

the RP group

Research • Planning • Professional Development
for California Community Colleges

Reflections from the Leading from the Middle Academy 2017

Executive Summary

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Introduction

The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (RP Group) launched Leading from the Middle (LFM) Academy in 2013 to support the development of middle leaders across California Community Colleges (CCCs). This charge entails providing ongoing professional learning opportunities for deans and department chairs, as well as for educators who may serve as coordinators or directors for campus programs. LFM believes that middle leaders are well positioned to be change agents and move their colleges in ways that advance student success and equitable outcomes.

Since LFM's inception, more than 400 CCC educators have participated in LFM activities, including the yearlong academy and customized programs for individual colleges and consortia. After each annual Academy, LFM produces an internal report capturing what participants share about their learning from the experience. The LFM leadership group also uses the opportunity to reflect on its own learning about how to best support development of middle leaders. This support for middle leaders has become even more important as colleges across the system are preparing for guided pathways. The guided pathways model requires rethinking campus policies, procedures, and practices through cross-functional inquiry and inclusive decision-making. Middle leaders will be critical agents in this change process.

LFM Program Background and Design

The LFM Academy design reflects current literature on effective professional development and is experiential, undertaken collaboratively with colleagues, and is directly related to practice. The core LFM curriculum covers tools for planning and communication, aspects of the change process, as well as challenges of leadership.

The LFM Academy invites colleges to send teams that draw from various functions of the institution and include current and emerging leaders. Each team comes to LFM with a proposed campus project. Collaboratively planning and implementing the project gives teams the context to apply the LFM curriculum and to experience leadership in practice. The professional learning setting also connects participants with peers from other colleges across the state, providing a broader context to understand their work.

LFM Outcomes

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT:

1. Develop leadership identity
2. Develop strategies to sustain and support leadership development

TEAM COLLABORATION AND LEADERSHIP:

3. Create and sustain professional relationships in which peers share ideas and strategize together

LEADERSHIP IN THE CONTEXT OF A COLLEGE INITIATIVE:

4. Engage with existing literature
5. Apply research and evidence to make informed decisions that advance institutional change efforts
6. Strengthen capacity to prioritize and lead departmental, institutional, and other changes through the process of evidence-based inquiry

Programmatic Changes in 2017

In 2017, LFM received a grant from the California Community College Chancellor's Office (CCCCO) Office of Institutional Effectiveness. This funding subsidized college participation by decreasing cost per individual team member. In addition, the grant provided increased staff resources to support coaching and an external evaluation by the Education Insights Center (Ed Insights) at Sacramento State University. Ed Insights evaluators attended the LFM convenings and followed up with participant surveys.

While Laura Hope began the year as co-director with Bob Gabriner, in summer 2017 she accepted the position as Executive Vice Chancellor for the CCCCO's Educational Services Division. Other individuals from the leadership group took on responsibilities for planning and delivering the October convening as well as filling in on LFM presentations at the Strengthening Student Success Conference.

LFM Academy 2017 Reflections

The reflections associated the LFM outcomes are presented in three clusters: (1) individual leadership, (2) collective leadership, and (3) college transformation. The conclusion highlights potential next steps for the Academy.

Individual Leadership Development

Participant reflections underscore the numerous ways LFM impacts development of leadership identity. Involvement in the LFM Academy allows individuals to feel more aware, more willing, and better prepared to take on the challenges of leadership in college transformation. Their determination to improve their institutions is rooted in a moral purpose and passion for the ways that their institutions can more effectively and more equitably educate students.

In response to a question about what they learned about themselves as leaders, participants did not express a simple view of leadership; one person summed it up, stating, "Leadership is not a role, it is a complex activity." Another participant shared:

> *Leadership involves calculated risk, coherence, collective inquiry, belief, and courage. I have learned that I am going to fail, I am going to make mistakes, and I will feel discouraged; however, when these things happen, I have learned that these setbacks are opportunities for learning, developing, and growing as a professional.*

Resistance is a particularly popular topic in the LFM curriculum. Many participants involved in change initiatives on their campuses come to LFM having encountered opposition in one form or another. The LFM activity titled "engaging resistance" focuses on employing empathy and understanding rather than battling different points of view. Participants said that they came to anticipate and appreciate resistance; in the words of a middle leader:

One thing that really resonated with me from LFM was preparing for and working through resistance. I had always assumed that to persevere in higher education, you just needed "thick skin" and "grit." However, after attending LFMA #2, I learned that I can be proactive in addressing resistance by empathizing with my campus partners.

In describing their growing understanding of middle leadership, participants came to see that there are multiple ways to be a leader as well as different ways to be themselves in a leadership role. As one participant stated:

The "strong back, soft front" metaphor is really powerful for leadership. I had several people tell me that they think of me as fitting this description, which, it's hard to put into words how good this makes me feel. I think I'm a very persistent person, but sometimes it's important to back off and let someone else do the leading. But, the learning I've had gives me the confidence that my style is a good leadership style, even though I may not appear to be the typically "extroverted," "on the stage" type of leader.

COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP

Collaboration is an inherent characteristic of middle leadership. Middle leaders take on problems that are bigger than one person and bigger than one program or department. Development of participants' ability to collaborate effectively is a central part of the LFM experience.

Coming with a team of colleagues, participants recognized that they are not alone on their campus. In describing their teams, participants indicated that they recognized the positive impact that shared values, trust, and effort can have at their college. In the words of a participant:

We can accomplish so much more by working together. We also have been able to create trust and the open atmosphere where we can work through differences in perspective. We are so much stronger and can accomplish so much more as a group than we ever could as individuals.

In the LFM Academy, participants interact with colleagues from colleges across the state. These interactions help participants recognize that they are not alone in their commitment to improve student success and equity. Hearing stories about other colleges further reassured participants that they are not alone; other institutions and educators grapple with the similar challenges. One educator observed,

It's been very helpful to hear that other colleges around CA have similar problems as us, and amazing to meet all these passionate educators.

INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION

The projects conducted by college teams as part of the Academy give participants the opportunity to better understand the interrelationship of leadership development and college transformation.

Fullan's leadership framework from *Leading in a Culture of Change* (2001)[1] has been a key resource since LFM's inception. Fullan's framework includes five facets of leadership. Three of theses characteristics—moral purpose, relationship building, and knowledge creation—commonly appear in other definitions of leadership. However, two additional facets—coherence making and understanding change—are not as often explicitly named and described as part of other leadership frameworks. These two dimensions are particularly relevant to middle leadership at community colleges. The projects carried out by college teams allow participants to deepen their familiarity with these two critical leadership concepts.

Below, we describe the projects undertaken by the college teams; then, we explore participants' reflections on coherence making (LFM 2017's theme) and understanding change, through the lens of their campus project.

COLLEGE PROJECTS

The LFM 2017 college team projects divided roughly into three overlapping categories: college-wide initiatives, student-centered supports, and basic skills.

COLLEGE-WIDE INITIATIVES:

Three colleges came to LFM intending to work on campus-wide programs that will subsequently contribute to guided pathways.

Fresno City College, which has regularly sent teams to the LFM Academy, came to prepare for guided pathways on its campus. At the final convening, the team reported, "Our group on campus has grown from six to 21. Though it was easier to agree at six, we now touch more parts of campus."

Chaffey College came to LFM with the goal of bringing Reading Apprenticeship (RA) into their campus Core Competencies, which link course and program level student learning outcomes to the overall institutional mission. Over the year, the college held more RA trainings; for the coming year, the team is looking for ways to embed RA in guided pathways and the campus STEM Academy.

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[1] Fullan, M. (2001). *Leading in a culture of change.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

Santa Barbara City College (SBCC) came to address the needs of part-time students. At the first convening, the team shared data showing that 60-70% of SBCC students were part-time, and the college maintains few programs designed specifically for them. At the final convening, the team reported that SBCC now has "a new way of describing part-time students as *flex students*." The campus secured a five-year Title V grant so SBCC will be able to explore, "how to integrate flex student in guided pathways."

STUDENT-CENTERED SUPPORT:

Four colleges worked on student-centered support projects.

Merced College enrolled in LFM for a second year, with two returning and three new team members, representing both the central campus and outreach centers. The Merced team extended work from the prior year, continuing development of an online map for the college website designed to direct students to resources available to support their educational journey.

Crafton Hills College, another regular LFM participant, worked to get space and equipment to establish an assistive technology center on campus.

Monterey Bay College prepared to launch a First Year Experience program, starting with a summer bridge. They are working on the ongoing challenge of data collection and analysis.

Golden West College conducted six focus groups to understand the student experience, in an effort to inform their work to develop a one-stop student support center.

BASIC SKILLS:

Four colleges developed projects related to basic skills.

City College of San Francisco piloted short, non-credit refresher workshops in math and English for specific student groups (recent high school grads or returning adult students) to improve placement and shorten students' time to completion.

San Diego Mesa College used the resources of its Basic Skills Transformation Grant to support faculty going into the institution's non-credit Continuing Education classrooms to give students a sense of college content. In the coming year they plan to work with the Outreach Office to encourage college enrollment of Continuing Ed students.

Saddleback College focused on reworking and integrating its basic skills content as part of their campus Completion, Retention, and Persistence Task Force.

Yuba College spent the year planning a support lab for developmental math courses. The team had some success with an increase in use of tutoring, however its initial plans were altered by the passage of Assembly Bill (AB) 705.

COHERENCE MAKING

LFM designated institutional coherence as the theme for the 2017 Academy, given recent movement to create more continuity across the CCC system's student success and institutional effectiveness efforts. During the last year, the CCCCO recognized commonalities across BSI, SSSP, and SEP, and called for the consolidation of their respective plans into one integrated plan. The CCCCO's new strategic vision,[2] with ambitious goals to increase student progress, degree completion, and transfer as well as reduce equity gaps across those measures, provides another set of cardinal directions for colleges to apply in their coherence making.

Fullan (2001)[3] defines coherence as the shared depth of understanding about the nature of the work. More recently, Fullan (2016)[4] ascribes initiative overload and fragmentation as barriers to bringing about sustainable change in K-12 schools. Fullan metaphorically likens schools with numerous programs and initiatives to Christmas trees, with too many glittery things strewn like lights and ornaments across the institution.

This language of initiative overload is familiar to the community colleges. Over the last 10 years, CCCs have been showered with a growing number of mandates and programs, funded by the state legislature, federal grants, or philanthropic investments. Although student success has been the overall goal of all such efforts, each initiative has had a different focus and format. As a result, campuses have fielded a growing number of programs that have been disconnected, disjointed, and (at times) duplicative and that fall short of their intended goal of increasing student success at scale.

During the first LFM convening, college teams counted the number of initiatives on their campuses. Most identified eight to 10 major initiatives, although one college counted as many as 35 initiatives. After the chance to hear about initiatives at other colleges, most teams upped their estimates, with the majority counting more than 10 initiatives across campus, and three colleges identifying more than 25 efforts. Participants reported having seen colleagues start initiatives with best intentions, without recognizing that other related efforts were already happening on campus. Middle leaders came to recognize opportunities to build coherence and connection across programs with related outcomes.

UNDERSTANDING CHANGE

At the end of the Academy, participants reported developing a deeper understanding of the messiness, complexity, and timeframe for change to take place. One participant summarized this, "Change and transformation take time, persistence, patience, courage, and hard work."

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[2] California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office. (2017). *Vision for Success: Strengthening the California Community Colleges to Meet California's Needs.*

[3] Fullan, M. (2001). *Leading in a culture of change.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

[4] Fullan, M. & Quinn, J. (2016). *Coherence: The right drivers for schools, districts, and systems.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press and Ontario Principals' Council

As participants become more confident as leaders, they became more intentional in their campus efforts. Engaging stakeholders across the institution became an important strategy for change, as one participant said,

> *Buy-in from so many areas is crucial along with communication so that individuals in many areas can be a part of the transformation. I'm much more aware of the repercussions of decisions that go beyond my immediate scope.*

Conclusion

At the end of the fifth LFM Academy, the LFM leadership group continues to be convinced of and committed to the value of developing a broad cohort of middle leaders within individual colleges and across the system.

Participant feedback informs and confirms the ongoing work of the Leading from the Middle Academy. When asked how they would describe their LFM experience to a colleague, participants reflected on the impact of the time away from campus, the instructional approach, the community, and the coaching on their own leadership identity and capacity. Their descriptions reflect the LFM outcomes. In the words of two participants:

> *LFM has enabled me to be a part of a conversation with other colleagues in structured ways. This has been important to an understanding of building coherence and the practical next steps of our project—both pedagogy and specific applications have enhanced the experience.*

> *LFM allows community college members, from various backgrounds and levels of (formal) expertise, to explore topics of leadership and how to become (better) change agents. It allows members to reflect on campus culture in a natural/organic manner. Oftentimes, folks feel jaded and disempowered. LFM helps mobilize and create more conscious and aware change makers.*

Future Directions for LFM

LFM 2018 will mark the second year of delivering the Academy with CCCCO support, allowing the RP Group to continue subsidizing participation for another year. The resources will also allow LFM to engage more former participants in the leadership group as coaches and facilitators. The LFM Academy 2018 will focus on guided pathways and implementation of AB 705. There will be two LFM Academies, one for Central Valley colleges, since the region will be supported by the Chancellor's Office as a site of experimentation and the place to learn from experience in the field.

LFM will continue to highlight the vital role that middle leaders can play, demonstrating that these important change makers are central to the process of transforming their institutions in ways that support stronger, more equitable student success.

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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