Faculty & Staff: A Toolkit for Mid-Level Managers

Leadership Capacity Assessment

This capacity assessment considers five key skills essential for mid-level managers as they work to accelerate student-focused change.

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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
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This capacity assessment considers five key skills essential for mid-level managers as they work to accelerate student-focused change. Details for each skill are noted below, followed by a rubric that provides measures for each skill, from emerging to advanced. A mid-level leader at the advanced level will demonstrate all the competencies included in emerging, developing, intermediate and advanced levels.

Key Skills

Using data effectively to engage and motivate

Mid-level managers at their best are equity-minded and have both the data literacy and emotional intelligence required to access, translate and use data to inspire curiosity and empower front-line faculty and staff to implement and refine promising practices with integrity. To build a culture of evidence-informed improvement, mid-level leaders must support consistent collection/reporting of student data and possess the social skills entailed in effective data use. Understanding that data conversations can be emotionally hard for faculty and staff, and that people struggle to bring their best when they feel shamed or defensive, skillful mid-level leaders work hard to enter data conversations with empathy, as well as principled focus. Program evaluation and continuous improvement, based on equity-minded quantitative and qualitative data, are essential to sustainable progress on any of the reforms outlined in the Core Principles.

Building trust with faculty and staff

Policy changes frequently and understandably face resistance from faculty and staff who feel excluded from decision-making processes or who perceive threats in reform priorities. In these situations, mid-level managers must facilitate meaningful engagement between their units and higher-level leaders to foster understanding of the rationale and goals of the new policy or practice. These discussions must be designed to foster trusting relationships through respectful communication grounded in shared values, consistency in leadership, and transparency in decision-making. Mid-level managers can accelerate and improve student success by creating a culture of transparency, an ethos of mutual respect, and a sense of belonging among faculty and staff. They are also uniquely positioned to elevate student voices and keep everyone focused on the student experience.

Forging high functioning relationships with senior leaders

Mid-level managers are in a difficult position of needing to meet the expectations of senior leaders while navigating the expectations and anxieties of those deeper in the institution. Developing the skills to simultaneously manage up and down amid competing perspectives is essential to the

success of mid-level managers. Helping senior leaders understand the impediments to change, securing the cover needed from senior leaders to pursue reform boldly, and successfully lobbying for the resources and focus needed from senior leaders are all essential areas of professional development for mid-level managers.

Facilitating effective cross-functional teams

Mid-level managers are on the frontlines of shaping how their units respond to initiatives and how they implement changes. Mid-level managers are in a unique position to create practices that foster cross-team collaboration and empower their people to work across functional areas around shared priorities and goals. The skills here include deftness in spanning functional cultures; facilitating co-discovery processes that result in shared commitment across diverse agendas; building relationship-based collaboration beyond transactional cooperation; and organizing collaborative work to meet the demands and realities of those involved. Effective institutional change entails all units working in coordination to leverage collective strengths.

Managing projects to foster continuous improvement

Mid-level managers are uniquely positioned to foster their team's professional development and provide feedback to senior leaders. Mid-level managers must cultivate project management and portfolio management skills that enable them to turn mandates/directives/aspirations into coordinated workflow that brings the best out of those deeper in the institution. More sophisticated and capable mid-level leaders understand that project management is change management, and find natural ways to embed a continuous improvement mindset into the way day-to-day work is organized and executed.

Effective institutional change entails all units working in coordination to leverage collective strengths.

Leadership Capacity Assessment Rubric

This rubric is designed for use as both a personal reflection tool and as a peer learning resource. It is also designed as an input to formal leadership training. It can be used as a standalone resource or be embedded in a wider leadership development program. The elements included accommodate a wide range of change models. The scale from emerging to advanced should be viewed as scaffolding, with the capacities at each level included and built upon at the next level.

	Emerging	Developing	Intermediate	Advanced
Using Data	Understands and shares the importance of consistently collecting and using data to make evidence-based decisions. Identifies available data, how and when it is collected, and how it is used.	Discusses the significance of disaggregating student results when evaluating equity. Develops a research agenda, including: • Key measures that are important to assessing student performance (KPIs and lagging indicators, like course completion, GPA, excess hours, time to completion).	Ties disaggregated data use to broader equity conversations that focus on structural impediments to fairness. Shares research agenda across college community and develops plan for implementation. Provides professional development activities to help all employees understand and begin reviewing data. Develops regular, consistent and easy to review and use data reports, for specific target audiences. Uses data to discuss measures and set targets.	Rounds all conversations about disaggregated data in a shared statement about the institution's definition of equity. Bases college planning and budget development on evidence-informed results. Develops action plans based on measures that attend to both the technical and adaptive, human dimensions of data-driven change. Includes data and technology capacity reviews in annual planning — from compliance to regular reporting — and uses data strategically to inform and measure.

	Emerging	Developing	Intermediate	Advanced
Using Data (continued)	Understands and shares the importance of consistently collecting and using data to make evidence-based decisions. Identifies available data, how and when it is collected, and how it is used.	• Measures for processes and activities aligned with the KPIs that will provide faculty and staff with evidence to make improvements (leading indicators) [e.g., completion and success by course by faculty, number of hours completed in first term, completion of first writing and math courses in first year, having program plan documented in first 15 hours]. Gathers baseline data (disaggregated by student groups), where available. Gathers qualitative data through student focus groups/interviews to understand the student experience.	Aligns measures with processes and activities to encourage use of evidence to make changes. Shares measures, targets and action plans for improvements with college. Begins discussions for sharing progress data with students based on ongoing equity discussions on student results.	Practices, reviews and enhances a culture of decision-making. Shares and celebrates results, and continually reaches for improvements/ push for excellence. Develops and expands a cadre of faculty, staff and administrators who model social and emotional intelligence in engaging colleagues as partners in sense-making around data.

	Emerging	Developing	Intermediate	Advanced
Building Trust	Shares policy and practice changes (and rationale for them) in emails with stakeholders.	Shares policy and practice changes (and rationale for them) with a small circle of advisors. Delegates change management and process improvement plans to a small circle of advisors. Ensures diversity of experience, perspective and background is included in committee make-up.	Shares policy and practice changes (and rationale for them) in ways that explicitly invite input and feedback from a broad range of stakeholders, particularly those on the frontline. Facilitates the development and implementation of change management and process improvement plans by stakeholders, particularly those on the frontline. Creates an atmosphere where team members acknowledge need for change and feel comfortable asking for help and admitting mistakes. Creates an atmosphere of belonging by consistently recognizing effort or accomplishment and by visibly elevating the successes of others. Ensures committees and composition of working groups are reflective of the diversity of the student populations served by the institution.	Ensures that policy and practice change recommendations flow from stakeholders, particularly those on the frontline, with dedicated room created by mid-level leaders for frontline faculty and staff to discuss concerns and provide insights that are then fed into improvement plans. Shares change management and process improvement plans progress reports at regular intervals, and success is celebrated in visible ways. Creates an environment where team members from all circles display co-ownership for change by regularly collaborating in ways that yield additional insights about policy and practice changes that ought to be considered or refined. Displays skills associated with emotional intelligence and actively fosters psychological capital (hope, efficacy, resilience and optimism) among colleagues through consistent communication and ongoing collaboration. Makes consistent efforts to acknowledge and address implicit bias by centering the voices of faculty and staff from racially minoritized groups in committees and working groups.

	Emerging	Developing	Intermediate	Advanced
Forging high functioning relationships (vertical)	Understands the position of their division or functional unit within the organization and how their work fits into the overall success of the college. Understands the expectations of senior leaders.	Sees the importance of developing high functioning relationships with the executive leadership team. Begins to be aware of the importance and influence of team members and individuals up the organizational chart on team performance and the overall performance of the organization.	Establishes strong professional and high functioning relationships with executive leadership. Successfully signals commitment to implementing leadership priorities.	Understands how to work with executive leaders to receive the cover and support needed to effectively bring those deeper in the organization along as reliable partners in the work.
Facilitating effective cross-functional teams (horizontal)	Ensures that functional units have representation on appropriate teams. Selects team members on the basis of human resource data, and college and team needs. If appropriate, advocates for a cross-functional team where mid-level leaders are equivalent in terms of levels, titles, job descriptions and responsibilities.	Focuses on promoting a culturally responsive environment of equity and belonging in addition to providing clear team charges and operations. Creates relationship-building opportunities for members beyond team meetings and outside formal roles.	Aligns team operations with the mission and values of the college. Ensures that team goals, actions, and evaluation plans are informed by data. Takes opportunities to communicate team strategies and work with the whole college with transparency, and creates effective opportunities for feedback. Provides feedback opportunities for team members around the cultural-responsiveness of team functionality.	Sees that team operations, including perceptions related to cultural-responsiveness of team practices, are reviewed at least annually along with appropriate data, and makes efforts to improve functionality accordingly. Establishes and monitors an "all up" communications and engagement plan across and between cross-functional teams to ensure information flows effectively.

	Emerging	Developing	Intermediate	Advanced
Managing projects to foster continuous improvement	Develops action plans for projects with specific objectives. Tracks progress using student success metrics. Meets with faculty and staff each semester to share results.	Engages faculty and staff in project/portfolio planning to improve student success. Builds and monitors a living implementation plan that includes milestones aligned to objectives to ensure clarity around expectations/roles, and to foster a shared understanding of conditions for successful implementation. Establishes accountability measures to track results. Regularly reviews and shares results with faculty and staff. Identifies areas and strategies for program improvement. Regularly engages students in reviewing results to identify areas needed for improvement.	Creates a communications and engagement plan to ensure strong feedback loops are built around the implementation of major projects. Fosters continuous quality improvement by establishing and supporting a learning community of faculty and staff. Facilitates faculty and staff sense-making about program-level student success data, and sets program goals, areas to explore and strategies for improvement. Facilitates conversations about equity and the experience of different student populations.	Focuses faculty and staff on equity and student success in project planning and implementation. Leads internal and external stakeholders to collaboratively set program goals, clear objectives, shared commitments and accountability structures. Promotes sustained learning about program successes and needs by centering the experiences of different groups of students. Engages students as co-creators of solutions.

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

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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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