FRONTIER SET

USING CROSS-FUNCTIONAL EFFORTS TO ADVANCE EQUITY-FOCUSED TRANSFORMATION

Observations From the Frontier Set

FRONTIER SET

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 the work of the Frontier Set, support partners of the [network](#) synthesized observations from the institutions' work, and this document's focus on cross-functional efforts is part of a series of approaches you can use to advance equitable student success at your institution. No matter your role at your institution, these observations are relevant for you. These **Insights to Act On** are inspired by the work of Frontier Set sites, and they've been compiled with the goal of providing accessible, useful content you can use to ensure that driving equitable change on campus is part of everyone's job.

WHAT ARE CROSS-FUNCTIONAL EFFORTS?

Cross-functional efforts are essential to student-centered and equity-minded transformation. Cross-functional efforts, as observed in the Frontier Set, are both informal and formal practices in which key stakeholders from across various units strategically review qualitative and quantitative data to assess students' needs, develop or refine programming or initiatives, or otherwise realign the institution's structure, culture, and business model.

Cross-functional efforts encourage joint ownership of opportunities and solutions. These efforts enable collaboration around students' experience and success, and encourage campus leaders and practitioners to engage in collective strategic reflection that can lead to more coordinated and integrated strategies.

The Opportunity

When individuals across different units and offices work together, they can create and implement more inclusive, coordinated, and equitable institutional practices, policies, and programming. This cross-functional approach can ultimately transform an institution's culture and contribute to improving equitable student experiences and outcomes overall and for individual students.

Higher-education institutions are traditionally designed to operate within silos, explicitly and tacitly encouraging divisions and units to operate separately and tangentially. These units often compete for resources and have different priorities. Silos can maintain a status quo that is exclusionary to students of color who may not have the same access to resources and networks to navigate decentralized units such as academic affairs and student support services.

Cross-functional efforts are essential to student-centered transformation. The absence of cross-functional efforts may increase the risk of institutions implementing changes that may be based on selective input and/or buy-in from stakeholders. As a result, changes can feel random, uncoordinated, and narrowly targeted on student experiences that do not reflect marginalized communities.

A cross-functional approach allows institutions to identify coordinated solutions across

EXAMPLES OF CROSS-FUNCTIONAL EFFORTS

Here are a few examples of a range of informal and formal cross-functional activities that sites used to advance student success and equity efforts within the Frontier Set.

Informal:

- Town hall meetings organized around topics, challenges, and relevant experiences on campus and in the community.

- Student-focused check-ins with colleagues in different units.

- Individual staff and faculty reaching out to contacts in other units, engaging in ad hoc problem-solving to help a student (or multiple students) navigate a particular gap or issue they're experiencing.

Formal:

- Specific, time-bound work groups.

- Subcommittee- and project-based approaches to implementing a new initiative.

- Strategic planning processes and regional accreditation review preparation.

departments and divisions, solutions that support the whole of the student experience rather than solely focusing on individual interventions affecting any one element. It also allows institutions to employ a whole-systems approach to identifying the barriers that impede student success. A cross-functional approach minimizes "pilot" projects and focuses on large-scale policy and practice reform.

WHAT ARE SOME BARRIERS THAT CHALLENGE CROSS-FUNCTIONAL EFFORTS?

Common barriers to effective cross-functional efforts include:

- Unclear or no decision-making structure or authority. If a cross-functional team does not have decision-making authority or a decision-making process, as well as a charge or sponsorship from senior leaders where necessary, working together to no specific end is discouraging.

- Limited opportunities to empathize with other involved colleagues or to learn across individual roles and perspectives. When engaging in cross-functional work, this can result in differences being viewed as threatening, disruptive, or counterproductive. It can be useful to empathize with the students' experiences and each other's perspectives and day-to-day roles at the institution.

- Unwillingness to let go of the status quo, established patterns, and ways of working, along with limited incentives to reform.

- Ignoring or dismissing the student experience as the main motivation for change. This limits the full realization of transformation.

- Inefficient or nonexistent protocols for recruiting and onboarding diverse members that accommodate participation and/or membership changes. This results in poor continuity and difficulty building and sustaining momentum.

- Limited support for clarifying the "problems" the institution is creating, particularly limited access to well-understood data or access to support for effectively interpreting and understanding of that data as the group considers how to solve the problems.

No single cross-functional approach is responsible for equitable improvements in student outcomes. Rather, campus leaders should take multiple considerations and conditions into account when shaping and framing cross-functional practices; this can lead to more equitable transformation efforts and, eventually, more equitable student success outcomes.

Additional considerations related to equity and cross-functionally oriented efforts are outlined below.

Consider Individuals' Experiences

Individuals' experiences on cross-functional teams may vary based on identity, especially for leaders and practitioners of color. Many administrators, faculty, and staff members of color are confronted with having to hold a dual focus: 1) doing the job they were hired for; and 2) informally doing the work and arguing the case for diversity, equity, and inclusion. The latter requires additional emotional and mental energy not required of privileged, primarily White colleagues. This uncompensated emotional labor can lead to burnout and also maintain a status quo rooted in racism that disempowers leaders of color.

Don't Let Data Limitatins Overshadow Intersectionalit

Existing data systems and approaches to disaggregating data do not uniformly consider intersectionality. Though it is widely understood that disaggregated data is important to supporting student success, disaggregation does not fully account for intersectional experiences and identities. The concept of intersectionality— when various identities interact with systems of oppression that shape the overall magnitude of people's experiences—is important to understanding and responding meaningfully to the nuances and biases that students encounter. A number of existing tools and dashboards don't allow this level of analysis, which would provide enormous benefits to understanding the entirety of students' experiences. Many automated tools do not allow for cross-tabulated data to understand basic metrics for specific populations, which highlights the importance of both improving quantitative tools and creating space to collect and capture qualitative data that can help leaders better understand students' experiences.

Acknowledge Power Dynamics

Strategies for embedding a diversity of voices should account for power and privilege. A number of student-success transformations leverage and center on different perspectives, including students, junior faculty, and staff. Yet the ways this is

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.

achieved can introduce harm or prevent individuals from being able to provide candid and explicit feedback on their experiences. Designing strategies to solicit feedback and include a variety of voices should acknowledge the power-and-privilege dynamic across leadership, faculty, staff, and students.

Below are high-level observations of how senior leadership on campus can develop, motivate, and support cross-functional efforts that center on equitably transforming the student experience and improving success rates in intentional ways.

Cross-functional work is driven by members with skills and competencies that include fluency in and understanding of student data; the ability to manage conflict and complex conversations; possession of an equity-mindset to approach opportunity identification and solution implementation through an asset-based lens; and an ability to both horizontally and vertically communicate and advocate for identified structural, cultural, and systemic changes.

Model Inclusive Practice and Engagement

Invite and engage individuals from across various units and offices, to represent both the entire arc of and the variations in students' experiences. For example, if addressing a high gateway-course failure rate, be sure to engage advising, financial aid, the registrar, gateway course faculty, and individuals from student services, as well as students themselves. Be sure to consider the full context, variability, and "whole" of the situation, recognizing that some elements may not be easily observed through data, and/or not explicitly understood based on limited perspectives from a single office or individual.

Provide Time and Resources for Those Involved

Support cross-functional work by providing physical space, funding, and allocated time to give individuals valued incentives (e.g., payment, leadership status, release time, etc.) to spend time participating in a collaborative and coordinated group setting—or repurpose existing committees

to prioritize transformation, so as not to "ask too much" of key people. Ensure resources are equitably distributed across employee roles and are proportionate to the time needed to deeply and consistently engage in identifying opportunities and implementing changes. This aspect of cross-functional support is vital to fostering reflection, a critical component of transformation efforts.

Delegate Leadership and Oversight to a Mid-level Professional

Effective cross-functional efforts typically exhibit strong leadership that delegates work oversight and implementation to a strong mid-level leader. Mid-level leaders are well-positioned to break down silos and cultivate cooperation across functions. In addition, mid-level leaders often champion efforts that engage key stakeholders across different departments/units, to identify organizational challenges and in turn develop and implement equitable change.

Who Are Mid-level Leaders?

While mid-level leaders exist across each campus or system, there is no singular definition of a mid-level leader. Rather, who serves as a mid-level leader varies based on the campus context and the size of the institution. Mid-level leaders can therefore be defined by their roles in communicating, engaging, and acting as a conduit between students, frontline staff, faculty, and senior leaders.

Define "The Charge" and Boundaries

A common vision or shared understanding of "the charge" or mission is important to cross-functional efforts. This can include group deliberation to identify an opportunity to be addressed, clarity around processes to achieve the task at hand, and an established set of boundaries to help focus conversations. This level of definition may also include clarity on who is accountable at the team and senior-leader level for which strategies or decisions are made.

FRONTIER SET INSTITUTION EXAMPLES OF CROSS-FUNCTIONAL EFFORTS IN PRACTICE

Arizona State University formed the Student Success Analytic Collaborative in January 2018 to bring greater intentionality to the data infrastructure, research, analytics, and evaluation efforts that support their student outcome goals. The Collaborative is designed to foster a culture of cooperation and shared responsibility, for understanding and supporting student success by bringing together leaders and analysts from across the institution.

Johnson C. Smith University developed a flat organizational structure, formalized in 2015 and operationalized as task-specific cross-functional teams, to foster and capture the direct input of campus stakeholders holding various roles and positions in the institution. (This structure has since been revised, but its development provides some helpful insights.)

Sinclair Community College has created design teams tasked with developing ideas for addressing key strategic priorities; structurally, these teams are intentionally staffed by mixed-function teams bringing together representatives from key areas of student affairs/ services, academic/faculty, and key capacity divisions (finance, etc.). Structurally, this encourages planning for sustainability and impact by bringing people into the initial ideation whose areas of responsibility will be implicated by potential solutions.

Portland State University (PSU) has built a culture of buy-in and support by engaging in equity cross-functional efforts that invite diverse voices at varying levels, in addition to the student and community voices. The Using Evidence for Impact and Equity committee is the foundation of the four pillars—Persistence, Academic Success, Affordability, and Student Experience— that are all supported by strategically and continuously improving data use. Equity is a core focus in all of PSU's work, and this committee ensures data is widely shared so they can take action quickly.

The goal of the Student Success Steering Council at University of Texas Rio Grande Valley is to let problems surface from people in the room (multi-divisional representation).

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 prioritizeand 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?

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.