
Faculty & Staff: A Toolkit for Mid-Level Managers

Frequently Asked Questions

Find the answers you need to put this toolkit into practice.

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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.



Frequently Asked Questions

What is a mid-level manager?

For the purposes of this toolkit, we define mid-level managers as those leaders who are accountable to senior leadership (e.g., president, provost, head of student services) and responsible for supporting/managing lower-level management and frontline faculty and staff. Mid-level managers exist at multiple levels between senior leadership and frontline faculty and staff, and include deans, directors, division heads, vice presidents, associate vice presidents and department chairs.

Why are mid-level managers important?

Mid-level managers are important because they are responsible for leading implementation of institutional priorities and the objectives of senior leadership; translating information and policies from senior leaders to lower management and frontline employees; and inspiring and guiding lower-level managers/supervisors to accomplish objectives around implementation of student success priorities. Put simply, mid-level managers are critical influencers of both the quality and pace of implementation of priorities. Therefore, they are among the most important change agents within an institution.

How do mid-level managers shape institutional culture?

Mid-level managers are uniquely positioned to touch all levels of the institution, which gives them the power to shape institutional culture through their ability to positively influence others through their approach to leadership. By fostering a healthy team culture of mutual care and support, mid-level managers empower others to participate in culture-building practices grounded in a core commitment to equitable student success. They also have the power to influence practice and policy changes that can shape institutional culture.

Do mid-level managers really have any power to make change?

Yes, and in fact no sustainable positive change is possible in the absence of skillful mid-level managers. Despite the constraints mid-level managers face from above, below and across their institutions, they are uniquely positioned to influence both the quality and pace of change around the most important student success priorities. Mid-level managers have the power to make or break implementation of placement reform, math pathways, co-requisite remediation and advising redesign.

What is equity consciousness and why does it matter for mid-level leadership?

Equity consciousness is being aware of the historic, systemic structural practices that have served to exclude/marginalize and continue to raise barriers for students from the benefits of higher education

based on socioeconomic status, race, gender, etc. It is important for mid-level managers to be equity conscious because they influence so many aspects of institutional culture, practice and policy.

What does it mean for a mid-level manager to be data literate?

Mid-level managers who are data literate are successfully able to access, analyze, translate and communicate data in order to create a culture of evidence-based decision-making. They understand the importance of disaggregating student outcomes and addressing differences by student groups to further equity consciousness, and know how to create measurable action plans for improvement. Data literate mid-level managers also display emotional intelligence in helping frontline faculty and staff confront and work through hard issues revealed by effective use of data.

What is the best leadership development/change management model for mid-level managers?

There are a range of leadership theories and models for managing change that could be adopted and applied effectively by mid-level managers. While this toolkit is agnostic when it comes to specific leadership and change management models, it is premised on the recognition that mid-level managers must be effective in managing and leading change around challenges that are both technical and adaptive. A variety of specific leadership development and change management models can be applied within this wider framework around adaptive and technical problem solving.

Why does trust matter?

Trust is the cornerstone of strong relationships, and mid-level managers are in a unique position to influence both their teams as well as senior leadership. Mid-level managers with strong relationships built on trust are able to use their realm of influence to lead transformational change from the middle with less resistance from their team and other stakeholders. By building trust, mid-level managers can create a culture of transparency and belonging around them for both their teams and students. Because mid-level managers often lack formal authority, and therefore rely on their ability to influence others to make the changes they are tasked with implementing, the ability to develop, deepen and maintain trusting relationships is critical to their success.



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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