
Faculty & Staff: A Toolkit for Mid-Level Managers

Executive Summary

This toolkit provides tested change leadership strategies for mid-level leaders, and those who support them, with the goal of better equipping these critical actors to lead efforts that accelerate equitable outcomes for marginalized and racially minoritized students.

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Every student deserves a strong start in their first year of college. This toolkit is part of a SSTF three-part series, providing resources to assist postsecondary leaders design and implement reform strategies that support equitable outcomes for students who are marginalized and racially minoritized.



The University of Texas at Austin
Charles A. Dana Center



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This toolkit provides tested change leadership strategies for mid-level leaders, and those who support them, with the goal of better equipping these critical actors to lead efforts that accelerate equitable outcomes for marginalized and racially minoritized students. We define equity here as the elimination of race and socioeconomic status as predictors of outcomes. We also approach equity with explicit recognition of the intersectionality of identity and the importance of factors including age, gender identification and immigration status when it comes to the work of dismantling structural and systemic barriers to student success. To support administrators' efforts to address patterns of inequity in student outcomes, the toolkit includes topics related to evaluating institutional policies and scaling culturally responsive pedagogical practices.

Why focus on mid-level leaders?

As those who impact faculty and staff most directly, mid-level leaders must be equipped to translate priorities from above into action plans for those deeper in the institution. It falls to them to shape priorities and mindsets, model silo-spanning collaboration across different functional units, and strengthen shared appetite for the hard work of student reform. Perhaps most importantly, mid-level leaders are tasked with achieving ambitious goals, often without formal authority. This means they must develop and hone a particular set of leadership skills that expand their capacity to influence, motivate and inspire others.

How this toolkit helps

Large-scale, equity-grounded redesign of developmental education requires leadership training. Nowhere is this more important than at the mid-level, where leaders are tasked with leading implementation of promising practices, strategic direction, systemic change and evidence-based interventions. This toolkit is intended to help these leaders assess their leadership capacity, build skills related to policy evaluation, and measure structural change as they seek to transform developmental education to benefit Black, Latinx, Indigenous and first-generation students, and those from households with low incomes.

How to use this toolkit

This toolkit provides rubrics, guiding questions, case studies and resources to help mid-level leaders increase their capacity to spearhead reform. The tools included here can be used separately or together.

- **Leadership Capacity Assessment** — A rubric to help mid-level managers reflect on and assess their leadership capacity to galvanize faculty and staff resolve for improvements, build trust, forge high functioning relationships with senior leaders, facilitate effective cross-functional teams, and effectively manage projects.
- **Policy Typology** — A framework designed to support mid-level managers to better understand and influence the policy development and implementation process. Through a set of guiding questions and recommended action areas, this resource offers a simple framework for evaluating institutional policies, identifying areas for improvement, and making the case for change.
- **Measures of Structural Change** — A tool to help mid-level leaders assess the extent to which policies and practices create institutional conditions that yield equitable access, opportunity and experiences for students in racially minoritized communities. Measures include placement policy and practices, advising practices, alignment of gateway courses with programs of study, number of corequisite course sections based on enrollment, and proportional representation of student groups enrolled in corequisite courses.
- **Practice Profiles** — Short stories that highlight colleges doing exceptional work, as well as field-based lessons. One practice profile also focuses on the role of mid-level system leaders as drivers of innovation.
- **FAQ** — Frequently asked questions about mid-level managers.

Key takeaways

- Increasing the capacity of mid-level managers to lead developmental education reform includes assessing and developing their change-leadership skills, and helping them understand how to:
 - Evaluate and impact policies.
 - Make the case and build shared will for transformation.
 - Connect the dots between high-level priorities and needs on the ground.
 - Support high-quality implementation of reforms. Successful developmental education reform efforts share commonalities that shape the work of mid-level leaders:
 - Ongoing, authentic engagement at every level is necessary for systemic change.
 - Transformation requires cross-functional teamwork and a culture of collaboration that truly values distributed leadership and empowers co-ownership of complex work.
 - Senior administration must be supportive of time allocation and professional learning opportunities for mid-level leaders and frontline faculty/staff to own and lead efforts.
 - Using quantitative and qualitative data to elevate the experiences of faculty, staff and students is essential to continuous improvement, and should be supported at multiple levels within and across departments and functional units.
 - Cultivation of an institutional culture of belonging and care for faculty, staff and students to achieve true co-ownership of complex, equity-minded change work is the result of ongoing effort.
- Prioritization leadership skills that relate to social and emotional intelligence so that mid-level managers — often lacking formal authority — are able to influence and motivate others.

About This Toolkit

This toolkit was conceived by the Dana Center and Sova with the goal of bringing together leading lessons and insights gleaned by these organizations over the years through direct work supporting hundreds of institutions committed to scaling ambitious, equity-grounded student success reforms. Based on our combined insights, we built this toolkit to provide institutions and systems with practical resources to help mid-level managers become more effective leaders of complex change, and to help inform institutional and system leaders tasked with providing professional development for mid-level managers.

Toolkit authors

Martha Ellis

Martha M. Ellis, Ph.D. is president of Mellis LLC, a consulting firm bringing deep experience, substantive knowledge, and research-based innovation to leaders as they confront the challenges and opportunities facing higher education today and in the future. She is the senior pathways lead for the Texas Success Center, Achieving the Dream Leadership Coach, and professor in residence at the University of Texas at Austin.

Previously, Martha was managing director for the Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas at Austin. Prior to joining the Dana Center, Martha was associate vice chancellor of Academic Affairs for the University of Texas System. She has 35 years of experience in universities and community colleges in Texas, New Mexico and Oklahoma, including two college presidencies, provost, chief information officer, graduate and undergraduate dean, and faculty member positions. Martha has won numerous teaching awards, has written scholarly publications and is an invited presenter at national conferences. She was recognized by the U. S. Congress and Texas House of Representatives for her leadership in higher education.

Alison Kadlec

Alison Kadlec is a founding partner at Sova, where she leads a body of work focused on accelerating the pace and improving the quality of large-scale, equity-grounded reform of higher education. She has worked with scores of colleges and universities across the country to support the capacity of senior and mid-level leaders to effectively engage members of their communities as constructive partners in the hard work of change on behalf of equitable student success. Alison and her team also work with state policymakers and system leaders in more than half the states in the U.S. to help improve the quality of policy development and implementation around higher education and workforce issues. She has been active in the Guided Pathways movement since its origins, led the 2020 update of the Core Principles for Transforming Remediation, and is working in several states on issues related to scaled redesign of developmental education.



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About Strong Start to Finish

Strong Start to Finish is a network of policy and research partners, institution and systems leaders, and foundations advancing system reforms in developmental education, so every student can succeed in their first year of college. In particular, we support college success for Black, Brown, Asian American, Indigenous students, adult learners, and students with low incomes, who have been underserved by the education system for too long. We work to scale the use of proven, proactive strategies that remove barriers that typically impede these students from earning essential college credits in English and Math courses in their first year. Education Commission of the States is the host of the Strong Start to Finish network.





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