



FRONTIERSET



INSIGHTS TO ACT ON

INTEGRATED APPROACHES TO EQUITY-FOCUSED TRANSFORMATION

Observations From the Frontier Set



FRONTIERSET

The [Frontier Set](#) was a select group of high-performing, high-potential colleges, universities, state systems, and supporting organizations committed to eliminating race, ethnicity, and income as predictors of student success by transforming how institutions operate.

The Frontier Set used the following definition of institutional transformation to orient its work: **“the realignment of an institution’s structures, culture, and business model to create a student experience that results in dramatic and equitable increases in outcomes and educational value.”** To learn more about institutional transformation, visit the Frontier Set website [here](#).

The existing conditions in higher education are not serving Black, Latino, or Indigenous students, or students from low-income backgrounds. Education after high school has provided opportunities to millions of Americans, but race, ethnicity, and income are too often predictors of student access to and success in postsecondary education. Colleges and universities can be critical change agents for increasing postsecondary access and boosting student success. **We believe an inclusive, equitable future is possible;** the Frontier Set helped show the way. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation invested in convening the Frontier Set to explore the why and how—the strategies and tactics—of institutional transformation. The 29 institutions and two state systems that made up the Frontier Set were



part of a growing movement to expand access and ensure persistence and completion for people who historically have been and currently are denied the benefits of higher education. Frontier Set sites spent several years working closely with a network of support partners and researchers to capture their respective transformation journeys, so other institutions can learn from them and accelerate their own journeys toward equitable student success outcomes.

As part of a series based on synthesized learning from support partners of the [network](#), this document is focused on integrated approaches to equity-focused transformation. No matter your role at your institution, these observations are relevant to you and can help advance equitable student success at your institution. These **Insights to Act On** are inspired by the work of Frontier Set members, and they’ve been compiled with the goal of providing accessible, content you can use to ensure that driving equitable change on campus is everyone’s job.

WHAT IS AN INTEGRATED APPROACH?

An integrated approach combines processes that facilitate institution-wide change through coordination, engagement, and collaboration. Many institutions operate as loosely coupled systems that lead to an overwhelming number of varying student success strategies being implemented on a campus. Regardless of context, culture, or resources, taking an integrated approach helps break down silos and align student success efforts.

When institutions in the Frontier Set describe the benefits of taking an integrated approach, they often express the importance of their ability to effectively manage changes that implicate other academic departments and academic units, and that connect to other initiatives, policies, and practices.

The following strategies, processes, and frameworks illustrate key components of integrated approaches observed in Frontier Set institutions and based on the American Institutes for Research's report, [Key Findings from the Frontier Set](#).

Strategic Planning

Institutions used strategic planning processes to map integrated approaches to transformation. These development processes, along with their resulting plans, offered opportunities to practice integration by prioritizing the student experience, setting equity goals, and working across teams.

Reflection

Institutions systematically engaged in reflection processes that included reviewing data, soliciting feedback, engaging in collaborative conversations, and providing leaders with the opportunity to determine if their integration approaches aligned with goals or if course-correction was needed. Read more about how reflection processes support transformation in [Insights to Act On: Using Reflection to Advance Equity-Focused Transformation](#).

ADVANCING EQUITY

Below are some principles and practical tools that served the Frontier Set well, and that may be helpful as you take action to advance equity at your institution.

- Express commitment to racial equity by making it explicit in your institution's mission, vision, and strategic plan.
- Embed a holistic equity strategy in processes and practices across all facets of your institution and avoid a piecemeal approach.
- Cultivate authentic relationships by creating space for sharing personal journeys with peers to build a sense of trust that empowers people to speak and think in new ways about power, privilege, and oppression.
- Disaggregate student data to build awareness and create a sense of urgency around addressing inequities in policies, practices, and student success outcomes.
- Listen to student stories to add depth and clarity to the picture painted by quantitative data in order to ensure that the design of interventions reflect and link to students' lived experiences.
- Survey students to understand their experiences, and use what is learned to build a sense of belonging.

Cross-Functional Efforts

Institutions created formal and informal opportunities for administrators, faculty, and staff to work across departments and coordinate efforts to improve the student experience. Read more about working cross-functionally to advance transformation in [Insights to Act On: Using Cross-Functional Efforts to Advance Equity-Focused Transformation](#).

Student Experience Frameworks

Institutions implemented student experience frameworks to chart a path for staff, faculty, and students to engage with and advance the integration process.

The Opportunity

In 2019, Lorain County Community College worked to implement a new strategic plan focused on expanding enrollment and achieving student success goals. This plan provided a clear and holistic approach to student success, and it supported the implementation of a set of mutually reinforcing initiatives and strategies aligned with Lorain's priorities (AIR 2020 Institutional Case Summary).

Institutions make transformation more sustainable when they take an integrated approach to creating a cohesive strategy that's centered around the student experience and embedded in its structures, culture, and business model.

Transformation is about deep and widespread change. Isolated, one-off interventions or investments in single-capacity areas aren't enough to achieve meaningful and sustainable improvements to equitable student success. An integrated approach moves beyond implementing individual student success strategies; rather, it works at the systems level to serve students in a more comprehensive and coordinated way.

Whether it's the adoption of a system-wide strategic plan or incorporating information technology into decision-making structures, the intentional use of integrated approaches to organize and manage change over time can lead to sustainable transformation.

WHAT IS AN INTEGRATED FRAMEWORK?

An integrated framework is a method institutions can use as a guide to model a cohesive and comprehensive transformation approach that ensures change efforts are organized, sequenced, and embedded into the institutions structures, culture, and business model. Read more about how models sustain transformation on [frontierset.org](#), [Models That Sustain Transformation](#).

This perspective is based on the "how" of transformation as defined by the Frontier Set: Institutions transform by integrating evidence-based practices that create inclusive and coherent



learning environments and leveraging a student-centered mission, catalytic leadership, strategic data use, and strategic finance in a robust continuous improvement process.

Student-Centered Mission refers to a clear and public commitment to equitable student success reflected across an institution's mission, vision, values, and strategic plan.

Catalytic Leadership refers to a personal, compelling, and widely communicated call to action that empowers people on campus at all levels to advance the institution's mission.

Strategic Data Use refers to the systematic use of data to monitor student progress and inform decision-making.

Strategic Finance refers to Financial decisions and practices which prioritize equitable student success and value.

Continuous Improvement Process refers to the ability to regularly monitor and reflect on an institution's progress and inform how changes are implemented.

The most frequently used integrated frameworks across the Frontier Set were student experience frameworks like those detailed below, signaling that the student experience is core to successful transformation across all institution types. Many institutions received support to implement these frameworks through participation in student success networks. Read [Catalysts That Ignite Transformation](#) to explore how student success networks set transformation in motion and help propel it forward.

EXAMPLES OF INTEGRATED FRAMEWORKS FOR INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION

Whether they focused on streamlining a student's journey or accelerating a student's momentum toward completion, the most effective frameworks used in the Frontier Set centered around the student experience.

Guided Pathways

[The Guided Pathways Framework](#) developed by the [Community College Research Center](#) is a whole-college redesign model designed to clarify and strengthen pathways for students to choose, progress towards, and reach their goals. It shows institutions how to prepare and implement Guided Pathways, how to support student success along the way, and how to evaluate impact. The four pillars of the Guided Pathways framework are:

- **Create a path.** Create clear curricular pathways to employment.
- **Enter the path.** Help students choose and enter their pathway.
- **Stay on the path.** Help students stay on their path by keeping them on track
- **Ensure students are learning.** Enrich and assess student learning.

Loss and Momentum

[The Loss/Momentum Framework \(LMF\)](#) developed by the [Completion by Design](#) initiative helps institutions identify where students meet their greatest obstacles to persistence and completion. Institutions can use the framework to map student success efforts to key stages of the student experience, in order to ensure they are providing the necessary supports to students throughout their full experience. The four pillars of the LMF are:

- **Connection.** From interest in college enrollment to application.
- **Entry.** Enrollment to completion of first college-level course.
- **Progress.** Entry into program of study to 75% of requirement completion.
- **Completion.** Complete program of study to credential with labor-market value.

There is no simple one-size-fits-all model for an integrated framework, as specific contexts, cultures, and experiences will vary by institution. What matters is how intentional an institution is about integration to create a cohesive strategy centered around the student experience. Whether your institution is already using an integrated framework to organize transformation or is preparing to

embark on a transformation journey, the following elements can serve as a guide to taking an integrated approach:

Equitable student success at the center

- Prioritize and explicitly communicate equity in the institution's mission and strategic plans.
- Use disaggregated student data to measure progress.

An informed perspective about the student experience

- Map the student experience to identify barriers and chart a clear path from matriculation to completion.

Targeted interventions

- Implement evidence-based solutions that measurably improve the student experience.

Operating capacities

- Strengthen structures and routines that enable effective implementation, tracking, and improvement of targeted interventions.

In addition to using the above elements to guide your journey, keep in mind that transformation is an adaptive process, so it's important that your approach also be:

Comprehensive. Involve as many units on campus as you can.

Coherent and cohesive. Be sure the components make sense together.

Continuously improved. Reflect and adjust so you know an approach works.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Transformation is a journey. Continuous improvement is the rhythm of ongoing reflection and the regular evaluation of progress that informs adjustments along the way. A practical framework outlined below was used in the Frontier Set to guide colleges, universities, and systems through a process of continuous improvement. Consider and adapt this process based on the needs at your institution as you reflect on how changes are implemented and evaluated.

PREPARE:

Institutions want to review, analyze, and consider current and future equitable student success initiatives and goals.

REFLECT:

Institution leaders gather information and people to reflect on goals, outcomes, and plans.

PRIORITIZE:

Leaders review data, identify priorities, and initiate or proceed with plans to address inequities in student success.

ACT:

Institutions make necessary changes and investments in people, process, and technology.

MONITOR:

Institutions monitor progress against goals and support changes made.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Reflection and sharing are key pieces of transformative work, no matter where your institution is in its transformation journey. Use the questions below to guide discussions independently or with your team, to identify strategies that can help you employ reflective practices to enhance equity and accelerate transformation.

- What are some examples of formal and informal cross-functional efforts at my institution? What efforts are most effective? Why?
- What is my role in cross-functional efforts at my institution?
- How important are cross-functional efforts at my institution? How do leaders prioritize and provide resources for practitioners to implement these efforts?
- How can students, especially students of color, at my institution benefit from cross-functional efforts? What would make cross-functional efforts at my institution more effective at advancing student-centered and equity-minded transformation?
- What quantitative and qualitative data are available, and how can I use data in cross-functional efforts at my institution? What additional perspectives and information would provide nuance and context to the data? What training or insights might be needed to effectively interpret and leverage the data?
- How does my institution invite a diversity of voices and perspectives into cross-functional efforts? What about student perspectives?
- What opportunities at my institution would benefit from informal or formal cross-functional efforts? Who should lead this effort, and who else should be involved?

SUMMER 2023

This content reflects high-level observations from the Frontier Set network. The Frontier Set is supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

