to happen on its own. We (each of us) must critically examine the outcomes of the students we interact with and honestly question why those students have those outcomes. This takes time, it takes intentionality, and it takes a willingness to make changes to what we do and how. We often have such a hard time accepting our own responsibility in ensuring that we disrupt the status quo. We have the power to make the outcome different if we admit that the “fault” is not always with students, that the goal is for all students to learn and grow and not everyone takes the same path to that goal.

Discussion Questions

This brief, like TAG’s first Lessons from the Field, is intended to foster dialogue, deliberation, and robust action at AASCU institutions across the country. We suggest that student success leaders use this brief and the following discussion questions to prompt individual reflection and to structure group conversation across silos throughout the institution.

Discussion questions for group settings and team-based dialogue:

1. Reflect on the key reflections and corresponding silver linings. Which of these resonate with you most deeply? In your discussion group, compare your responses with those of your colleagues and discuss what the similarities and differences in your viewpoints tell you about each other’s experiences.
2. In what ways can you use the lessons and experiences of the past year as opportunities to create lasting change on your campus?
 - a. Were there any changes made on your campus in response to the COVID-19 pandemic or the heightened focus on systemic racism that will (or you believe should) be sustained longer-term?
 - b. How might you maintain the visceral urgency elicited from the crises of the past year to continue to build momentum for long-term, systemic change?
 - c. What can you do to ensure the equity work begun or accelerated throughout the past year continues past this moment of crisis?
3. What have you learned about the importance of care—for yourself and for others—steeped in this work of counter-cultural change? What can you do to better care for yourselves and your team?
4. In your discussion group, identify potential systemic barriers to student success. What steps might you take to address those barriers?

Reflection questions for individuals to contemplate and explore:

1. What does “leading from the middle” mean to you, and what does it require?
2. How do you define equity for yourself?
 - a. In what ways has your own equity consciousness developed over time or as a result of your own history, as well as what you have seen during the pandemic and the most recent reckoning around issues of racial and economic injustice?
3. How does your definition/understanding of equity fit into your position at your institution? In what ways does it align (or not) with your institution’s definition of equity?

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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 focused on promoting equitable upward mobility for more through the reform of higher education and workforce development. Sova's work is based on the conviction that sustainable, scalable, high-quality innovation in higher education and workforce development must be designed and implemented with rigorous attention to the human dimensions of change. Sova's core services are focused on adaptive change leadership, strategic communications and will-building, program strategy, and implementation support. To learn more, visit www.sova.org.

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