



INSIGHTS TO ACT ON

THE ROLE OF MID-LEVEL LEADERS IN ACCELERATING EQUITY-FOCUSED TRANSFORMATION

Observations From the Frontier Set



FRONTIERSET

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



The Frontier Set used the following definition of institutional transformation to orient its work:

“the realignment of an institution’s structures, culture, and business model to create a student experience that results in dramatic and equitable increases in outcomes and educational value.”

To learn more about institutional transformation, visit the Frontier Set website [here](#).

The existing conditions in higher ed 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 agents of change when it comes to 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 have historically 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 the role of mid-level leaders is part of a

series of themes you can reflect on as you figure out how to advance equitable student success at your institution. Whether you're a senior leader looking to support your mid-level leaders, a mid-level leader yourself thinking about how to leverage your role, or another stakeholder interested in coordinating with mid-level leaders, these observations are relevant for you. These **Insights to Act On** are inspired by the work of Frontier Set sites, and have 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.

THE CRITICAL ROLE OF MID-LEVEL LEADERS

“Mid-level leaders are the solution creators. They understand the ways daily operations and student needs intersect, which creates opportunities for creative solutions. Executive leaders do not have this same nuanced understanding of student needs or daily operations[.]”

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA
AT GREENSBORO

THE OPPORTUNITY

When individual departments on campus implement targeted changes to solve for a specific barrier within their (limited) purview, these changes are ad hoc and do not address the full student experience (lived and academic). Accordingly, these efforts are not integrated and do not lead to transformation that improves and sustains completion outcomes.

When mid-level leaders possess a student-centered mindset and a scope of influence beyond a single unit, they can foster and implement strategies that better align to the student experience and represent integrated transformation rather than one-off interventions or iterative adjustments. This approach should ultimately contribute to improved and more equitable student outcomes.

At transforming institutions, effective mid-level leaders are critical to true equity-focused transformation. Mid-level leaders are well-positioned to break down silos and cultivate cooperation across functions. These leaders more often manage, facilitate, and participate in cross-functional teams, working to identify organizational challenges. They are central to efforts that engage influential stakeholders across different departments to influence student success related decision-making that is critical to developing and implementing 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.**

Some typical titles for a mid-level leadership position include:

- Vice Provost
- Associate/Assistant Vice Provost
- Dean
- Director of individual units
- Department Chair/faculty (depending on the institution)

WHY ARE MID-LEVEL LEADERS IMPORTANT?

Mid-level leaders are the change-makers in most institutions, acting as bridges and translators between senior leaders and other stakeholder groups.

No single department or unit has a full view of, or influence on, the complete range and intersectionality of students' experiences, journeys, and identities. Therefore, no single department or unit can support all aspects of the student experience. **Effective change requires coordination and cooperation between many units on campus. Mid-level leaders are well-positioned to create and manage complex change,** as well as to engage others in creating and implementing strategies.

Mid-level leaders are often effective when the institutional culture supports widespread stakeholder engagement, along with a set of institutional conditions that enable mid-level leaders to drive equitable transformation efforts.

The following are six conditions and institutional attributes that in part explain the role of effective and empowered mid-level leaders. These conditions are not exhaustive, but represent consistent observations and trends reported across the network.

TRANSPARENT AND COMMITTED SENIOR LEADERSHIP

Senior leaders who are committed to their public statements concerning equitable student success help provide vital support for mid-level leaders to drive transformational change. Senior leaders must build space for mid-level leaders to push for campus wide change—but also to embrace failures.

COMMON AND ALIGNED PURPOSE

Mid-level leaders are positioned to be most successful when the institution has a strong, visible, and clear point of view on equitable student success. This commitment to student success, when broadly accepted and embraced, enables mid-level leaders to make difficult decisions and drive transformation efforts.

CROSS-FUNCTIONAL REACH

Effective mid-level leadership roles have some degree of cross-functional exposure and/or responsibilities. This type of reach can take different forms, and regardless of the design, common skills seen in effective mid-level leaders include the ability to manage conflict, collaborate, and operate from an integrated, systems-level point of view.

DIFFERENTIATED ROLE CLARITY

Successfully empowering mid-level leaders requires institutions to develop clear roles that are sometimes organized under a central campus position devoted to student success. Under this central role, mid-level leaders can see more direct application and benefits of their efforts. Mid-level leaders also benefit from a more differentiated focus, which empowers them to support cultural changes needed for transformation.

REGULAR COORDINATION

Institutions that provide opportunities and mediums for regularly coordinating student success initiatives tend to demonstrate more empowered mid-level leadership. Regular coordination occurs in a variety of ways—weekly cross-functional meetings, task forces devoted to specific issue areas/topics, continuous improvement processes, project management strategies, and so forth—and looks different by the size of the institution.

INTEGRATED AND FLUENT DATA USE

Data fluency and understanding are nearly non-negotiable for mid-level leaders. Even if it's not a required skill for the job, mid-level leaders should possess the ability to connect with, understand, and apply student success and outcome data to manage transformation. Mid-level leaders should have the ability to not only interpret progress, but also communicate and advocate such data to senior leadership.



HOW TO SUPPORT EFFECTIVE MID-LEVEL LEADERSHIP

1 | Start with Mindset

Mid-level leaders benefit from developing an equity- and asset-based mindset, and from understanding students' lived experiences. This mindset recognizes and champions differences across students as assets. This mindset is particularly important to develop in the early stages of transformation planning, and should carry on throughout the transformation journey. Having an equity mindset helps mid-level leaders generate engagement from practitioners who may otherwise resist institutional reforms and transformations.

2 | (Re)Center Job Structures around Students

Mid-level leadership positions are often structured to manage and understand the operational needs, supports, and activities within and across different campus units, as well as situations students experience on a day-to-day basis. This includes developing an understanding of faculty and staff roles, and how they influence student success. Mid-level leaders should work cross-functionally and center around the student experience.

3 | Value and Invest in Skills and Competencies

Effective mid-level leaders often describe specific skills and competencies as important to their work. For example, many mid-level leaders demonstrate an ability to use data to inform key institutional decisions, and to assess and advocate for appropriate changes. The mid-level leader skill set helps individuals navigate, communicate, and engage with equitable transformation efforts. Mid-level leaders benefit from having professional development opportunities and established institutional hiring practices that increase skills and competencies.

4 | Empower Cross-functional Processes

Mid-level leaders can be empowered by senior leaders who trust them to be effective, often by granting them a degree of flexibility and autonomy to engage with various stakeholders. This leads to cross-functional transformation strategies that are institution-wide and backed by adequate resources, knowledge, and tools.

“Mid-level staff make sense of the vast amounts of student information, and equip senior leaders and other decision-makers with synthesized data sourced from multiple functional areas, tools, and platforms for more comprehensive insights into trends and patterns.”

THE UNIVERSITY INNOVATION ALLIANCE

“[Miami Dade’s] hiring was strongly aligned to its student-centered philosophy, and the college’s strong onboarding and professional development offerings (including mandatory one-year graduate training for faculty and other opportunities for professional learning for all staff) created a culture where both the expectation and the support for mid-level leadership to exercise agency on behalf of students were present.”

THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

“University of Texas Rio Grande Valley has really empowered their leaders to use practices like differentiating services based on the data... The role of the mid-level leader who began all this work has been elevated, and she has been empowered to work with other divisions to inform the work they are doing more broadly. The cultural change that resulted in the leadership change empowered her and other mid-level managers to find their place in the student success work and move it forward with more of an institution-wide focus and approach.”

THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF STATE COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

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.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS TO CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

Reflection and sharing are key pieces of transformative work, no matter where your institution is in its transformation journey. Whether you're a senior leader or a mid-level leader yourself, use the questions below to guide discussion with your team or other colleagues to identify strategies that can help empower and enable mid-level leaders.

- Who are the mid-level leaders on your campus? How are they empowered to implement equitable student success strategies and instill an equity mindset? How are they not?
- How do you define effective mid-level leadership? What examples come to mind? What makes them stand out?
- How can your organization foster an environment for mid-level leaders to develop and implement strategies that will result in more equitable outcomes for students?
- What institutional challenges (e.g., structural, procedural, cultural) might hinder effective mid-level leadership?
- How can your hiring practices and onboarding processes better support the agency and effectiveness of mid-level leaders? What professional development opportunities are available for mid-level leaders?
- How are mid-level leaders using data to implement equitable student success strategies? How can senior leaders provide opportunities for mid-level leaders to share and communicate success and outcome data?
- What tools, methods, or strategies is your institution providing that enable mid-level leaders to have conversations and work on initiatives that focus on equity? How can you offer more support?
- What mechanisms does your organization's senior leadership have to listen to mid-level leaders and bring their perspectives into decision-making? How could you better support this?

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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.