Johanna Duncan-Poitier

Personal Story

Johanna Duncan-Poitier is the Senior Vice Chancellor for Community Colleges and the Education Pipeline for the State University of New York (SUNY). In this role, Johanna provides system oversight and coordination for SUNY’s 30 community colleges. She previously served as the Senior Deputy Commissioner of Education P-16 for the New York State Education Department (NYSED) and before joining NYSED, she provided campus-based leadership for the City University of New York (CUNY) at Queens College, York College, and Bronx Community College.

At SUNY, she has led the launch and development of many major statewide projects bringing together a wide range of stakeholders from K-12, higher education, community development and business. She now provides leadership for SUNY Achieve – a transformational initiative that helps students meet their higher educational goals and prepares them for high-demand career opportunities. Through SUNY Achieve, SUNY is scaling-up the delivery of student support strategies across the 64-campus system including: Early Alert Systems, Guided Pathways, Math Pathways, Degree Works, Mentoring and Tutor Networks, Transfer Finder, Workforce Development and Re-enroll to Complete.

Because of her leadership across the K-12 and higher education landscape, Johanna thinks deeply about what complex change efforts look like across the system – at the national, state and campus levels. That depth of experience has helped her build a solid base of support for the Strong Start to Finish work. SUNY’s story on developmental education redesign is about what dedicated system leadership support – partnered with faculty, student and campus leadership – can accomplish when resources are marshalled in service of a long-term vision of student success. It is a powerful story of a system’s principled and practical commitment to authentic faculty leadership can serve as the key to scaled impact.

Policy-Related Overview

The system began exploring the conditions for scaling developmental education reform in 2012 through the SUNY Pathway to Success initiative, when a blue-ribbon Taskforce on Remediation was charged with identifying scalable solutions to the problems facing students in developmental math. The Taskforce, composed of a diverse array of critical P-16 stakeholders – including students and faculty – studied student outcomes data, evaluated evidence-based strategies, and made a recommendation about the approach that should be adopted and supported by the system. At the end of the process, the Carnegie’s Math Pathways model was identified as a promising fit for SUNY. Focusing on systemic
change, the Carnegie approach to creating differentiated math pathways draws heavily on the following areas: an accelerated and collaborative structure, relevant content, research-based instruction, productive persistence, a networked community, and relevant analytics to inform continuous improvement.

While the strategic focus of the Taskforce’s decision-making process was instructive and the partnership with Carnegie had been a powerful one, Johanna emphasized that the most important aspect of the SUNY developmental education redesign work is the story of faculty leadership.

Two SUNY campuses were among the pioneers in piloting the Carnegie Math Pathways model and some of those faculty members were involved in the design. Johanna turned to another college to scale-up the model and invited two cutting-edge faculty members to the national Carnegie Math Pathways conference in California. Both faculty members came out of the conference excited about the Carnegie approach and eager to share what they’d learned with their fellow math professors.

As interest in the work grew among faculty and mid-level administrators, SUNY was fortunate to receive a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to create a New York State-based institute for professional development to scale the work and train many more faculty. This made it possible to scale this work without hundreds of faculty members travelling to California. As she put it, “Quickly, two faculty grew to hundreds of faculty members who were saying to their colleagues, ‘Let’s do this, come join me!’” The work grew and grew from there, driven at each step by institutional practitioners and supported by the system.

Today we have over 475 faculty, administrators and tutors trained to deliver and support this curriculum. Growing from two campuses to 28 in math alone impacting 3,000 students initially with an anticipated impact of tens of thousands. The trust and faculty support that was built at that early stage with math pathways was critical to the infrastructure that is now bringing 38 two- and four-year campuses together for Strong Start to Finish, math pathways, co-requisite English and Guided Pathways.

When asked to reflect on the key lessons of SUNY’s experience so far, Johanna reiterated the importance of the work being driven by those closest to students, and she stressed the importance of being provided grant funding to deepen, strengthen, expand and knit together promising work already underway.

Strong Start to Finish has been a critical gift to take us to the next level of long-term, sustainable success to scale. Funding is usually provided for new initiatives; this is an investment to further what we are already doing well. Dr. Christopher Mullin and the leadership of SSTF have told us time and time again, “We’re investing in you because we recognize that what you’re doing is evidenced-based... and that it is going to scale.” It’s an incredible gift, and a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to transform our students’ lives.

Citation: