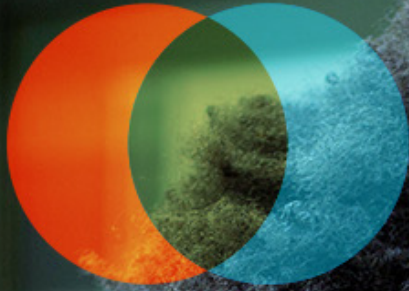




FRONTIERSET



INSIGHTS TO ACT ON

USING REFLECTION TO ADVANCE 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 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 reflection is part of a series of approaches you can use to advance equitable student success at your institution. No matter your role at your institution, these observations are relevant for you. These **Insights to Act On** are inspired by the work of Frontier Set sites, and 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.

WHAT IS REFLECTION?

Reflection, as observed in the Frontier Set, is a process in which an individual or group identifies and discusses structural and systemic problems in the student experience, to solve for or mitigate barriers through either ad hoc or integrated strategies. Reflection allows campus stakeholders to consider how organizational culture, structures, and resources may or may not need to transform to improve their capacity to become more student-ready and equitable.

When campus leaders, faculty, staff, and students engage in thoughtful, recurring reflection on student data and current institutional practices through the lens of students' experiences, they can identify opportunities to disrupt and improve overall operations, enabling student-centered and asset-based transformation.

The Opportunity

Most of the systems and conditions in higher education hinder equitable student success outcomes. Reflection is a powerful accountability practice that can change this, particularly when paired with data. Reflective practice can lead to collaborative problem-solving, enabling individuals, units, and departments to: examine organizational structures and policies; identify and address barriers; implement changes; track the progress of student success efforts and equitable transformation; and reinforce and hold one another accountable for shared goals and processes for equitable student success.



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 CAN REFLECTION FUEL ACTION?

Reflection can take many different forms. Through the lens of what you control as an institution, including an examination of your role—individually and collectively—in the problems you identify from the practice of reflection, the following framework can help the reflection process effectively fuel equity-focused institutional transformation:

1. **Identify** an issue observed in the student experience. Consider all potential structural and systemic challenges.
2. **Assess** how institutional policies and practices create and/or contribute to this issue, using a mix of qualitative and quantitative data such as focus groups, stakeholder surveys, or disaggregated student outcome data.
3. **Focus** these observations to a set of actions and activities that may alleviate or eliminate this issue and improve the student experience.

WHO CONTRIBUTES TO REFLECTION?

Campus leaders, faculty, staff, and students can engage in individual and collective reflection at all levels. Often informed by data and facilitated by a mid-level leader, effective reflection on student success results from a process that is encouraged by leadership, includes cross-functional teams, and takes diverse student voices into account, to get a complete picture of the full student experience, both lived and academic.

WHAT ARE SOME BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE REFLECTION?

Some common barriers include:

- Existing reflective processes, such as accreditation or program reviews, are often procedural, narrow in scope, exclusive by design, and do not consider the entire student experience.
- Effective reflection requires multiple data sources and types (a mix of quantitative and qualitative) related to the student experience, and should be framed through an equity lens. However, campus units often have limited access to comprehensive, student-level data to inform decision-making.
- There can be a lack of an inclusive and/or trusting space or culture that is conducive to honest reflection, particularly around equity.

THE IMPORTANCE OF REFLECTION

Reflection is an essential part of equity-focused institutional transformation. Reflection enables institutional leaders to understand when, where, and how to implement and integrate student success transformations. Although student-centered transformation looks different across institutions, a set of similar principles exists with respect to reflection as a practice for equitable change. These principles include:

- Reflection is fundamentally about assessing one's own practice as well as the institution's practices, policies, structures, processes, culture, etc., from a critical perspective in order to better serve the most marginalized student populations.
- Reflection is effective when it's data-informed, routine, and inclusive of a variety of cross-functional stakeholders, including students.
- Different intentions for reflection can guide various stages of the transformation journey, from reflecting on the problem being solved to reflecting on the change process itself.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR TRANSFORMATIVE REFLECTION

No single strategy or form of reflection directly leads to equitable transformation. Rather, a set of considerations and conditions is important to helping campus leaders shape and frame reflective practice, which can lead to more equitable transformation efforts and student outcomes. Below are some considerations, which are not exhaustive but are observed trends from work at the Frontier Set sites.

1. **Make it Student-Centered**

The student experience can vary for different student groups. In order to reflect more equitably, start with listening and then critically thinking about the student experience from the perspective of diverse student groups, and whether students' experiences are reflected in the institution's major practices, policies, and routines, such as the strategic plan, mission, and targets/key performance indicators.

2. **Consider Power and Privilege**

In identifying which offices and individual roles are involved in the reflection process,

consider how power and privilege dynamics contribute to the process itself. What are the historical elements of participation? How do positions with more authority help or hurt the participation of others in conversations related to the student experience? Who is traditionally included at the decision-making table and why? How do leaders with access to influence and resources support the inclusion of marginalized student voices and their experiences? Reflection opportunities can enhance transparency, trust, and vulnerability.

3. **Focus on Language**

Pay particular attention to what assumptions or stereotypes exist in the language used as you reflect on institutional practices and policies. Does this language exclude specific groups of students? How does the institution's history and "tradition" show up in the conversations? What about this history has been harmful and/or not accounted for in the institution's present context?



CONSIDERATIONS FOR EFFECTIVE REFLECTION ON STUDENT SUCCESS AND EQUITABLE TRANSFORMATION

Develop an Equity Mindset

- Be conscious of and explicitly name the inequities you're focusing on. For example, awareness of racialized inequities means observing and questioning patterns of inequalities in the context of racial discrimination and exclusion.
- Avoid deficit-based thinking—students are not the problem. What role does the institution (individuals, offices, units, policies, procedures) play in creating barriers for students?
- Embrace a solutions orientation. Students can be the best source of direct information on how to address barriers. What role does the institution play in creating opportunities for students to assist in solution creation?
- To the extent possible, examine barriers and solutions that are rooted in history and tradition, and act to remove barriers and implement solutions.

Examine Data

- Disaggregate student success outcome data and apply an intersectional lens to identify and discuss patterns and trends specific to different student groups.
- Use qualitative data to ask deeper, more explanatory questions about observed outcomes, to fully understand students' lived experiences.
- Create, maintain, and use data dashboards during the reflection process.
- Embed experts from the institutional research/effectiveness office to support informed inquiry, discussion, and a solutions orientation.
- Engage other campus leaders, through channels such as faculty and staff onboarding, professional development, student advising, and the campus life/residential program.

Align to Existing, Recurring Processes or Frameworks

- Intentionally integrate reflection across processes for institutional transformation, leadership, and student success initiatives, from start to finish.
- Regularly examine student-level data and feedback during senior leadership/cabinet meetings, department meetings, strategic planning, and quality enhancement planning.
- Align student success changes and recommendations for change with the institution's strategic plan, and set equitable goals accordingly.
- Orient reflection around field-facing student success frameworks.

Engage a Range of Perspectives to Reflect On

- Create cross-functional groups such as task forces, committees, or teams to focus on the student experience and student success.
- Incentivize reflection by aligning or reallocating resources to encourage reflective practices that lead to action.
- Identify opportunities to embed and capture student voices, either by direct student participation in the reflection and decision-making process or through other means such as surveys, focus groups, or evaluations.



Our transformational efforts are centered on equity, and teaching and learning. Both were catalyzed by a close examination of student success outcomes at DCCC. Like prior efforts, sharing of data created the momentum and urgency for action."

**DAVIDSON-DAVIE
COMMUNITY COLLEGE**



Key groups meet on a regular basis to disseminate information to stakeholders and thus ensure continuous engagement on university priorities... The Enrollment Management Council meets weekly to discuss ongoing strategies focused on meeting annual enrollment targets, IDP, retention strategies, etc."

**DELAWARE STATE
UNIVERSITY**

PUTTING REFLECTION INTO PRACTICE

Frontier Set sites have used many tools to help build effective reflection into their equity-based transformation. Two tools that many have found useful are:

- **Process Mapping:** Based on CQI methodology, this approach is often used to reflect on institutional processes and identify barriers that impact the student experience, especially for students of color. In reflecting on current student outcomes concerning the associated activities, steps, and decisions around a given process, many institutions can reimagine future, improved processes that can support increased student access and success.
- **Design Thinking:** Applying human-centered design (an approach to problem-solving that starts with people and ends with innovative solutions that are tailor-made to suit their needs) allows institutions to focus on their “end users”—students. For some Frontier Set institutions, using human-centered design enables them to take an inherently more cross-disciplinary approach to designing for and with students, and to center the voices of diverse students at the beginning.



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.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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

- How am I reflecting on my own identity as I lead and participate in reflective practices that lead to equitable student success outcomes?
- What existing reflective practices are we already using at my institution? Are there opportunities to enhance those existing practices to better drive transformative change given the strategies shared in this PDF?
- How do existing reflection opportunities encourage transparency, trust, and vulnerability on campus? How might I enhance these opportunities to promote more transparency, trust, and vulnerability?
- How can I frame challenges at my institution with an equity-based mindset? How does this differ from how challenges have been discussed or considered in the past?
- What qualitative or quantitative data are used currently at my institution to help inform reflection? Can these data be disaggregated? Are there additional data or resources that could be used or developed to help inform transformative reflection?
- What processes or frameworks are already in place that would benefit from adding reflective practice?
- Who else should I be working with as I undertake my own reflective process? What data should inform this reflection?
- What additional trainings, integration, or other activities would further normalize reflective practices on campus?

