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Middle Leaders in the Design and Development of Guided Pathways

Leading from the Middle 2018

Executive Summary

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Introduction

The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (RP Group) launched Leading from the Middle (LFM) in 2013 to support the development of middle leaders across the California Community Colleges. The term middle leader has typically been used to describe middle managers in business or principals and district leaders in K-12 schools. Community colleges have also used the term to designate positions, such as dean, that have formal leadership responsibilities, but are not part of executive leadership. However, a more inclusive definition of middle leadership has emerged. Faculty, administrators, and classified professionals across all levels of the institution have taken on leadership responsibilities and acted to make their colleges more effective and more equitable.

LFM 2018 focused on development of Guided Pathways and the roles that middle leaders can play in institutional change. As colleges reimagine the student experience, middle leaders are critical agents in the process of institutional change.

In 2018, funding from the California Community College Chancellor's Office subsidized two LFM academies. One academy served 13 Central Valley colleges to build on regional connections. Fifteen colleges from across the state participated in the second academy. Together the two academies served 140 educators.

LFM Program Design

The LFM Academy has two interconnected components:

- Three face-to-face convenings over a calendar year (February, June, and October)
- Coaching by a former LFM participant during and between convenings

The LFM curriculum covers planning and communication tools, the change process, and challenges of leadership. This curriculum is presented through hands-on, project-based pedagogy. In prior years, college teams came to their academy experience with a proposed campus project. Planning and implementing the project gave each campus team the opportunity to apply the LFM strategies and tools at their college. Each year activities are adapted to address current conditions; this year's activities focsues on aspects of Guided Pathways. [for more description of LFM coaching, see pages 8-9)

LFM Academy 2018: Middle Leaders in the Design and Development of Guided Pathways

To be prepared for the transformational change required by Guided Pathways, middle leaders need a broad array of planning and communication tools, skills, strategies, and perspectives.

Connections between LFM Teams and Campus Guided Pathways Leadership

Although there was a common focus on Guided Pathways, LFM teams entered the 2018 Academy with varying levels of understanding the connection between LFM participation and the Guided Pathways work at their college. After some initial confusion about how the LFM Academy related to other Guided Pathways workshops in the state, LFM facilitators clarified that the academy experience offered participants an opportunity to develop leadership skills that they could apply in the context of institutional change, specifically to Guided Pathways.

Because many of the LFM teams were part of their broader college Guided Pathways leadership teams, they were able to bring LFM activities directly to their campus planning process. LFM team members described structural and strategic connections, including the following:

> *The LFM team is the Guided Pathways Design Team; all LFM team members are on the Guided Pathways Steering Committee. Several LFM team members are serving as workgroup leads.*

> *Our team has been crucial to the development of Guided Pathways on our campus because every LFM member is also a member of our GP Steering Committee. In many ways the work we do at LFM informs the work we do on Guided Pathways.*

Application of LFM Strategies and Tools to Guided Pathways Design and Development

The sense of immediacy about Guided Pathways meant that participants could see potential applications of LFM tools, activities, and strategies. For example, an activity conducted during the first convening gave each team the opportunity to articulate the expectations of team participation. Participants directly translated this norming process to their campus Guided Pathways committees:

> *We shared the "developing norms" tool with our guided pathways inquiry teams over the summer, and plan to bring the consultancy protocol and listening activity to our guided pathways steering committee in November.*

Participants also indicated that planning tools, particularly the logic model, were instrumental in creating campus-wide plans, explaining:

> *Our team used the logic model and concept map we developed during the first convening to share information with campus colleagues. These were very helpful in allowing people to understand the big picture of GP and shaping the structure of the year 1 work plan.*

> The logic model was the foundation of our GP plan. We used logic models again at a retreat to begin the work of the design teams.

The LFM team leads the core planning of the GP activities on campus. We had our first committee planning retreat where we had each work group produced a logic model for their inquiry projects.

Participants recognized that communication was a vital component of building a network of engagement across the campus. Participants shared ways that they applied LFM tools to their campus-wide communication:

Our work at the first LFM meeting heavily informed the work plan, which was essentially put together by our team. We also became the initial "face" of GP, so people would come to us with questions. We have used a lot of the philosophical conversations from LFM to inform our work (e.g., engaging with resistance). We used logic models during our GP committee retreat, and used all three products from the first retreat to share our intentions for the work plan with the rest of the campus.

College Progress on Guided Pathways

Although the LFM Academy had a common focus on Guided Pathways, colleges were in different places in the design process when they started the year. A few colleges were part of the national American Association of Community Colleges Pathways Project or the California Guided Pathways Project and were further along in the process. Most other colleges were in early stages of inquiry. This variance provided an opportunity for college teams to learn from each other. At the end of the year, each college reported making progress from wherever they had entered.

Colleges in the early stages of adoption reported using LFM to create plans to inform and engage colleagues, sharing:

We used our LFM group to plan the college-wide publicity, develop trainings, and oversee the work for writing the college's meta-majors, including the 30 recommended units. There was a lot more involved in this, and LFM helped us concentrate on all of the not-so-little details. We actually accomplished this goal and had moved on to doing this with program mapping by session 3!

Our larger GPDT has divided itself into six workgroups, aligned with the five-year work plan. Our LFM team has brought back information and tools to help these groups move forward. As a result of LFM, we decided to table the discussion of meta-majors and instead start with program mapping.

The handful of colleges where Guided Pathways was already in progress before this year used the time to go deeper into details and continue advancing their work, as one team described:

At [our college], we have met some major milestones in our Guided Pathways work, however, we are currently trying to drill down and accomplish more fine-tuning. Our team project was creating a Strategic Plan for Professional Development aligned with Guided Pathways. We have done that, and now there is momentum in bring this plan

through our shared governance processes and using it to apply for a CCC Innovation grant.

Anticipated Challenges and Opportunities in the Coming Year

LFM does not explicitly define strategic thinking. However, through hands-on activities and discussions with colleagues from other colleges, participants gained a broader view of Guided Pathways across the state. This gave participants the capacity to see their own work in a broader perspective, which in turn helped them identify upcoming challenges. In the final survey, when LFM participants identified challenges and opportunities for the coming year, common concerns emerged.

One challenge centered on broadening engagement on campus. Participants had taken to heart the message that Guided Pathways would require active participation across the campus community. Participants anticipated some pushback from various stakeholders; in particular, faculty engagement was frequently named as a challenge, as one participant noted:

> *We will need to recruit more individuals to leadership. We will have some challenges with faculty who believe we might be diluting our rigor.*

Participants also identified implementation issues as potential challenges; for example, one participant highlighted a shared concern that the transition from discussion to action would be a challenge that also embodied an opportunity, stating:

> *The biggest challenge is, of course, moving from inquiry to implementation phases. We've done a great deal of work on recruitment and getting campus "buy-in," so it's time to begin implementation starting with some of the infrastructure we already have in place.*

Another issue participants highlighted focused on the changes in funding to support student success. Funding from prior initiatives has been aggregated into a single source as Student Equity and Achievement (SEA). Two participants anticipated that this change in funding may be a challenge at their college:

> *A challenge I anticipate is deciding how SEA funds will be used to support Guided Pathways work. People involved in equity need to be in those conversations, and we need to ensure that equity is aligned with Guided Pathways.*

> *As we develop new structures and processes, we will need to clearly communicate how these changes are going to be funded. The SEA funds are specifically for that, but there are some on our campus who are NOT* going to like that.

Participants also shared concerns about governance issues and the absence of clear and consistent college leadership—explaining:

> *Lack of vision and leadership. Initiative fatigue. A desire from members of the administration to confound the Guided Pathways work with things like accreditation, outcomes assessment, program review, etc.*
>
> *We have a challenge in that the administration needs to come on fully and not just treat this as another thing to do with budget ramifications.*

[Challenges?] Lack of vision and leadership. Initiative fatigue. A desire from members of the administration to confound the Guided Pathways work with things like accreditation, outcomes assessment, program review, etc.

Along with challenges, participants identified opportunities they foresee in the coming year. Examples included collaborating, crossing silos, and building on existing work:

> *Put our heads down and get the work done. Join forces (for the first time) between student services and instruction.*
>
> *We are working to combining our ATD, SSSP, Equity, and GP so that we are not all duplicating efforts.*

Middle Leadership Identity in Guided Pathways

From the onset of LFM, program initiators understood that developing identity as a leader was a critical outcome of academy participation. Observations and evaluations have shown that participants' sense of leadership grows out of action and experience. As middle leaders gain knowledge and apply skills and strategies, their identity and confidence as a leader grows.

Individual Leadership

The reflective comments about leadership identity at the end of the 2018 Academies mirror comments from prior years; participants described growth in skills and confidence. When asked what they had learned about leadership and about themselves as leaders, participants articulated their awareness:

> *Before, I didn't really view myself as a leader because I'm new to full time faculty. But now I see that I am, by default, in a leadership role and I just need to make my voice heard. I learned about how values relate to building coalitions.*

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My involvement in LFM made me see how I have come a long way not just in my eleven years as a full-time instructor but even in just the past five years. …It is clear that leadership is a trait that can be possessed by virtually anyone yet is taken up by very few.

As noted above, LFM teams are part of their broader college Guided Pathways leadership teams. One leader reflected on how the LFM experience gave encouragement to actively take on a leadership role in Guided Pathways, saying:

I think the biggest takeaway for me in regards to leadership is that leadership takes on many different forms and that it doesn't necessarily come from the top. Leaders can step forward and step back allowing others to take on leadership. It was through LFM that I even considered stepping up and applying as one of our GP faculty leads. It was also through our LFM team that I received encouragement to even apply for the position.

Collective Leadership

In former reports, LFM described the many ways that middle leadership is collaborative and collective. Middle leaders need colleagues and coalitions to address issues that are larger then than their individual domains, departments, or offices, particularly in the context of Guided Pathways development, which calls for a more integrated and coherent approach to the student experience. One participant noted:

For me, I have used my sense developed at LFM of the need for communal decision-making processes. I am still new in my career and so don't have much of an institutional voice at the moment, but in anticipation of becoming more of a leader, I think I've learned the power and, more significantly, the importance of bringing people together and making decisions in an environment in which multiple stakeholders are consulted and considered.

LFM provides participants the opportunity to not only to build relationships with colleagues at their college, but also to develop an extended network with colleagues working on other campuses. As a participant noted:

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Perspectives on LFM Coaching

Participants and coaches offered insights that reflect the value of embedding coaches with colleges teams during and between convenings.

Participants' Perspectives

Participants' responses indicate that the teams valued the support and encouragement that coaches give them individually and as a team. Coaches were a source of feedback, questions, and resources. Participants offered their appreciation of the varied ways LFM coaches supported their teams:

> *[Coach's] listening skills are amazing and her feedback is even greater.*
>
> *[We] regularly channel her – to remind us that we don't need to do all of the work and that we should consider how we might apply the tools and strategies that we have learned at the LFM convenings.*
>
> *Generally, [Coach's] background as a researcher has been helpful and his enthusiasm has fueled our motivation.*

[We] regularly channel [our coach] – to remind us that we don't need to do all of the work and that we should consider how we might apply the tools and strategies that we have learned at the LFM convenings.

Participants also described how their coach's outside perspective offered different insights into their situation. Several participants noted:

> *[Coach's] presence was great! When she attended our leadership meetings she could offer input as an "objective observer" which I think was really helpful.*
>
> *Having the outside perspective to bounce things off was really helpful and kept us from getting stuck too long on any one issue.*

Coaches' Perspectives

Although coaches previously had been participants in LFM, they reported that being a coach was a different experience. Coaches described the ways they shaped their coaching style in response to their team's needs, including:

> *First, I expected as a coach that I would be directive. But the team wanted support, not direction. I listened, and got to know them. As I developed into the role, I found ways to interject occasionally.*
>
> *As coach, my job is to affirm their abilities and tell them, "You guys are leaders."*

Coaches also shared what they gained from the experience, learning about the team, about the change process, and about themselves. In fact, several coaches relayed that they felt they gained more than they offered others. Three coaches described their personal growth:

I gained a lot, I found out a lot about how I react in life and in my job. My instincts around education are good. This was a chance to marry action and curriculum, to be in the situation and rely on curriculum and inquiry.

I came with a jaded view as an administrator. The team was so positive, so energetic. They reminded me of me in the day.

I went in as a learner and learned hands-on. They shaped me [as a coach]. Coaching is listening. By the second convening, they were really working, using tools and laughing. They loosened up.

I went in as a learner and learned hands-on. They shaped me [as a coach].

Conclusion

This internal evaluation report is based on responses from participants from the 28 colleges that participated in the two LFM 2018 academies. The report provides insights into both the development of middle leaders and the possible roles of middle leaders in the design of Guided Pathways.

Developing Guided Pathways requires leadership at all levels of the college, spanning executive and middle leadership. The responses in this report illustrate multiple ways that middle leaders can be central to the Guided Pathways design process. Almost all of the LFM teams were part of their college-wide Guided Pathways design teams and were able to directly apply planning tools and strategies. In addition, several LFM participants took on roles such as faculty Guided Pathways coordinator or design team lead.

From the first convening, participants could see the usefulness of the LFM planning and communication tools presented to their Guided Pathways design work, including the norming process, logic models, and the participatory pedagogy. The hands-on activities gave college team members a chance to practice, prepare, and plan how to apply those same activities directly to their college Guided Pathways planning process.

The feedback from participants underscores the importance of middle leaders as change agents in the current movement towards institutional transformation and the role LFM can play in equipping middle leadership with the knowledge, skills, confidence, and vision required for Guided Pathways reform. Looking to the experiences of colleges even a step or two ahead in the Guided Pathways process, it is becoming evident that not only will middle leaders will play essential roles in changing their institutions, they will also be vital in sustaining the change, keeping the focus on the student experience, and maintaining a sense of continued improvement and innovation.

The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges

The RP Group strengthens the ability of California community colleges to discover and undertake high-quality research, planning, and assessments that improve evidence-based decision-making, institutional effectiveness, and success for all students.

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