Tips and Strategies from the Network

Creating Equity-Focused Change

by Melinda Karp

From 2022-2023, the CSU Student Success Network (Network) hosted three sessions as part of its Your Power in Middle Leadership series. On September 8, 2023, nearly 60 individuals from 20 California State University (CSU) campuses gathered virtually for the third and final session of the series. The session, titled What Does it Take to Create Equity-Focused Change? examined strategies that middle leaders can use to push reforms forward on their own campuses.

Participants heard from four colleagues from California State University, Dominguez Hills: Kim Costino, Dean of Undergraduate Studies; William Franklin, Vice President of Student Affairs; Matthew Smith, Senior Associate Vice President of Student Life/Dean of Students; and Michael Spagna, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs. In a wide-ranging discussion moderated by Network Advisory Board Chair Shonda Goward, Associate Vice Provost for Undergraduate Advising and Success, San Jose State University, the panelists described their campus's student success initiative: "Going Far Together."

The focus of the discussion was on how the panelists were able to shepherd substantial, cross-divisional student success reform, rather than the details of their initiative. Importantly, the approach taken by leaders at CSU Dominguez Hills was both cross-functional—engaging student services, instruction, and institutional research—and cross-hierarchical, such that senior leaders and middle leaders worked closely together to shepherd the reform. The panelists described the ways that they leveraged their respective positions and forms of influence to implement their initiative.

It was clear from the panel discussion that effectively shepherding institutional change requires strong collaboration across middle and senior leaders. Developing such partnerships takes time, trust, and a "re-acculturation" to get people to approach leadership in new ways. At CSU Dominguez Hills, collaboration was built in part by a shared budget. Having a shared budget required leaders to have difficult conversations about what type of reform they were driving towards, and what it would take to get there. One leader explained, "It took us being transparent with one another, having really candid conversations and decision hygiene. We needed to make sure it smelled good, looked good, felt good so that the budget request had real teeth." This degree of transparency and willingness to engage in difficult discussions helped the leadership team build trust and shared understandings that supported their collaboration beyond the budget request.

In discussing their own processes, practices, roadblocks, and successes, the panelists provided participants with insight into strategies for engaging in change efforts on their own campuses. Below, we summarize some of the themes that emerged, along with illustrative detail, so that other campus leaders can adapt these lessons for further change efforts.

Senior leaders serve as conveners, decision-makers, and supporters.

Senior leaders have a critical role to play in shepherding campus reform—though they are certainly not the only players. In fact, panelists made it clear that effective reform happens when senior leaders step up and step back, ceding power and control to middle leaders. One panelist described this by saying that change agents "need to know your lane, and when to change lanes. Senior leaders need to get in the way only when necessary, and get out of the way the rest of the time."

- Senior leaders, up to the president, approached the reform effort organically, determining the end goal but allowing middle- and front-line leaders to determine the details. By approaching the effort as "not preordained," senior leaders built trust across campus constituencies.
- Senior leaders were not in every session or meeting, enabling front-line personnel to "speak their truth" about how they viewed reform efforts and what they needed to middle leaders.
- Senior leaders did step in to make decisions or difficult calls, noting, "Sometimes, someone just needs to say, 'We're going to do it.'"
- Senior leaders were the conveners. They also made sure that middle leaders knew they had their backs.

Middle leaders are the catalyzers and the do-ers.

Middle leaders work with front-line personnel to develop, buy into, problem-solve around, and implement reforms. This means they need to have a clear sense of where they are going: they have their "fingers on the pulse" and can develop the contours of the reform in ways that work for staff and students. Middle leaders also need to be able to convey the reform and its rationale to those charged with carrying out new work. They listen to concerns and, if necessary, shift in response. At the same time, they work with senior leadership to generate and deploy resources to support the reform.

- Middle leaders consistently centered students' voices. By starting with the student experience, they were able to both build a better reform approach and make a stronger case as to why reforms were necessary.
- Middle leaders led the development of the actual strategy and work plan.
- Middle leaders made sure all levels of personnel were informed. They would meet with directors and front-line personnel so that everyone knew what was happening, every step of the way.
- Middle leaders used data, not anecdote, to connect the reform, individuals' work, and larger campus goals.
- Middle leaders knew they had to have patience and think about the timing and fit of various reform strategies. "Leaders can't take on everything and be strategic."

Middle leaders need to employ effective change management strategies.

Given their central role in implementing reform efforts, middle leaders need to use a variety of change management strategies to bring others along and incent them to implement new approaches. Doing so requires middle leaders to use their relationships and political capital. Panelists were clear that engaging in change management from the middle is not easy, and can exact a personal toll. Middle leaders in the discussion emphasized that it is important to find allies and trusted colleagues to turn to for support when the inevitable roadblocks to change arise.

- Middle leaders developed a long-term, deliberate, collaborative, and transparent process. They over communicated. They worked with everyone who would be impacted by the change. They brought folks together, listened to concerns, and revised as they could.

- Middle leaders had to have multiple, ongoing conversations with individuals across the campus. Many of those were one-on-one, creating safety for people to voice concerns and ask questions. Many of these conversations were hard; it was important to approach those "from a place of love and with focus on what we as a college were trying to accomplish."
- Middle leaders had to accept that sometimes, the work wouldn't go well, in terms of relationships and perceptions on campus.
- Sometimes, they changed their minds or changed tactics in response to feedback. Middle leaders had to "get comfortable" with straight talk and be willing to admit when they were wrong.
- The leadership team figured out their "non-negotiables" but were willing to listen and learn from those impacted by the changes. They were transparent about what decisions were made, and why.
- Middle leaders had to lean on one another. Change management is "people work" and finding others to provide accountability and support was critical. One middle leader said that by relying on colleagues, they could "be professional in the 'out there' but then come commiserate with someone in it with you that you really trust."
- Middle leaders shared the insight that, when it comes to change, "identity matters." Approaching the work with an understanding that views, expectations, and experiences differ across roles helps make the differences easier to manage. It also allows for the acknowledgement of different power structures and institutional positions.

Ultimately the panel agreed that implementing reform is heavily dependent on trust—trust among the leadership team, and trust from front-line leaders in the team. They shared that trust is "accrued through actions. It's built over time, by letting people in, leveraging others' expertise, viewing all constituencies as educators, and behaving authentically and trustworthily." By building trust, thinking strategically, and valuing student and stakeholder input, the team at CSU Dominguez Hills was able to implement substantial reforms at their campus. In doing so, they demonstrate that it's possible elsewhere, as well.

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in the California State University