March 2022

STUDENT SUCCESS TEAMS

AN IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGES

SDI PRODUCTIONS

PHASE TWO
ADVISORY™

SETTING THE SCENE

MARTÍN'S STORY

Martín is driven, motivated, and smart. He's also the first in his family to go to college, and his mother doesn't speak English. He needs help figuring out the college journey — what classes to take, where to get extra support for his courses, and how to pay for it. He knows the college provides services, but he isn't sure how to find them. He's frustrated. His grades first semester were low, and he wishes he could figure out how to do better.

1 See, for example, Karp, M.M., O'Gara, L, & Hughes K.L, (2008). *Do support services at community colleges encourage success or reproduce advantage: An exploratory study of students in two community colleges.*; Scott-Clayton, J. (2015). *"The Shapeless River: Does a Lack of Structure Inhibits Students' Progress at Community College?"*

2 The U. S. Department of Education recently summarized this research in Karp, M.M., Ackerson, S., Cheng, I., … Richburg-Hayes, L. (2021). *Effective Advising for postsecondary students: A practice guide for educators.*

Martín's experience isn't unique. In the two decades since we interviewed him for an earlier study, community colleges have come to realize that they need a better way to help the many students like him on their campuses. Previously, colleges offered all sorts of supports, but they expected their students to figure out how to navigate the resulting offices, programs, services, and people on their own. Research[1] tells us that this approach — while well-intentioned and implemented by committed practitioners — doesn't work for students.

At the same time, research — as well as student voices — tell us what does work. Studies[2] consistently show that providing a more coherent, systematic, and robust set of services can create the conditions for students, like Martín, to realize their educational goals.

For this study, we define SSTs as:

Cross-divisional teams of individuals who collaboratively engage in cohort management to support and assist a group of students from entry to completion, with a focus on equitable outcomes.

At its core, this means that a team structure:

• Identifies cohorts of students

• Assigns them to a team, and

• Provides cohort-based case management to meet students' needs in and out of the classroom in proactive and personalized ways.

The Move Towards Systems of Holistic Student Support

Community colleges are increasingly redesigning their service ecosystem to provide holistic student support. Holistic support systems address the reality that **students' needs beyond the classroom play an important role in their ability to be effective learners.** From an institutional perspective, this means colleges address a broad range of student needs to ensure that students are served equitably. They do so by offering a diverse selection of information, services, and resources that are intentionally integrated into a proactive system of academic, social, and personal supports. Students are therefore able to easily navigate and access relevant support, regardless of their background or college knowledge.

Colleges can approach the development of holistic support systems that are strategic, personalized, and proactive[3] in several ways. The challenge, of course, is developing and implementing holistic support systems that work for each college's unique context, given the fiscal, human, and policy constraints faced by community colleges around the country.

The Rise of the Student Success Team (SST) Approach

One increasingly popular holistic support approach is the Student Success Team (SST). Although other forms of success teams exist at many community colleges, in this guide, we are referring to teams that focus on providing holistic support to students directly. We define these SSTs as cross-divisional teams of individuals who collaboratively engage in cohort management to support and assist a group of students from entry to completion, with a focus on equitable outcomes. These teams work together to provide coherent and consistent support so students like Martín don't have to navigate their college's service ecosystem on their own.

At many institutions, this holistic, team-based approach exists in small programs or initiatives. Colleges are now exploring ways to expand SSTs to establish a comprehensive, institution-wide approach to holistically support all students on their campuses. This usually means **restructuring advising, counseling,[4] and other services so the college has multiple teams, each working to serve its assigned group of students.** This guide is framed around the process colleges take in moving SSTs from being programmatic to an institutional structure.

About this Guide

Colleges considering holistic SSTs often wonder where to start. This guide provides tactical, actionable insight, **based on the experiences of over 80 practitioners at nine institutions around the country.** (We provide a snapshot of the participating colleges on following page.) We spoke with a wide array of individuals, including frontline advisors and counselors, directors, instructional faculty, institutional researchers, equity program professionals, and vice presidents. To encourage candor, we promised our interviewees not to name them or their institutions. The appendix provides more information about our methods.

Interviewees showed a great appetite for sharing their experiences with others and giving an unvarnished look at what reform really looks like when you're in the middle of it. Their perspectives provided a detailed understanding of what it takes to redesign a student success ecosystem using an SST approach. They were also clear that the outcomes of the work are worth it — both gratifying for practitioners and holding great promise for students.

Given the experience of our interviewees, as well as our experience working with colleges around the country, we firmly believe that reform efforts as large as holistic support redesigns are not easy, linear, or quick. This guide does not pretend otherwise. Instead, we hope that by sharing how colleges navigated the challenges they encountered, we will **normalize the difficulty of the work** and provide ideas and tactics that can help facilitate the design and implementation process.

Reform efforts as large as holistic support redesigns are not easy, linear, or quick.

MONKEYBUSINESSIMAGES

Snapshots of Participating Colleges

College 1
Central New York
Small City

<10K
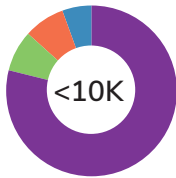
College 2
Downstate New York
Large Suburb

<15K
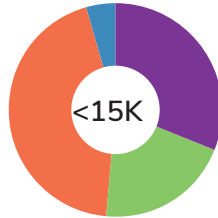
College 3
Eastern Pennsylvania
Large City

>15K
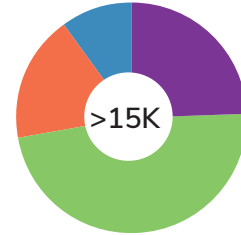
College 4
Northern California
Large Suburb

>25K
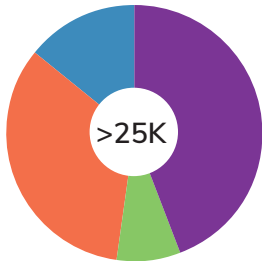
College 5
Northern California
Midsize City

>15K
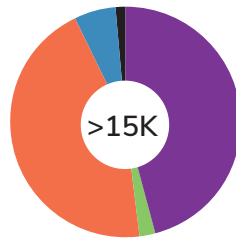
College 6
Central California
Distant Town

<15K
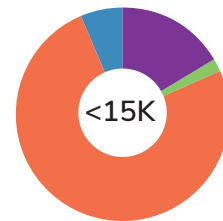
College 7
Southern California
Distant Town

<10K
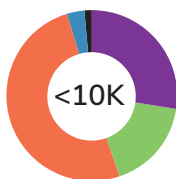
College 8
Southern California
Large Suburb

>15K
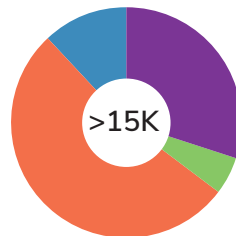
College 9
Southern California
Large Suburb

>15K

- White
- Black
- Hispanic
- Asian
- Native American
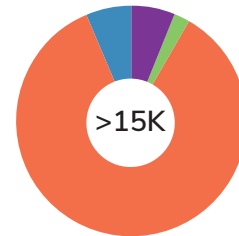
College Size by Student Population

Small = <10K

Medium = >10K – <15K

Medium-Large = >15K – <25K

Large = >25K

Navigating this Guide

In the diagram below, equity is at the center because it is where teams need to anchor their work. The themes and topics encircling equity emerged directly from our conversations with practitioners; they most often surfaced as **critical things to think about, plan for, and problem solve around.** Within this guide, we address each of them in turn to help you think about them from the outset of your SST journey. We hope that by sharing strategies for navigating the design and implementation process successfully, you will be able to get ahead of any challenges and navigate them more easily.

The themes and topics are arranged in a circle because colleges confront them at different times and in different ways.

GETTING STARTED

THINKING ABOUT PEOPLE

CENTERING EQUITY

LEADING THE WORK

BUILDING YOUR INFRASTRUCTURE
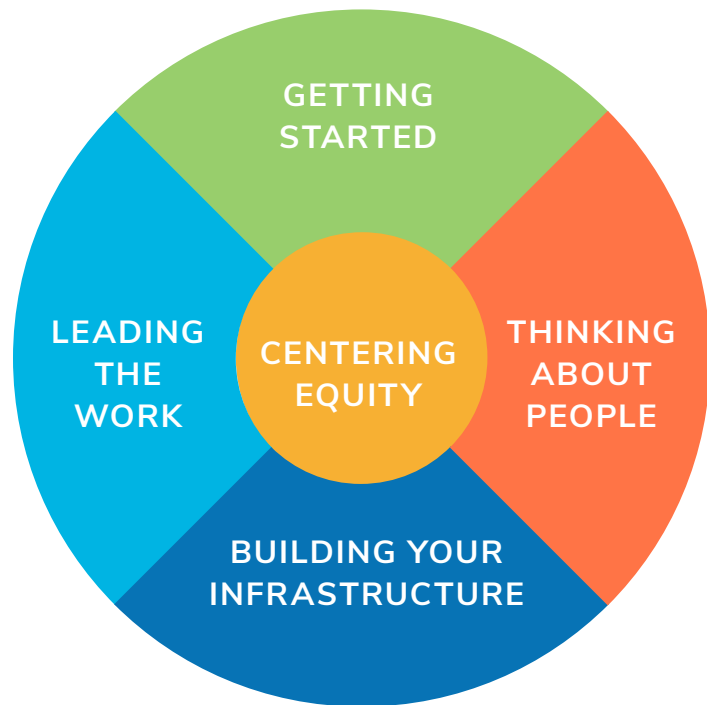
We've organized the guide around the following questions:

- How do we keep equity at the root as we use SSTs to scale existing cohort-based support approaches?

- How do we structure our teams? What are the phases of development we should anticipate?

- What kind of leadership do we need to implement these teams? What does this leadership look like in action?

- How can we ensure that we have the right people in place to design, implement, and support SSTs once they've launched?

- What data and technology infrastructure do we need to support SST efforts? How do we use data and technology to communicate across teams and functions?

CENTERING EQUITY

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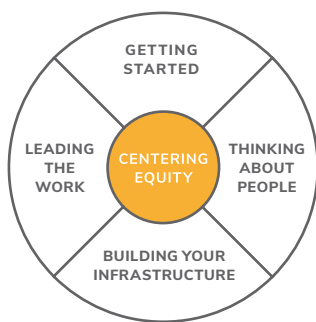
5 Programs like EOPS, Puente, MESA, and Umoja are federal, state, or local programs designed to support cohorts of students using culturally-responsive pedagogies and practices, additional financial supports, and/or tailored advising. Other cohort programs might include those for foster youth or veterans.

6 See, for example, Messier, V.J., Williams, S.A., Hall, N., & Visueta, V. (2018). _Evaluation of the Umoja Community._

> An equity-forward perspective means looking beyond aggregate success rates to find ways to use SSTs to help ensure that students' backgrounds do not predetermine their outcomes.

Equity at the Root of SSTs

SSTs are an attempt to build on the effective work done for decades by smaller, cohort-based programs. These existing cohort programs, including TRIO, EOPS, Puente, MESA and Umoja,[5] provide holistic supports to groups of students from racially-minoritized, low-income, and/or first-generation college-going backgrounds. The strength of these programs form much of the rationale for expanding a holistic support approach across a college community.[6]

From our perspective, **equity is a process** by which campus practices, programs, and mindsets shift such that students' educational experiences and outcomes are not predetermined by their racial, economic, or social background. In this document, we use the phrase "racially-minoritized, low-income, and first-generation college-going students" to refer to the groups of students who are currently disadvantaged by our educational institutions. We acknowledge the many types of students for whom higher education was not designed, including, but not limited to, those who are Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and Asian-Pacific Islander, as well as students who are low-income, first-generation college-going, part-time, differently-abled, LGBTQ+, gender expansive, parenting, foster care-involved, military-connected, or justice-impacted and who may also need to be the focus of equity-focused efforts.

Most people interviewed for this study conceived of SSTs as a strategy for improving equitable outcomes. Indeed, any scaled holistic support approach, including SSTs, can and should promote equity, not just overall student success…but only if you intentionally design it to do so. An equity-forward perspective means looking beyond aggregate success rates to find ways to use SSTs to help ensure that students' backgrounds do not predetermine their outcomes. This approach requires that institutions work to create conditions that support the success of student groups historically excluded from higher education and for whom higher education was not designed.

The colleges in our study were using an SST approach to:

- Address the fact that, at most community colleges, many more students need holistic, sustained support than smaller programs can serve

- Acknowledge that students for whom higher education was not designed should receive holistic support that honors their backgrounds and experiences

Despite their equity goals, our study participants indicated that their institutions lacked clear and explicit definitions of equity and equitable outcomes. Few interviewees felt that their college had a shared vision of what equity looks like that could be clearly articulated by individuals across the college.

As a result, participants worried that (a) SSTs would change institutional structures, but not the negative experiences of racially-minoritized and poverty-impacted students that affect their sense of belonging; (b) SSTs would fail to address specific needs of student groups most disadvantaged by our higher education system, and (c) SSTs had the potential to pull students away from culturally-responsive cohort programs.

One interviewee emphasized that any equity strategy, including SSTs, needs to be connected to broader work ensuring that minoritized students are consistently valued throughout the institution. Without such attention, colleges engage in "performative equity" and SSTs may then "perpetuate the same [societal] structures" that lead to inequity today.

Designing SSTs with Equity at the Center

Colleges need to make designing and implementing for equity the centerpiece of their SST design and implementation planning process. By this, we mean taking an "intentional universal design approach"[7] in which the strengths and needs of the students most disadvantaged within the college are identified at the outset and used as the starting point for a future state. The first step is to engage college stakeholders in difficult conversations about race, class, positional power, and the new community college student. These conversations help design teams define what equity means on their campus, who they are working to support, and what equitable practices and outcomes look like. During this step, college leaders also need to "put their names behind" an equity-forward process and nurture the difficult conversations required.

7 For additional information about Institutional Universal Design see, for example, Karp, M.M., Cormier, M., Whitley, S.E., Umbarger-Wells, S.M., & Wesaw, A. (2020). *First-generation students in community and technical colleges: A national exploration of institutional support practices.*; Kezar, A., Perez, R.J., Kitchen, J.A., & Hallet, R.E. (2021). *Learning how to tailor programmatic offerings to support low-income, first-generation, and racially minoritized student success. Journal of Postsecondary Student Success.*

Then, colleges need to put equity definitions at the center of their process. At Central NY Small CC, the SST design team was given a single guiding principle: Keep our students who are most structurally disadvantaged at the center of the design.

Colleges designing with equity at the center also integrated these approaches into their work.

Integrate the Student Perspective. This meant including students on the design team, examining student experience data, and building SST expectations and practices that address the challenges the students themselves say matter. At Southern CA Medium-Large CC8, this included developing a student advisory board; at Northern CA Large CC it meant including a student on each SST; and, at Northern CA Medium-Large CC, this meant using students as peer coaches.

Build Equity-Forward Professional Learning into SST Development. Being intentional about SSTs as an equity strategy means pushing all members of the team to interrogate their practices to understand how their engagement with students can elevate or hinder success. At Eastern PA Medium-Large CC this included an anti-racism training that interviewees hoped would help stakeholders look at systemic barriers, and at Northern CA Medium-Large CC this included leveraging a Title V grant to provide culturally relevant trainings.

Embed Team Members Whose Role it is to Focus on Equity. Central CA Medium CC had equity coaches and Eastern PA Medium-Large CC had an equity subcommittee connected to their SSTs to make sure someone was responsible for asking what the impact of SST design and related campus policies and practices could have on key groups of students. Stakeholders noted that thinking about equity needs to become a visible, vocal part of their day-to-day work.

Connect SSTs to Specific Student Populations. Rather than connect their SSTs to academic programs, Southern CA Medium-Large CC8 created SSTs for the student groups with the lowest success rates at their college, with the intent to scale teams to all groups of students over time. Northern CA Medium-Large CC connected one of their SSTs to their multi-cultural center.

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• Assigns them to a team, and

• Provides cohort-based case management to meet students' needs in and out of the classroom in proactive and personalized ways.

Types of Cohort-Based SSTs

SSTs sound like a simple concept. In reality, they are not so simple. Because SSTs are cohort-based, there are usually multiple SSTs operating at a given college — each assigned to their own cohort. Colleges might assign students from each Guided Pathways meta-major to an SST, or assign all military veterans to one SST and foster youth to another.

Looking at the nine colleges in our study, we identified three different SST designs. Importantly, all three focus on supporting groups of students — this differentiates them campus-wide teams that work behind-the-scenes to analyze institutional data or develop college-wide success strategies. Beyond SSTs' common focus on taking a holistic support approach, the three types differ quite a bit in their structure, workflow, and how they reach students.

As shown in the table on the following page, these types of teams build on one another, and grow in their sophistication and ability to provide personalized support for each student in the cohort. We typically see colleges starting their SST journey by implementing cohort-based backend coordinating teams. Once those are launched, colleges iterate, improve, and deepen their work to enable networked support teams, and ultimately inch towards a networked single point of contact approach.

Types of Cohort-Based SSTs

	PURPOSE	IMPACT
ROOTED IN EQUITY + STUDENT EXPERIENCE		
BACKEND COORDINATING	Work behind the scenes to coordinate support for students as a group; help streamline and improve programming and policies.	Students do not always know there is a team working behind the scenes on their behalf. The team's impact is felt in smoother policies, stronger programming, and engaging activities and workshops.
NETWORKED SUPPORT	Create an easily identifiable network of people students can go to for a variety of supports; build communication channels across team members to streamline and integrate their activities.	Team members are listed in a student's portal. Students receive targeted messaging from members of their team. When students reach out, the team member they contact has information to guide the conversation.
NETWORKED SINGLE POINT OF CONTACT	Provide personalized, holistic case management; ensure the single point of contact has access to behind-the-scenes data and resources to enable holistic engagement.	Students have a single "go to" for questions and concerns, and that person reaches out to regularly. That person helps to connect students to others as necessary with a warm hand off and follows up to ensure support was received and student issues are resolved.

Teams in Action: Evolution in Central NY

As part of the college's Guided Pathways and Holistic Student Support redesign efforts four years ago, campus stakeholders engaged in data exploration and process mapping,[8] and discovered they needed a more coordinated, intentional system. "We needed to do more for our students. [They] bounced around here to there, and we had pockets of offices."

Using grant funds, the college built a Networked Support SST structure. They developed a Completion Coach role to provide case management; assigned professional advisors to academic programs; maintained instructional faculty advising; and implemented an early alert system. The college quickly realized the coach and professional advisor roles overlapped, and both had unmanageable caseloads (up to 900:1 for Completion Coaches). Moreover, students were confused as to who to go to — coach, advisor, or faculty.

Central NY Small CC decided to create a Networked Single Point of Contact, combining the coach and advisor roles to create an integrated holistic support position — the Student Support Advocate (SSA). SSAs provide academic advising and holistic case management to students in a meta-major and are students' first point of contact for questions and concerns. To effectively support students in areas outside of their expertise, SSAs work with their dean, an assigned financial aid advisor, and faculty members as necessary.

By combining two roles into a single first point of contact, the college was able to reduce caseloads closer to their goal of 300:1 and help students navigate the support ecosystem while building meaningful relationships. As one SSA explained, "I am just amazed at how much my role improved — [especially] my ability to help students and my level of connection with students over time."

Building on Existing Cohort Programs While Going to Scale

In designing SSTs, many colleges confront tensions between broad-based teams and targeted, culturally responsive ones. They wonder how to scale SSTs without losing the personalized, identity-forward, and focused work that successful cohort programs already provide. It is important to remember from the outset that SSTs should supplement, not replace, other equity-focused programming.

The colleges we spoke with tried to maintain, elevate, and learn from programs like Umoja, Puente, MESA, EOPS, and TRIO, so they could integrate the expertise of program staff into the SST design and implementation process. They spent time learning from staff in these programs to better understand programs' institutional histories, funding requirements, and practices. They also explored the unique needs of the students served by each program and potential areas of overlap and complementarity. Schools in our study deliberately connected equity programs and SSTs by:

- Bringing program staff into design discussions as experts in equity-forward case management and holistic support

- Collaborating across programs and SSTs on design to help reduce duplication of services and create streamlined communications strategies

- Including cohort programs in conversations to align data, technology platforms, and use across programs and SSTs

- Regularly meeting together to build relationships, share resources, and communicate across cohort programs and SSTs

For most colleges the biggest tactical question was how to support students who are eligible for both existing cohort-based programs and SSTs. Colleges emphasized the need for focused and intentional efforts to (a) clearly differentiate roles and value-add of each service and program, (b) navigate professional relationships and boundaries, and (c) coordinate communication from and between the two types of support so that students are not confused. Depending on campus dynamics, we saw colleges in our study take one of three approaches to engaging students in cohort programs, SSTs, or both.

1. **Permitting Eligible Students to be Served by Both an SST and an Existing Cohort-Based Program.** Based on the belief that more support is better, students receive outreach from both and are at liberty to reach out to whomever they choose. However, this risks student-level confusion from having multiple supports and information overload, and raises questions of which students get to access multiple programs and which students may be left out altogether.

2. **Creating a Tiered Approach that Connects Students in Existing Cohort-Based Programs to an SST for Certain Functions.** For at least one of the schools in our study, existing cohort-based programs are the front-line of contact for their students. Nevertheless, those students can still also engage with the broader services offered by an academic-program-based SST, such as career workshops or faculty engagement. This seems to be the ideal situation because it streamlines student contacts while maintaining access to as many supports as possible.

3. **Assigning Students to One or the Other.** This approach simplifies student contact, avoids mixed messages, and ensures that compliance for specific programs is met. Unfortunately, it also risks siloing or excluding students in existing cohort-based programs from the larger ecosystem of supports on campus. This is especially true if SSTs are connected to academic program and career information, as students in existing cohort-based programs would not receive that information.

SST Development Phases

There is no standard timeline or set of steps to designing and implementing SSTs. The process is much messier than a recipe, timeline, or road map.

There is a common set of phases but the time colleges spend in each phase varies substantially. Some colleges spend a lot of time in the reflection phase, needing to dig into their student data and understand what works and doesn't. Others are able to quickly jump to envisioning a new holistic student support ecosystem, but need extra time to work out the implementation planning logistics. The iterative nature of the work means colleges often cycle among phases as shown in the diagram below. Some realize during design and implementation that they need to revisit their "why" and return to the reflection phase. Others realize after launch that they need to refine their design or implementation planning. Still others iterate their work to move ever-closer to a networked single point of contact.

Regardless, the most successful colleges are those that commit to a design and run with it, understanding the delicate balance between substantive planning and the need to act. Throughout the process, they also are thinking one to two steps ahead, constantly fine-tuning and refining their work while also **keeping an eye on a very clear vision of where they want to end up.**

Developing Your SST: A Process

REFLECTION   DESIGN PLANNING   IMPLEMENTATION PLANNING   LAUNCH

REVISIT   REVIEW + REFINE

ROOTED IN EQUITY + STUDENT EXPERIENCE
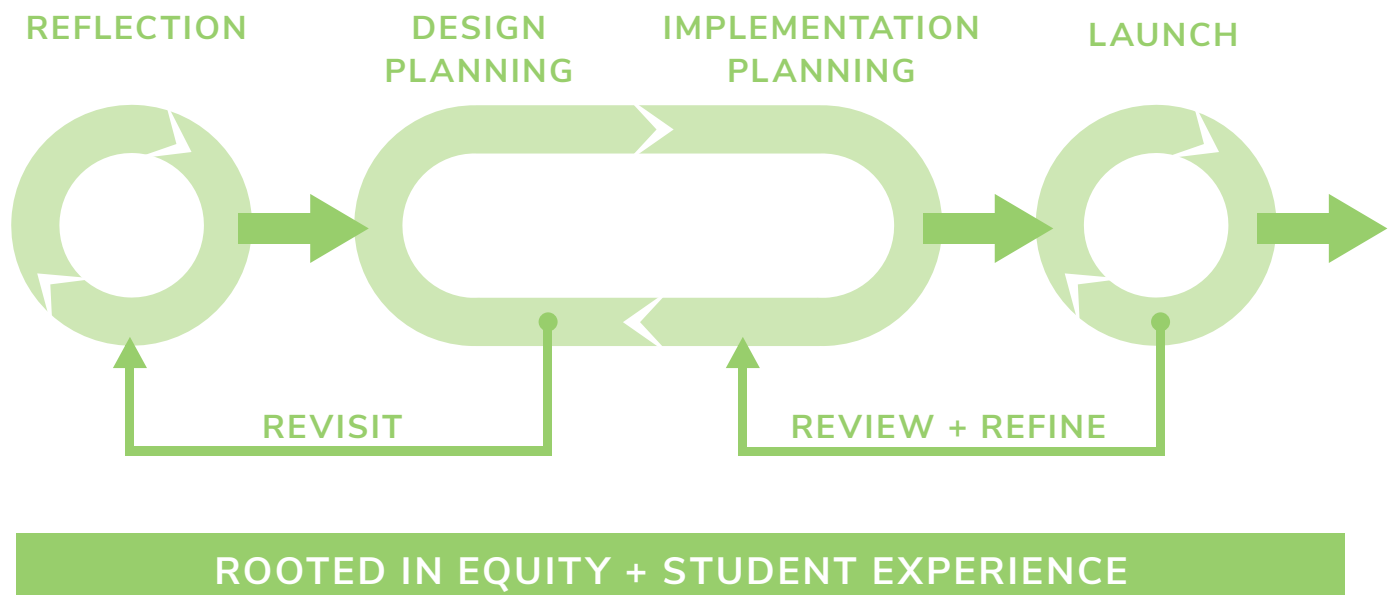
Reflection: What is Happening at our Institution?

WHY? This first phase isn't SST-specific. It is the prep work that identifies SSTs as an approach a college wants to take and begins to build a coalition of the willing. Usually, the reflection phase is part of a larger set of efforts, such as Guided Pathways redesign, joining Achieving the Dream, or Title III/V strategic planning.

WHAT? Colleges recognize that reform needs to happen. By exploring data, talking to students, and interrogating their practices, colleges realize that their student support ecosystem needs to be refined. SSTs emerge as a potential strategy to address challenges arising from this institutional reflection, and the college starts to communicate the "why" of their intended work to the broader college community.

Activities during the reflection phase include:

- Data (quantitative and qualitative) exploration centered on understanding the experiences of different student populations, particularly racially-minoritized, low-income, first-generation college-going students, and those who are struggling or have left the institution

- Case making with a larger community to start building consensus around the need for change

- Activities such as process mapping[9] to uncover the root causes of challenges revealed in the data analysis

- Beginning to craft a vision for what the goals and success metrics for any change might be

WHO? To get the work done, colleges convene cross-functional groups of individuals from across the college; not just within student services, but also IR, clerical staff who engage directly with students, and students themselves. This means that the folks involved in the original reflection phase for holistic student services reform may not be the ones who are ultimately responsible for designing and launching it. But, those involved in reflection should be the individuals who have access to data, and who have enough connections in the college community to share their message widely and effectively.

TO WHAT END? A deeper, equity-forward understanding of and empathy for students at your institution; a commitment to creating a strategic, personalized, and proactive support ecosystem for every student; identification of SSTs as a strategy to create that system.

9 See, for example, MDRC. (2019). _Step-by-step guide to creating a process map for higher education._

Design Planning: How Will We Fix It?

WHY? A cross-functional group of folks come together to figure out what the future state will look like: What kind of team are you building? What problem is it trying to solve and for whom? What do you think it will do and who will be on it?

WHAT? The design group engages in an imagining process that identifies a team structure that will meet the challenges identified during the reflection phase. Every college builds teams to meet the needs of its students and to fit in its constraints, but the three types of teams we identified across our nine colleges are a useful starting place to frame potential design decisions. While not all-inclusive, the table on the next page provides a sampling of how colleges might design teams differently depending on their intended outcomes and institutional constraints. The key is that the design group makes decisions regarding their future team structure.

WHO? Successful design groups are made up of individuals from across the college, but ideally are led by those directly involved in supporting students and include representatives from governance and collective bargaining structures. Remember to also include students! This ensures that designs are attentive to the realities on the ground. At the same time the design group needs to include leaders who can make decisions and ensure that future design plans are aligned with broader institutional goals and contexts. The design team must also have clear insight from leadership on who will "approve" the final design and what considerations will guide that decision.

TO WHAT END? An SST design vision — a broad sense of what SSTs will look like, do, and accomplish to support equitable student outcomes, and how that success will be measured. This vision will serve as a "north star" and set of guideposts for implementation decisions.

Designing Student-Focused Teams

Keep in mind, these types of teams build on one another, and grow in their sophistication and ability to provide personalized cohort management for each student in the cohort.

QUESTIONS TO ASK	Who should be on the team, and what role will they play?	What do team members need to do or focus on?	How will team members work together?	What tools will the team need to use?
BACKEND COORDI– NATING	Individuals who can provide broad expertise related to policies and programming connected to the identified cohort while maintaining most of their traditional professional scope	Review cohort-specific data, policies and processes to identify trends and pressure points; take action to address issues and report on progress towards improvements	Meet monthly; refine and/or develop new policies and processes in between meetings	Robust data infrastructure; real-time outcomes data that can be disaggregated
NETWORKED SUPPORT	Individuals who can provide targeted expertise and work as a cohesive team to establish integrated communications and support to the identified cohort while maintaining most of their traditional professional scope	Learn from one another to develop team expertise, identify trends, and respond to student needs; develop support and communications (e.g., milestone messaging and workshops)	Meet weekly or bi-weekly; coordinate as needed between meetings to plan and host programming	Systems to communicate with students; user-friendly access to real-time data
NETWORKED SINGLE POINT OF CONTACT	Individuals who can serve as single points of contact (e.g., success coach, advisor) and others who can support them with targeted expertise for the identified cohort	Points of contact monitor caseload to identify students in need of support; the team meets to talk about specific students (e.g., early alerts) and supports the single point of contact with consultations and warm-handoffs	Single point of contact and team lead meet weekly, bringing in other network members as needed; communicate regularly in between meetings	Case management systems, flags or other mechanisms to identify students with specific needs via real-time data

Implementation Planning: How Will We Do it?

WHY? Once colleges have decided the driving purpose of their SST and what they want students to experience, the focus then must turn to how to bring this purpose to fruition. Addressing the "how" forces more nuanced discussions around team roles, responsibilities, structures, and tools. This requires implementation planning — a distinct phase before the implementation itself.

WHAT? We find that the most successful colleges spend substantial time in this phase, figuring out what needs to happen, planning for challenges and contingencies, and clarifying new workflows before they move to the actual launch. (See sidebar for questions to consider.) **The remainder of this guide is structured around key considerations that should be built into your design and implementation planning.**

During this phase, colleges also dig into the constraints that may limit how they can make their planned design real. In fact, they may need to make some modifications to the original design once those constraints become evident.

Though the focus of this phase is on planning, don't forget to communicate updates on progress and important decisions, especially with governance, collective bargaining, and other individuals whose work will most likely shift once the teams are launched. These communications should include practical information and not simply focus on messaging or buy-in. Also, think about professional learning that will be required, and keep messaging the "why" and the north star of the SST approach.

WHO? Implementation planning groups (often conceived of as "work groups") need to think about the various implications of the design on everything from roles and responsibilities to workflows and underlying technology. This means that implementation planning needs to be led by those most affected by the change and who are frankly the most expert in the work that needs to be done. They also need a clear understanding of their authority to act on implementation decisions, so these work groups need strong involvement, support, or advocacy from senior leaders. Work groups also need to include individuals from other offices that are implicated in the new design, including IT, IR, and HR, as their understanding of and input into the changes will be critical for building out new structures and roles as the teams evolve.

TO WHAT END? An implementation plan, and the groundwork for the SST approach. Procedures and practices are clarified so that teams can jump into their new workflows once you are ready to launch, and can be assessed to make sure they don't create new inequities.

Questions at this phase get more granular. They also continue to vary across colleges and the "right" answer will be highly contextual. Key things to think about include:

- **Do you want to roll SSTs out in phases? Or do you want to start at scale, making the change happen for the entire institution all at once?**

- **How will you cohort your students? How many teams will you have, and how many students will each serve?**

- **What data will you need to collect to measure success and build continuous improvement into your process? How will you access it?**

- **What practices, procedures, or protocols will you build to ensure consistency and quality across teams?**

- **What underlying technologies or tools will teams need?**

Launch: Let's Try it!

WHY? At some point, you just need to get the work going and launch the SSTs. It's important to acknowledge that this first foray into implementation is unlikely to be the last version. Rather, the first semester of launch is likely to be a period of exploration, challenge, and learning. We had one college refer to this as "the first pancake"— it's edible, but it's ugly.

WHAT? In addition to supporting students via SSTs, during this phase, it's important to establish who is responsible for the maintenance and sustainability of the teams as an institutional structure. This person (or at some colleges, small group of people) will develop mechanisms like check-in meetings, progress reports, or data collection to understand what is working and what is not. You'll want to think about which things need to be addressed immediately and which ones you can address later in a more formal process of continuous improvement and refinement. You should also continue to engage in professional learning related to individuals' new roles.
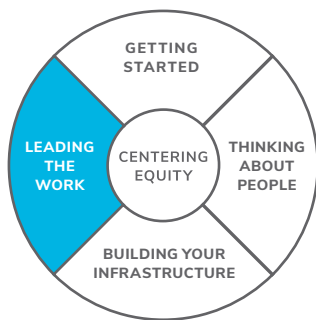
TO WHAT END? SSTs! And a plan for continuous improvement.

Continuous Improvement: How Can We Make it Better?

It's important to figure out what you've learned from your "first pancake" and identify ways to make it better through a continuous improvement process. This requires self-reflection even as you continue to engage in success team activities. Data collection and analysis — both quantitative and qualitative — offer important insight in this process, particularly in relation to equitable student outcomes.

Compare data collected to the markers of success that you identified at the outset. Once you've engaged in some reflection, you will be able to think about which pieces of your model need to be refined and changed, and how you will launch those refinements in future semesters.

LEADING THE WORK

SSTs require different types of expertise during different phases and are inherently cross-divisional and cross-functional. This makes SST design and implementation leadership critical, yet complex.

Higher education leans towards distributed and bottom-up leadership, but our interviewees made it clear that both senior and mid-level leaders have distinct and essential roles to play. Without strong involvement of senior leadership, mid-level leaders are left with (a) an unclear vision for the end goal; (b) lack of authority to implement work across functional areas; (c) a culture of talking rather than acting; and/or (d) not enough resources for high-quality design and implementation. Implementation is effective when senior and mid-level leaders are aligned in the goals for SSTs, understand and support their respective authorities, and work together to achieve both planning and launching SSTs.

Leading from the Middle, and the Top

Although there are common hallmarks of effective leaders our interviewees identified (see sidebar), these traits are enacted differently across leadership levels and contexts. Based on our interviews, colleges want senior leaders who **inspire, guide, and support** SST design and implementation efforts on campus. Mid-level leaders are subsequently empowered to operationalize the vision and make tactical decisions.

Our interviewees were clear that, when it comes to SST design and implementation, **"bottom up" does not mean "bottom only."** Mid-level leaders are often caught in an awkward position leading the work but constrained by the limitations of their positions. Senior leaders play an important role in helping mid-level leaders move the work forward when they cannot do it alone.

Importantly, leadership is both contextual and relative. Mid-level leaders are often viewed as senior leaders in relation to frontline personnel; and senior leaders still have an additional layer of leadership above them in terms of boards and system officers.

On the following pages are definitions along with important responsibilities for senior and mid-level leaders to build into your college's SST plans.

HALLMARKS OF EFFECTIVE LEADERS

- **Get ongoing input from front-line personnel, trusting their perspective and skill**

- **Support innovative thinking and risk taking; normalize iterating and improving**

- **Make clear decisions, communicating WHO makes the final decisions and HOW**

- **Make efforts to connect with the day-to-day student experience**

Senior Leaders

SET THE VISION. Express a vision for SSTs that includes their purpose and importance for student success, providing a clear model for mid-level leadership to focus their work.

BRIDGE ACADEMIC AND STUDENT AFFAIRS. Coordinate and communicate across the traditional silos to ensure consistent messaging and to bolster the cross-divisional and cross-functional nature of SSTs.

PROVIDE SUPPORT AND RESOURCES. Demonstrate clear support for SSTs. This includes providing verbal support; securing funds or personnel to support implementation plans; and translating the value and urgency of holistic student support efforts to their higher ups and boards to garner necessary resources.

EMPOWER OTHERS. Convey confidence in mid-level leaders, and back mid-level decisions whenever possible. Understand when to let the middle lead — typically around questions of design, workflow, or day-to-day practice — and when to step in to make hard calls.

TAKE ACTION. Know when it is time to stop talking or planning and move forward.

Mid-Level Leaders

PROVIDE CONNECTION TO BROADER COLLEGE WORK. Participate in higher-level discussions so that their perspectives and needs are incorporated into any final decisions made by senior leadership and align with other institutional and departmental efforts.

INFORM THE REFLECTION PHASE. Participate in planning meetings and professional learning opportunities such as institutes and trainings. Such an approach keeps them involved in planning and decision making while simultaneously providing them with support to take a stronger leadership role as implementation processes evolve.

LEAD THE SUBSEQUENT PHASES. Make tactical decisions as they are empowered to do so. Meet regularly across functions, team types, and divisions to create collaborative planning networks and generate a more comprehensive understanding of SSTs. Create and lead an iterative process to continue refining the SST model.

SUPPORT FRONT-LINE STAFF. Anticipate and understand the ways in which front-line advisors and coaches will be affected by changes. Maintain open lines of communication to address concerns, develop appropriate supports, and advocate on their behalf to ensure they are able to focus on their core responsibilities.

SENIOR LEADERS include Presidents, cabinet, and/or VP-level personnel who manage multiple departments/units and help to lead and guide institutional strategy.

MID-LEVEL LEADERS include managers, faculty, classified professionals, and support staff administrators that typically report to executive or VP-level leaders, and hold titles such as department chair, dean, or director.

Below are two vignettes that illustrate the need for aligned leadership. Southern CA Medium-Large CC8 exemplifies what happens when middle and senior leaders are not on the same page, whereas Central CA Medium CC illustrates the power of aligned leadership.

Teams in Action: Too Much Autonomy in Southern California

At Southern CA Medium-Large CC8, senior leaders were verbally supportive of SSTs, building them into their Guided Pathways plans and identifying counselors for the teams. To not be "top down," they left the planning and implementation solely to work groups of mid-level leaders. The original SST proposal from these work groups was rejected by senior leadership, leaving the mid-level leaders feeling like they had been asked to do work that led nowhere. One design team member said, "We were on the right track in terms of conceptualizing it... [but] realized in the long run they weren't committed to this."

Senior leadership remained hands off during implementation planning. Mid-level leaders expressed confusion with regards to the vision for SSTs, and felt that they did not have the political, fiscal, or technological resources to launch the teams. For example, mid-level leaders did not have authority to connect the teams to college infrastructure such as the counseling appointment scheduling system or website. They felt that the teams were not explained or promoted to students or others in the college.

Ultimately, mid-level leaders felt that senior leaders avoided "difficult conversations," leading them to wonder: "Is our institutional response genuine, or just reactive...? Just follow the crowd or are we trying to make big change?" SST implementation at this college was proceeding at a "slow pace."

Teams in Action: Aligned Leadership in Central California

At Central CA Medium CC, senior leaders were also vocally supportive of SSTs and wanted the work to be led by mid-level personnel. Senior leaders said, "This has required key people to do the work on the ground directly with the programs to figure out what it logistically, operationally looks like." However, unlike at Southern CA Medium-Large CC8, mid-level leaders were not left alone to figure out design and implementation. Instead, senior and mid-level leaders met regularly to discuss progress, next steps, decision points, and resource needs.

This structure enabled mid-level leaders to do tactical planning while senior leaders stepped in to make decisions when necessary. The Vice President overseeing the work said there were times they needed to say, "We'll just try it... If we don't invest and try, we aren't going to do it." Senior leaders also ensured that mid-level leaders were appropriately resourced. They found funds to buy out mid-level leaders for design, implementation, and sustainability, and used their positions to give mid-level leaders authority to make decisions and get people to listen to them.

As a result, although mid-level leaders expressed that SST design and implementation was challenging and exhausting, they felt supported and valued throughout the process. The college was also able to launch their SSTs at scale during the pandemic and continues to sustain and improve them.

Transparency and Support in Action

We know most leaders want to display the characteristics we described earlier, but sometimes intent doesn't translate to action. Here are specific things you can do to nurture aligned leadership.

Foster Transparency

- Communicate clear expectations around timelines, workflows, and the north star

- Hold open forums at various points of SST design and implementation

- Provide context regarding the why, why now, and why not

- Answer questions as they arise and follow up when answers are not readily available

- Record meetings for non-attendees to ensure information dissemination is not confined to those who were "in the room"

- Engage institutional partners such as existing cohort-based programs, IT, IR, and collective bargaining from the very beginning

Provide Tangible Support

- Provide resources, incentives, and professional learning

- Give advisors, counselors and other front-line practitioners voice and choice in participation on SSTs

- Acknowledge a voice is heard even if an idea isn't possible

- Acknowledge and celebrate small wins

- Make space to hear about institutional barriers to student outcomes and incorporate proposals for possible solutions
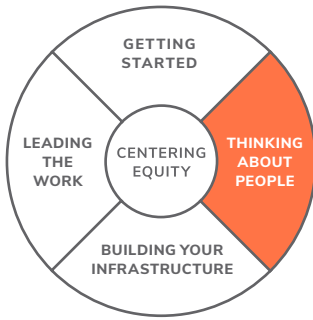
At the senior-level of leadership, this also includes:

- Fund work appropriately

- Balance do-ers with decision-makers on teams

- Emphasize new norms that embrace the iterative and sometimes imperfect approach to design and implementation (making "the first pancake"!)

PIXELFIT

THINKING ABOUT PEOPLE

At the colleges in our study, "thinking about people" meant thinking about three things:

1. **Professional roles, and how they evolve to meet the SST approach**

2. **The time it takes for practitioners to do the work required**

3. **Learning to provide equity-forward holistic support in a team environment**

"People change" is at the core of SST implementation. Once you break down functional silos to provide coordinated, holistic support to students, practitioners will need to engage in new workflows, connect with each other in different ways, and take on revised responsibilities. In short, team members' work looks different — but when correctly designed, should enable them to carry out the functions of their job more efficiently and effectively.

When colleges don't plan for the "people side" of SST design and implementation, they run into trouble in a few different ways. New roles may conflict with human resources constraints or collective bargaining contracts. This might lead to grievance procedures, or to some faculty and staff working quietly outside of their contracted role. Professional staff might feel stretched so thin that folks are burned out and exhausted. Resistance to change might arise from individuals being asked to do new professional functions without commensurate compensation or necessary professional learning to build new skills.

Though sometimes viewed as barriers, **existing "people structures" can be generative when leveraged well.** HR and collective bargaining processes can support new and refined roles, hiring practices, and promotion opportunities that embody holistic student support approaches. Compensation and workload management can be used to ensure that individuals have the time and space to do the work needed during different phases of SST design and launch. Professional learning structures can support individuals' transitions to meeting new expectations.

Strategies to Revise and Create New Professional Roles

Because SSTs require new holistic support practices and span traditional job functions, they often require new roles or revised professional responsibilities within existing roles. Depending on the structure of the team, these might include:

- Modifying advising and counseling to go beyond program planning to providing holistic support

- Adding coaches or navigators to support procedural aspects of advising or connect students with appropriate resources

- Modifying the instructional faculty role to engage with students in advising and support contexts

- Expecting team members to communicate and collaborate regularly, develop new programming, and/or use new technologies to proactively monitor their shared caseload

Many of these shifts are "contract adjacent" — they align with the spirit of existing roles but aren't explicitly outlined in job descriptions. For example, SST meetings are clearly aligned with the instructional goal of supporting student learning and the student services goal of helping students navigate the pathway to graduation. But, they take faculty and staff away from their formal contracted duties of classroom teaching or meeting with students. New and refined roles also create questions around boundaries and compensation across divisions and bargaining units.

Our interviewees told us that key to leveraging people structures to successfully evolve roles is to **bring governance, collective bargaining, and HR leaders into the conversations early on** — during design planning, not implementation. The strategies they shared include:

Be Upfront that SSTs Will Require Evolved Professional Roles. Frame SST development as an opportunity to co-create new work across governance and bargaining units. Commit to a norm of collaboration and figuring things out together, rather than back-and-forth negotiation.

Many of these shifts are "contract adjacent" — they align with the spirit of existing roles but aren't explicitly outlined in job descriptions.

Start by Defining the Activities SSTs Need to Engage in. Then work backwards to the bargaining or human resources context to determine appropriate compensation, contract grade, and other contract concerns. Engage HR, governance, and collective bargaining leaders as "critical friends" — asking them to identify potential challenges and the things that worry them from a role perspective. These concerns can be addressed in the design.

Create Buy-Out Time for Chairs, Design Leads, and Others Involved in Design and Implementation Planning. Upon launch, turn them into formal positions embedded in institutional structures to build sustainability. Engage with HR throughout the process to identify the best strategy for turning buy-out time into line-item positions.

Teams in Action: Helping Refine Professional Identities in Downstate NY

People place meaning on their work practices and competencies. Asking them to shift those practices means asking them to shift how they think about themselves.

At Downstate NY Medium CC, SST leaders found that professional identity work showed up as fear and resistance, often framed around potential loss. Advisors worried that new coaches would displace them, or take over aspects of their jobs. Some union representatives worried that the redesign would be an excuse to reduce bargaining lines.

To address these fears, implementation leaders set about building trust, clarifying where roles aligned and where they remained distinct, and reassuring professional staff that SSTs would not lead to reduced staffing. They made progress when they said to advisors, "Let's work together with coaches to contact students and direct them to you," thereby clarifying the relationship between the two roles. This also addressed contractual questions by clarifying which activities were related to specific bargaining lines. And fundamentally, it helped individuals start to refine their professional identities—maintaining the core competencies they valued while realigning what it means to "advise" within with a more holistic model.

Making Sure People Have Time to Do This Work

Thinking about people means thinking about how they will find time to do their work during design, implementation, and launch. There are, of course, only so many hours in the day. And while we often think of time constraints as being important during design and planning, our interviewees were clear that **capacity needs persist through implementation.** SSTs require back-end coordinating, such as filtering early alerts to advisors and counselors. One participant noted, "You need people on the back end to do the work so it's seamless for students on the front end."

Building this capacity is a challenge across colleges and exacerbated at small institutions like Southern CA Small CC. Some strategies to expand capacity create new challenges, such as when temporary positions create instability later. Still, colleges in our study found ways to ensure that there were people to design, plan, and launch SSTs by:

- Creating a full-time buy-out position or dedicating a professional staff member's time during design and implementation planning to ensure that a single person is responsible for and has time to shepherd the process

- Building coordinator/practitioner hybrid positions that enable SST members to continue doing their core functions while also having dedicated time for back-end systems building

- Cross-training to ensure that functions are filled even when key staff are out of the office

Ensuring People Can Be Successful SST Members

One college leader told us, "just because you create a position doesn't mean [the person] knows how to do their job." We heard numerous instances of colleges that did not prioritize professional learning across the SST development process. As a result, they saw reduced impact from their SSTs on students and increased stress for professionals. One SST member noted that after a rapid launch with minimal training, it felt like "we're helping students, but we're confused ourselves." Another noted that, without training, SSTs varied in practices and quality and created inequities for students.

Professional learning needs shift over time. During the reflection and design planning phases, professional learning focuses on the "why" of SSTs. This type of learning is well-positioned for external support, such as statewide institutes or professional conferences, and is the type of learning colleges in our study focused on the most.

As colleges move towards implementation planning and launch, **learning needs shift from "why" to "how."** Faculty and staff need to learn how to:

- **Shift mindsets** — from advising-as-registration to advising-as-shepherding-students-to-completion, or from working in silos to working as team members

- **Build skills** — using new technology, asking new questions, or collaboratively planning group advising activities

- **Work cross-functionally** — understanding the functions and professional scopes of other departments and members of the team

Internal structures are well-positioned to nurture and sustain "learning for how." At Central NY Small CC, the first half of each weekly team meeting was dedicated to professional learning, for example, bringing in representatives from other offices so that team members could learn about their work, build relationships, and provide "warm handoffs" to those offices for their students. This approach was low-cost, long-term, and easily tailored to the current learning needs of the team.

Colleges that successfully built internal "how-focused" learning structures used the following tactics:

- Co-creating job descriptions or SST "codes of conduct," to help teams define success and share strategies for enacting new expectations

- Asking team members, "what do you need to do your job?" and building workshops around the answers

- Building a culture that encourages reaching out to colleagues if team members do not know the answer to a student question

- Developing on-line repositories of resources for SST members

BUILDING YOUR INFRASTRUCTURE
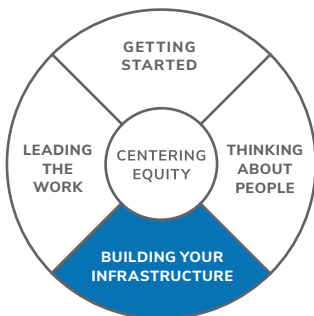
Given the overwhelming number of products, schools would be well served to proactively identify what they need and want to be able to do via a tech platform during the design process, so they have a means of assessing how well a given platform meets their needs.

For more information, see Ada Center. (2020). *Advising and technology procurement & planning: A practical playbook for higher education leaders.*

Successful SSTs rely heavily on a robust data and technology infrastructure to help them coordinate and execute their collective efforts. Infrastructure needs vary depending on the level of team coordination and student outreach needed by the SST. Regardless of SST type, this infrastructure requires **substantial time and attention** during design and implementation to make sure underlying systems work in the ways needed by team members.

Most of the colleges in our study were befuddled by inaccurate student data, overwhelmed with the number and cost of tech products, or frustrated by how seemingly-smart technology couldn't manage to communicate across products, functions, or departments. They also found that they needed to understand who on their team needed access to which data points and why, in order to avoid information overload. Without appropriate data quality controls, resources, or tech expertise, colleges didn't have the right data to provide personalized and proactive support to their cohorts.

Importantly, as one of our interviewees noted, "data and technology are used to describe so many different things and the challenges are vast." Our conversations with colleges highlighted the need for clarity on the difference between the two in the context of SSTs, so colleges could more effectively problem solve as issues arise. Our working description of data and technology can be found in the sidebars on the following pages.

Building a Foundation with Data

The foundation of all SSTs is a strong data infrastructure, which enables SST members to better understand their students, what they need, and what impact SST interventions have. Bringing student data to the forefront allowed colleges in our study to look at which students they were losing (via disaggregated data) and where the biggest pressure points were in the system (via enrollment and achievement data). They could then identify targeted interventions or outreach to address the barriers to student equity and success that they were seeing.

SSTs rely on accurate data to establish student cohorts and provide targeted support. The colleges in our study identified two main areas of need related to student data

DATA ACCURACY. SSTs rely most heavily on student contact information and student enrollment information, in order to identify who is in their cohort. But these data elements are often subject to change in any given year. One college leader spoke of standing outside classrooms to get updated student contact information; and another college leader shared examples of students coded in one SST's major but enrolled in courses following the path of another SST's major. Of note, SST assignments often must be manually entered into student outreach products such as the Learning Management System, since SST data is not typically stored in the Student Information System. Building out systems and workflows to collect these data and ensure their accuracy is a critical task that needs to be addressed as early as the design phase.

CLEAR DATA DEFINITIONS. Using data to assign students to SSTs requires definitional clarity and decision rules related to a myriad of situations. For example, one college raised the issue of the addressing different major codes in previous catalog years, while another addressed the complexity of determining which majors are considered career tech education. More broadly, colleges wrestled with how to define and measure "student success," especially in the context of weighing the success of SSTs. This was true even with traditional metrics, such as persistence and graduation, as colleges weighed which milestones (semesterly, annually, 3-year, 6-year) to monitor and who to use as their comparison groups.

Because of the interconnected nature of data and technology, strategies for addressing these issues rely heavily on collaborations with IT and IR — which we address in a subsequent section on bridging systems and people.

DATA

- **Provides SSTs with the information to better understand their students, what they need, and what impact SST interventions have**

- **Includes student-level information (e.g., contact, demographic, enrollment, major, achievement) allowing for identification of individual student needs**

- **Includes special population and/or cohort coding to identify and explore student group needs**

- **Incorporates both quantitative (e.g., success metrics) and qualitative (e.g., survey, focus group) measures**

Putting Data into Action with Technology

For student-facing teams, technology products (e.g., Learning Management Systems, early alert, and student success products) are often leveraged to manage large amounts of data and serve large cohorts of students more efficiently. We saw colleges using tech products for four main purposes:

1. Centralizing data so that SST members can interact with data from different sources, departments, or functions in a streamlined manner

2. Coordinating efforts between and among SST members

3. Communicating with students for targeted outreach

4. Monitoring student progress and/or case managing

Though all these functions could be done manually through low-cost tools like email or homegrown logs, the college-wide reach of SSTs makes technology products a valuable albeit expensive structural support. Technology products can both increase efficiency across large and complex data systems and ensure that all SSTs are collecting and engaging with their data consistently while enabling college-wide outcomes assessment.

Even when colleges found tech products to meet their needs, roll-out and utilization were heavy lifts requiring significant lead time to work out kinks in the system and provide professional learning opportunities. The colleges in our study also struggled with paying for the tools they would like or — after a trial period of "discounted" pricing — sustaining a product that had become unaffordable. Beyond the cost of the products themselves, they also found it challenging to secure the personnel needed to prepare, maintain, and monitor quality of new technologies. One interviewee summarized the challenge as finding products that meet "the robust nature of the work on a budget."

Strategies colleges used to create sustainable technology systems included:

Leveraging the Tools They Had (or Could Afford) Rather Than the Tools They Wanted. This included relying on internal IT knowledge to build homegrown case management systems to track student progress and outreach at Eastern PA Medium-Large CC and Central NY Small CC; using the Learning Management System (e.g., Canvas) to create shells for each SST to coordinate their efforts and communicate with students for targeted outreach at Northern CA Large CC and Southern CA Medium-Large CC9, and purchasing a Customer Relationship Management product which connects to phone, text, and email to show student contact history at Northern CA Medium-Large CC.

TECHNOLOGY

- **Allows SSTs to interact with the data from different sources, departments, or functions in a streamlined manner and act on what they learn, ideally in a user-friendly virtual environment**

- **Makes data accessible to individual SST members (e.g., SIS — Banner)**

- **Enables SSTs to manipulate and visualize data in a user-friendly way (e.g., Tableau)**

- **Allows SST members to coordinate with each other and other institutional partners, and leverages data to conduct student outreach, monitor student progress, and/or case manage (e.g., Starfish)**

Leveraging a Portion of Existing Personnel's Time to Assist with Set-Up and Maintenance. This included having the SST campus leads document the process for other teams to follow at Central CA Medium CC and bringing on a graduate intern to assist with the quality control process at Southern CA Medium-Large CC9.

Bridging Systems and People

Bridging both systems and people subsequently becomes a critical consideration at all stages of the design and implementation planning process, and must be an area of focus for refinement during launch and continuous improvement. Implementation teams found themselves trying to figure out how to work within the context of college and district guardrails on timelines, products, and viable options. They also struggled with how to get technology personnel and vendors to understand end-user needs well enough to identify appropriate products and data requirements. The colleges in our study addressed this issue with the following strategies:

Collaborating With IT, IR, and Your District Office (Where Applicable) from the Very Beginning to determine what systems they currently had, how they could meet the needs of SSTs, and who was responsible for the infrastructure. Colleges who found greater success noted the value of meeting regularly (even post-launch!). These meetings were most effective when they included staff who were going to use the system so they could provide feedback as it was being vetted or built out. SST leads from Southern CA Medium-Large CC learned from their Dean of IR that many of the tasks they wanted SSTs to do weekly could be automated through existing systems, thereby saving time; Central CA Medium CC met with district IT staff and other district colleges to identify needs, troubleshoot, and improve. Meanwhile, CA Medium-Large CC shared the value of piloting new tech products before expanding its usage to identify and work through challenges.

Creating a "Translational Culture" to Connect Tech Experts and Front-Line Users. SST members don't necessarily understand tech systems, and tech folks don't necessarily understand front-end processes. While many colleges relied on "stop-gap" strategies (e.g., leveraging untapped expertise, hiring temporary staff), institutions with more structural strategies experienced greater success. CA Medium-Large CC carved out part of a manager's position to oversee student services technology, such that any time a program or office wants to add a tech tool or product, the manager looks into several products, narrows it down for a group of stakeholders, and works closely with IT to make sure the systems selected meet end-user needs while also fitting into the overall IT infrastructure.

As one of our interviewees said, "If you don't have your structure (roles, responsibilities, workflows) in place, technology will only reinforce your silos."

CONCLUSION

We draw five lessons from the colleges in this study.

1. **Make equitable outcomes the north star for your efforts. Start by clearly defining what equity will look like on your campus, and design SSTs to support that definition.**

2. **Set a clear vision for your SSTs. Understand the type of team you are building, why, and how you will know your teams are functioning effectively.**

3. **Lead together. Middle and senior leaders both have critical roles to play in designing and launching SSTs.**

4. **People are the heart of the work. Professional roles and expectations may shift, and so you need to plan for changed workflows and capacity.**

5. **You need a strong data and technology infrastructure. It takes time and intentionality to build systems that will support the "people side" of SSTs.**

Earlier, we met Martín and learned that the structure of his community college made it difficult for him to access available supports. The colleges in this guide — and others around the country — are building SSTs to make sure that today, students like Martín are better able to connect with people, services, and information and remain on track to graduation. Critically, they are thinking about how to use SSTs to increase the success rates for racially-minoritized, low-income, and first-generation students.

This guide did not set out to assess the impact of SSTs. Rather, given their promise and prominence, we wanted to share what early-adopters have experienced so that other colleges can apply those lessons to their own contexts. In doing so, we hoped to acknowledge the messiness of institutional reform — to show that the work is not always linear, that there is no one "right" way, and that continuous iteration and improvement is part of every college's journey towards more equitable student success. We also hoped that telling these stories would honor the hard work and dedication of community college practitioners committed to building better structures for their students.

By sharing the lessons learned by these colleges, we hoped to provide you with practical ideas, tips, and strategies to ease your own implementation process. Our expectation is that, by learning about areas of challenge and the ways others have navigated them, you will be able to plan ahead and mitigate those challenges. For example, now that we know that professional learning is a key aspect of launching an SST, hopefully you will integrate professional learning opportunities into your own plans.

We hope this guide has inspired you to rethink how you support the students on your campus, how you are working to create more equitable structures, and how to lead institutional transformation. The need to support students like Martín is as urgent as ever.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

APPENDIX: METHODS

The findings in this report are based on individual and group interviews with 81 individuals from nine colleges across four states.

Using our professional network, we established a nine-person Advisory Board of stakeholders engaged in holistic student support reform representing instructional and student services personnel, system offices, and technical assistance providers. This Advisory Board helped identify and secure research sites; clarify our research questions and approach; and provided feedback on guide drafts.

We used the following working definition of SSTs: "A cross-divisional team of individuals who collaboratively engage in cohort management to support and assist a group of students from entry to completion, with a focus on equitable outcomes." The study's intent was to understand colleges' design and implementation processes and how they approach SSTs as an equity strategy. We did not set out to evaluate the impact of SSTs.

Our guiding research questions were: (1) How can community colleges address and navigate critical focus areas in designing and implementing a cohort-management-based Student Success Team?; and (2) How can equity programming be integrated into the SST model while maintaining the unique identity of those programs? Given this focus, readers should be cautious in assuming that SSTs will automatically lead to stronger or more equitable student outcomes.

Using suggestions from our Advisory Board and professional networks, we identified institutions engaged in Student Success Team reforms in California and other states with similar operating conditions (e.g., size, union environment). Institutions were purposefully selected to represent diversity in location, size, demographics, and SST implementation stage, as well as levels of partnerships with existing equity programs and external support from consultants.

At each college, we conducted an initial 45-minute interview with the college's Vice President or Dean who supervises the SST to learn more about the genesis and strategic goals of the SST; often this individual brought colleagues given the cross-functional nature of the work. We then conducted at least one 75-minute group interview with 3-5 representatives from an SST to learn more about the current structures and processes of the SST and any previous iterations. Through snowball

sampling, we conducted follow-up interviews with other key personnel to better understand how the college navigated any challenges that arose during design and implementation. On average, we spoke with 9 individuals per institution. Interviewees were compensated with a $25 gift card for participation to honor their time.

Interviews were conducted via Zoom. We used a semi-structured interview protocol, designed for the specific stakeholder groups and goals mentioned above. The interview protocol was informed by existing literature and feedback from Advisory Board members regarding challenges colleges face in the SST design and implementation process. During the conversations, we took detailed notes and recorded the calls to obtain transcripts when interviewee permission was granted.

We conducted three layers of coding — first compiling data for each school coded by topic and stakeholder, second analyzing college-level findings by topic, and third analyzing topics across colleges. We conducted team meetings to discuss our coding and emergent findings and triangulate across data sources. Approximately halfway through the data analysis process, we shared our emergent findings with the Advisory Board for feedback, their interpretation, and their hypotheses regarding alternate scenarios or explanations for the themes we identified in the data.

The draft guide was reviewed by the Advisory Board for their feedback on structure and again for content. External reviewers from the Ada Center and Group C provided feedback on specific sections and clarity of language.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

As part of the California Guided Pathways Project (CAGP), The College Futures Foundation, in partnership with The Ada Center and Phase Two Advisory, is supporting the development of resources for institutions pursuing holistic student support approaches (HSS). HSS seeks to provide students with the critical and individually relevant academic, social, and personal supports they need, when they need them. In its ideal state, this approach establishes a more student-centered campus, one that is more equitable, accessible, and easier for all students to navigate.

College Futures Foundation works to ensure that more students who reflect California's diversity complete a B.A. and access the opportunity for a better life. We believe this is best accomplished when California's education system is designed to meet students' needs, dedicated to fulfilling their aspirations, and ensures equitable outcomes. College Futures Foundation has supported the California Guided Pathways Project since its inception in 2017.

The Ada Center helps higher education leaders more effectively use technology to support success and equity goals. We partner with states, institutions, and national organizations to provide practical research and technical assistance. The Ada Center supports the California Guided Pathways Project by providing guidance and resources on how to effectively use technology to strengthen success and equity goals, and by supporting efforts to scale holistic student supports among partner institutions.

Phase Two Advisory works with colleges, foundations, and improvement networks to translate research evidence into equity-forward reform strategies. We provide strategic planning and implementation support, just-in-time research, and professional learning opportunities to leaders and practitioners throughout the higher education sector as they shepherd transformative change. Phase Two Advisory supports the California Guided Pathways Project by helping build communities of practice and supporting efforts to scale holistic student supports among partner institutions.