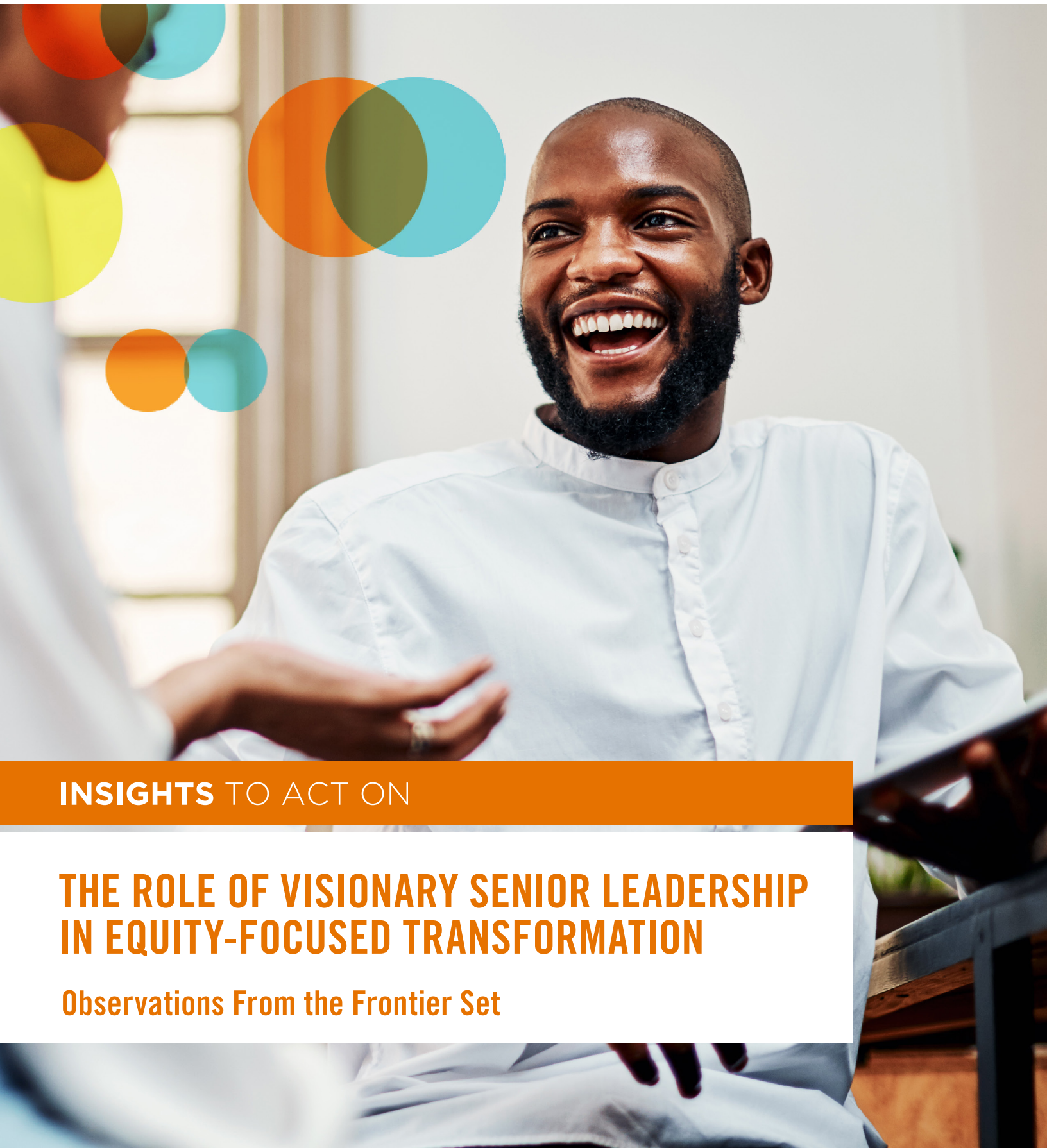




FRONTIERSET



**INSIGHTS** TO ACT ON

## **THE ROLE OF VISIONARY SENIOR LEADERSHIP IN EQUITY-FOCUSED TRANSFORMATION**

**Observations From the Frontier Set**



## FRONTIERSET

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

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

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



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

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

## WHO ARE VISIONARY LEADERS?

Catalytic, visionary senior leaders differentiate themselves by embedding equity into their institution's vision, mission, and values, then using these to inform the institution's activities and decisions. They also prioritize equitable student success by building clear goals into strategic plans, setting a direction for the institution, and empowering the people who can bring that vision to life.

A catalyst for transformation at Wake Tech Community College was the arrival of a new president, Dr. Scott Ralls, in 2019. It was clear from his arrival that Dr. Ralls wasn't simply talking about change, but he believed in it and worked to help the campus community get behind his vision. President Ralls spearheaded the development of Reach and Rally, a strategic plan that received institution-wide support from stakeholders (AIR 2021 Institutional Case Summary).

### The Opportunity

When an existing or newly appointed senior leader establishes and widely communicates a clear and compelling vision for equitable student success, reinforced by goals prioritized in strategic plans, they can **catalyze transformation**.

Whether an institution is welcoming a new provost or experiencing turnover at the presidential level, change in senior leadership can cause a shift in institutional priorities. As a result, senior leaders have the opportunity to introduce (or reimagine) a bold vision for transformation. Accordingly, if the vision is not communicated or effectively aligned with the institution's people, resources, and infrastructure, transformation efforts are often limited.

Moving transformation from inspiration to action is not the work of senior leaders alone, but their ability to create a culture of empowerment in the campus community leads to support for champions of student success. Institutions in the Frontier Set demonstrated that extraordinary progress can be made when the people contributing to student success understand strategic priorities and are supported by senior leadership, committed resources, systems, and processes that enable them to play an active role.



## 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.

## HOW DO VISIONARY LEADERS CATALYZE TRANSFORMATION?

Visionary senior leaders understand the powerful influence they have on an institution's likelihood of transformation, and they leverage that influence to play a key role at critical points in the change process. The following roles and competencies describe the most prominent attributes of effective senior leadership in transformation, as observed in the Frontier Set network:

### Create a clear and compelling vision for equitable student success

Senior leaders make the urgent and immediate case for change to the strategic direction of their institution. The case reflects hopes and expectations for the future and serves as a guiding beacon for change that is highly visible in the campus community. Senior leaders display the following competencies in setting a clear vision for student success:

- Ability to articulate a bold vision and goals for eliminating gaps in student success outcomes to internal and external audiences.
- Ability to clearly define the roles and responsibilities of the campus community to encourage widespread stakeholder engagement and promote collaboration.
- Willingness to establish open and transparent channels of communication.

### Integrate the vision into strategic plans

To achieve their bold vision for equitable student success, visionary senior leaders set clear, measurable goals. These goals are integrated into an institution's strategic plan and become the foundation of the institution's culture, structures, and business model.

Effective senior leaders often demonstrate specific skills and competencies that help them execute their strategic plan. These include:

- Understanding and acknowledging institutional gaps in student outcomes for Black, Latino, and Indigenous students and students from low-income backgrounds.

- Willingness to share power and distribute it across multiple levels of leadership.
- Ability to use data to inform decisions and monitor progress.
- Willingness to democratize the budget process to increase transparency and gain buy-in.

### Establish communication channels

When senior leaders commit to transparent and ongoing communication, staff and faculty better understand their roles in the strategic plan. This strengthens a shared sense of ownership in transformation efforts.

Visionary senior leaders use clear communication to align purpose, build trust, and strengthen relationships with the campus community. Examples include:

- Ability to leverage communications to align purpose, foster collaboration, build trust and strengthen relationships with the campus community.
- Willingness to open communication channels to share ongoing information about strategic goals, priorities, progress, and activities with campus stakeholders.
- Willingness to open communication channels to receive ongoing feedback from campus stakeholders to understand perspectives.

### Empower mid-level leaders

Senior leaders pursue transformation with the support of mid-level leaders. Visionary leaders recognize the integral role of mid-level leaders and position the people leading divisions and departments, as well as those working on the front lines, to play an active role in the change process.

Senior leaders can create opportunities for mid-level leaders to champion institutional goals and priorities by functionally and structurally enabling them to contribute to the institution's goals. Ways by which senior leaders do this include:

- Distribute power and trust to create a supportive environment that gives mid-level leaders the space, authority, and resources to make decisions, take action, and embrace failure.



## Prior success with institutional change initiatives

Engagement in prior transformation efforts—such as student success-oriented partnerships or networks—can build an institution’s muscle for reform and accelerate change. For many institutions in the Frontier Set, joining the network sparked their transformation journeys by helping them use data to set and monitor goals, assemble cross-functional teams, and improve collaboration. Networks also provide opportunities to share and learn from others while accessing tools, methods, and resources. As a result, Frontier Set Institutions embraced a new mindset about transformation and significantly increased their focus on equitable student success. Participation in a student success network introduced Frontier Set institutions to frameworks that supported the realignment of structures and processes around the student experience. Read [Insights to Act On: Integrated Approaches to Equity-Focused Transformation](#) to explore how integrated frameworks help organize and manage the change process.

In 2022, Davidson-Davie Community College referenced evolving its guided pathways program over the past several years, starting with its participation in Completion by Design and refined through The Frontier Set.

## Secure and Stable Finances

Financial circumstances make a difference in an institution’s ability to transform. An institution may have a bold vision for equitable student success and recognize critical gaps in student support, but if financial resources are unavailable to invest accordingly, transformation efforts are limited. Scarce financial resources also significantly affect buy-in for change. Mid-level leaders, staff, and faculty may be wary of taking on more roles and responsibilities or adopting new practices in the absence of sufficient resources, time, and training.

Consistent financial support—such as funding from local and state government, college foundations, budget reallocations, or strategic investments by outside funders—can provide institutions with the resources to invest in and sustain transformation over time. In the Frontier Set, institutions were in

- Position mid-level leaders as decision-makers and innovators and broadly communicate their authority and role in achieving strategic objectives.
- Improve mid-level leaders’ access to actionable data.
- Implement integrated structures and processes that strengthen the ability of mid-level leaders to collaborate and engage with cross-functional stakeholders.

A strong culture shift at Northeast Wisconsin Technical College led to more collaboration across the organization. This shift also led to increased dedication from faculty and mid-level leaders on student success initiatives, backed by a clearer vision.

## Being Ready to Transform

While visionary senior leaders were identified as the most common catalysts for change, Frontier Set institutions also identified two key conditions that increased an institution’s ability to effectively navigate transformation, remove obstacles, and mitigate risks: prior success with institutional change initiatives, and secure and stable finances.

a better position to transform when funding and access to resources were available, predictable, and reliable.

One Frontier Set example is Lorain County Community College, a tax levy-supported college that receives its financial support through community votes every 10 years. In 2011, LCCC leaders engaged with the community about what the investment does for community colleges, the importance of community funding to keep tuition affordable, and the need to maintain infrastructure, technology, support, and staffing to ensure student success.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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

- Do senior leaders at your institution regularly communicate their vision for equitable student success? Does your institution have open communication channels for sharing and receiving information about student success priorities, progress, and activities?
- Are priorities in the vision reinforced by goals in strategic plans? To what extent are people in the campus community aware of these goals, and to what extent do they understand their role in achieving them?

- How coordinated and collaborative are equitable student success efforts across administrative units and academic departments?
- How do senior leaders recognize and empower mid-level leaders to champion student success at your institution?

## 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.

SUMMER 2023

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