

A New Way

Introducing
Higher
Education to
Professional
Learning
Communities
at Work™

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Introduction

The story of the United States is perhaps most often told as one of success achieved through hard work and education. The twin admonitions to “work hard” and “get a good education” have always formed the foundation of America’s promise of upward mobility. In today’s high-tech and global economy, postsecondary education is perhaps more important than ever. A Federal Reserve Bank of New York study confirms the importance of a college degree, emphasizing that those who fail to complete an undergraduate degree are falling further and further behind in the economic playing field. As Jaison Abel and Richard Deitz (2014), the authors of the study, note, “Average wages for those with a college degree are far greater than average wages for those with only a high school diploma” (p. 2). They conclude that workers with a bachelor’s degree can expect to earn approximately one million dollars more than non-college graduates during their lifetimes, despite rising tuition costs.

Clearly, Americans see a college education as one of the prerequisites for upward mobility. Because it is so important, increasing access to a quality education has been a consistent theme throughout U.S. history. The movement to enhance access to education has progressed from the earliest Latin grammar schools to elementary education for all, to universal secondary education, to the establishment of public land-grant institutions, to the GI Bill, to the formation of the community-college system, to the implementation of the Pell Grant program—to name just a few historic milestones aimed at increasing access to education.

However, better access to postsecondary education does not always correlate with improved student success. Despite efforts to increase the number of students attending U.S. colleges and universities, graduation rates remain stagnant—hovering around 50 percent. Moreover, in spite of significant tuition increases at public colleges and universities, graduation rates have remained largely unchanged, causing many to question whether higher education leaders are truly committed to enhancing student success.

The fact is, university leaders are committed to student success. Most colleges and universities offer at least a few tutoring programs for students who are struggling. And it is not unusual for colleges and universities to provide math labs or reading labs to assist students. One only has to look at the efforts that are made to increase retention rates for student athletes to realize that presidents of institutions of higher education recognize the importance of enhancing student success. The issue is not the need to convince administrators, faculty, and staff of higher education institutions that raising retention and graduation rates is a worthy goal, but rather to develop an effective strategy to give them the means to re-culture their institutions in order to enhance student success. There is good news, however; more is known about how to improve organizations of all types, especially learning organizations, than ever before.

One of the most powerful tools for enhancing student success rates is the professional learning community (PLC) concept. There is virtually unanimous agreement among researchers and practitioners on the power of PLC concepts and practices to improve organizations in which student and adult learning is at the core of enterprise. Professional literature abounds with evidence for the positive effects of embedding PLC concepts and practices, and virtually every major educational organization in the United States, such as the National Education Association, supports their implementation. The PLC concept holds great promise for reshaping how leaders of higher education institutions think, how they work, and more important, how well students succeed.

This book is written as a guide to implement the concepts and practices of professional learning communities in colleges and universities. These concepts and practices are applicable to virtually any organization—especially other learning organizations, such as elementary and secondary schools, but also organizations in a broad range of fields, such as health care, social services, human resource management, and governmental services. The concepts and practices intrinsic to the PLC framework provide a model that is inherently doable, grounded in research-based practices, and requires little, if any, additional resource expenditures.

This book also has special significance for those who prepare teachers to serve in U.S. schools. Of the approximate 120 semester hours that a typical teacher education student will take pursuing an undergraduate degree, only a small portion is taught by college of education faculty. Teacher education students take the vast majority of their classes in other colleges. Prospective teachers are impacted by the instructional modeling they encounter *in all of their coursework combined*; for good or for ill, students training to become teachers learn about their chosen profession from *every* professor in *every* class. In short, institutions of higher education should model the very best practices throughout the university every day, in every classroom, in every office, with every interaction, with every student—but especially with students who will become teachers.

The term *professional learning communities* has become so popular that many people use it in varying ways, for differing purposes, to the point that it's essentially meaningless. Because the term is so widespread, we want to be clear about its meaning in this book; we use the PLC concept and practices based on the work of Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker (1998) in *Professional Learning Communities at Work*, and Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, and Robert Eaker (2008) in *Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at Work*. In subsequent chapters, we use the term *professional learning*

communities sparingly. Instead, we emphasize the concepts and practices reflective of a professional learning community.

In chapter 1, “Enhancing Student Success With the Promise of Professional Learning Communities,” we clarify what PLCs are—and equally important, what they are not—and highlight the potential of the concept and related practices for institutions of higher education seeking to make a significant and systemic impact on student retention and graduation rates.

U.S. higher education institutions—particularly public colleges and universities—are experiencing an avalanche of criticism on a number of fronts. One area of public frustration stems from the fact that although historically there have been significant initiatives aimed at enhancing access to higher education, corollary increases in student completion rates have not matched the increased access. Chapter 2, “The Journey From Student Access to Student Success,” highlights the major efforts and milestones designed to increase student access to higher education, along with a synthesis of the mounting criticisms of higher education, and points to current demands for major changes in the very culture of public higher education institutions—how they perform and how student success rates must improve.

Higher education institutions will need to make a number of structural changes—in terms of roles, responsibilities, policies, and procedures—in order to enhance student success rates. However, structural changes, by themselves, will not be enough. The more difficult challenge facing colleges and universities is making the requisite cultural changes in the beliefs, values, attitudes, and habits that constitute the norm of university life—literally, how things are done. While there is no one right way to change organizational culture, one indispensable factor is strong, effective, passionate, and persistent leadership. Therefore chapter 3, “Leading Cultural Change,” focuses on the actions leaders can take to successfully guide

structural and cultural changes within their institutions and enhance student success.

While it is essential that leaders work together to develop and communicate a clear and compelling purpose, as well as a vision of what they seek to achieve, the engine that drives cultural change in organizations is a set of collaboratively developed, clearly articulated, and constantly monitored commitments. In chapter 4, “Enhancing Student Success Through a Commitments-Driven University,” we describe how leaders go beyond discussions about “what we believe” to “what we are prepared to do” in order to be more successful with more students.

Collaborative teams are the driving force of successful organizations in the 21st century. Collaborative teaming has become the norm in virtually every major organization throughout the world. Yet many—if not most—colleges and universities still cling to a culture of professional isolation. Chapter 5, “Capturing the Power of Collaborative Teaming,” not only highlights the power of collaborative teaming but also describes how leaders can impact what teams actually do, day in and day out, in order to positively influence student retention and graduation rates.

College and university administrators, faculty, and staff must undertake specific actions to enhance student success, but it is equally important that leaders see the big picture—that they have the ability to connect the dots. Unless they can envision improvement through an overarching conceptual framework, efforts to raise student retention and success rates will appear to be a series of disconnected initiatives or unrelated events. Chapter 6, “Enhancing Student Success in a Culture of Continuous Improvement,” describes how leaders can implement a data-based, collaborative approach that serves as a way of thinking about improving student success throughout the university environment.

Chapter 7, “Bridging the Reality-Rhetoric Gap: Helping More Students Succeed—As If We Really Mean It,” addresses the gap between the rhetoric of supporting student success and the stark reality of retention and graduation data. And chapter 8, “Improving Student Retention and Graduation Rates: The Undergraduate Experience,” describes successful best practices that a number of institutions are implementing to improve student success.

Implementing PLC concepts and practices, if done effectively and with fidelity, can positively impact student success. However, re-culturing any organization, particularly institutions of higher education, is a complex, difficult, and incremental undertaking. Chapter 9, “Overcoming Barriers: Roadblocks, Detours, and Occasional Breakdowns,” addresses the potential barriers that college and university leaders are likely to face as they engage in the challenging work of culture change—and offers suggestions for overcoming them.

Organizational culture can be understood, at least in part, through the stories its participants tell. The epilogue contains the story of Ray Kuntz and his calculus professor, Al Murray. His narrative starkly contrasts with the rather tired and demeaning one that often describes (astonishingly, sometimes with pride!) one’s higher education experience: “Our professor told us, ‘Look to your left. Now, look to your right. Only one of you will still be here at the end of the course!’” College and university leaders who successfully embed PLC concepts and practices can write new stories—stories of student success, rather than failure, and stories that motivate and inspire, rather than discourage and humiliate. We know enough about what colleges and universities should do, as well as what they should stop doing. The issue is not a lack of knowledge. The needs of higher education are the same needs of all large enterprises—high-quality leadership, data-based decision making, passion and persistence, and the courage to choose to create a new normal in which stories like Ray Kuntz’s are the rule, rather than the exception.

The future of higher education in the United States is yet to be written. We have to begin making the necessary changes now. We must not wait until the time is right. The time will never be right. We cannot wait until everyone is on board; we will never have everyone on board. Instead, we must turn to the very core of effective leadership and choose to act! To quote Martin Luther King Jr.:

We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In the unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time. We must move past indecision to action. Now, let us begin. The choice is ours, and though we may prefer it otherwise, we must choose in this crucial moment of human history. (as cited in Carson & Shepherd, 2001, p. 163)

Most important, we hope this book will be a helpful tool for those who are committed to helping more students succeed in their college experience. The concepts and practices reflective of a high-performing professional learning community hold tremendous potential for positively changing the culture of institutions of higher education. The issue isn't one of a lack of knowledge, but rather one of leadership and will. The time to act is now. The vision of enhanced student success can become more than a slogan. It can become a reality.

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