

PATHWAYS, PARTNERSHIPS, AND PROGRESS: TRANSFORMING A COMMUNITY COLLEGE

*Lessons from Los Angeles Trade-Technical College
and the University of Southern California's
Center for Urban Education*



Los Angeles Trade-Technical College and the University of Southern California's Center for Urban Education teamed up three years ago with a clear mission: map out and finish the dramatic, campus-wide changes needed to implement pathways. In this case study, faculty, administrators, and Center researchers discuss the work behind campus-wide changes, how the changes help students, and what factors contributed to this unique success.



FOREWORD

Two prevailing beliefs are espoused in higher education. First, higher education is notoriously resistant to change; and second, the chasm between research and practice is inevitable: Researchers do not produce useable knowledge and practitioners do not look to researchers for help. That's why we want to share this story of the partnership between our two organizations: Los Angeles Trade-Technical College (LATTC) and the Center for Urban Education. It is a story about meaningful changes to benefit students and it is a welcome exception and a beacon for the field.

We hope this story will educate, inspire, and motivate others in higher education to learn the methods and tools that support innovation on the ground. We also hope it serves as a model for equity-minded reform. Too often so-called "game changer" reform initiatives are rolled out as if they were color-blind and overlook the possibility that what works at an aggregate level does not automatically produce the same outcomes for African Americans, Latinos, and other marginalized racial and ethnic populations. Too often the imperative for achieving equity gets overlooked in the college completion and reform agenda, which increases the possibility that reforms "succeed" even as inequity endures or worsens. We worry that innovations that are not race-conscious ignore the urgent need to prioritize equity. Our goal in this case study is to help practitioners, scholars, philanthropists, and policymakers realize that racial equity should be a requisite in all reform efforts.

Like many community colleges, LATTC uses guided academic pathways to help students reach their education and career goals. Many institutions that implement pathways, however, jump in and attempt to implement pathways in name only. To improve student outcomes administrators, faculty, and staff must be open to learning and changing their practices. They also must be particularly attentive to racial equity and not assume that guided pathways will magically eliminate racial gaps. Without that level of change, new, system-wide strategies will not go deep enough into classrooms or counselors' offices to help more students succeed.

This is where LATTC is different. Visionary and equity-minded leadership, collaboration, and clear communication have helped LATTC create a culture of student-focused change among staff at all levels. Simply put, LATTC administrators, faculty, and staff have engaged in a long process of learning and self-change made possible by a theory-based inquiry method. This process has led to stronger monitoring of student progress and intervention, easier access to staff and faculty, more personalized counseling, and faculty and staff engagement in rigorous inquiry aided by data and qualitative tools to view their own practices critically and through the lens of racial equity.

While LATTC has more work to do, we have little doubt that they will succeed. Throughout our partnership, LATTC staff has been willing to tolerate ambiguity and suspend standard practices in order to engage in a deliberate inquiry approach to self-change. We are confident that as instructors learn even more about their practice and are willing to experiment and change, outcomes will continue to improve.

We invite you to read LATTC's story and learn more about how CUE is using the methods of equity-minded action research to support practitioners to understand and improve their practices so that more students can excel and reach their goals.

Sincerely,

Estela Mara Bensimon

Director, Center for Urban Education

Professor of Higher Education, University of Southern California

Laurence B. Frank

President, Los Angeles Trade-Technical College

INTRODUCTION

Los Angeles Trade-Technical College (LATTC), located in downtown Los Angeles just a few blocks from the University of Southern California (USC), serves a diverse pool of students, many of whom are the first in their family to pursue higher education. In the fall semester of 2015, 87 percent of LATTC's roughly 15,000 students were African American or Latino/a; more than half were over the age of 25; and a vast majority had attended high school outside of the United States.

In 2010, LATTC faced a number of challenges familiar to many community and technical colleges in California and across the country. Students were increasingly likely to leave LATTC without completing an associate degree, choosing instead to jump straight into the workforce. Liberal arts faculty struggled to get students in the classroom for critical basic skills courses. And financial constraints made the prospect of large-scale campus reform daunting.

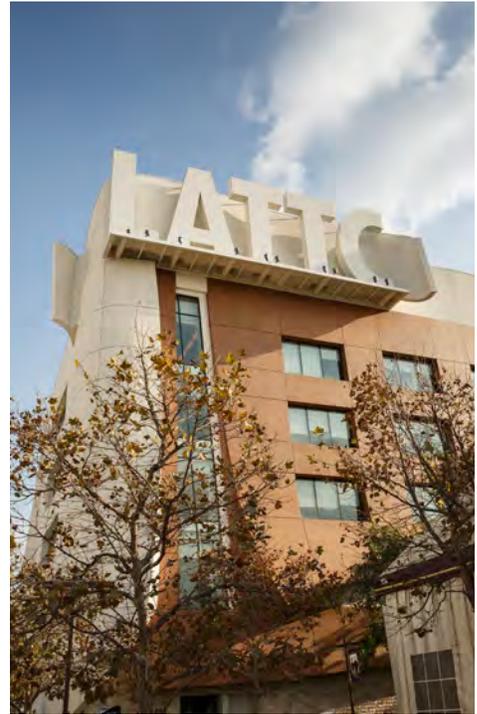
In response, LATTC leaders, faculty, and staff planned and implemented a bold restructuring of their academic model. The Pathways to Academic, Career, and Transfer Success (PACTS) initiative would take an idea germinating on campuses nationwide — creating academic pathways for students in particular fields, including tailored liberal arts classes, built-in student services, and dedicated counselors — and bring it to every LATTC department and degree field. The end goal is simple: a career-technical community college where all students, particularly those from traditionally marginalized groups, can easily plan and complete a certificate or degree.

To rally support for the new initiative, President Larry Frank made an impassioned speech during the college's annual faculty convocation, underscoring the college's persistent problem of low student success rates. He presented data illustrating that among the students who had entered the college in 2008, only 9 percent had completed a degree and just 5 percent had transferred to a four-year institution six years later. "We need to confront this data," he challenged. "We have a choice: We can say this is a problem with students or we can work to bring success to our students."

Implementation has proved to be much more complex. But the first few years of PACTS have had clear benefits: The student experience has been simplified and streamlined, faculty and staff have engaged in rigorous inquiry into their practices, and more LATTC students are completing degree programs.

PACTS implementation began in earnest in 2014, with faculty and administrators in a few select fields volunteering to serve as "incubators" to test the new practices and strategies for improving student outcomes. Once refined, these practices were adapted and rolled out to other pathways.

In 2014, LATTC partnered with USC's Center on Urban Education (CUE) for a developmental evaluation of the program and its implementation, supported by the Ford Foundation. This would be much more than a traditional

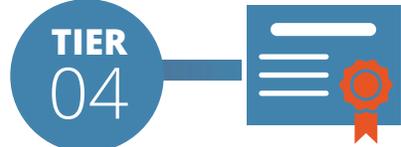


PATHWAYS TO ACADEMIC, CAREER, AND TRANSFER SUCCESS (PACTS)

4. DEGREE, TRANSFER AND/OR CAREER SUCCESS

OUTCOMES

- CTE Certificate of Achievement
- Industry-recognized certification/credential(s)
- 30 units in degree program



TIER 03

- Program-specific knowledge & tools

TIER 02

- Academic readiness in math & English
- Computing, information, & digital literacy
- Career readiness

TIER 01

- Completed PACTS Plan



- Self-efficacy
- Awareness of academic/career options
- Goal setting & planning
- Navigating community & college resources

SKILLS

LOS ANGELES TRADE-TECH
LATTC
A Community College

**CENTER for URBAN
EDUCATION**

research process. CUE stepped beyond the typical “data collection, analysis, and assessment” method of evaluation to incorporate strategies of support aimed directly at on-the-ground implementation. In a very real sense, CUE researchers became part of the team at LATTC while still helping to inform and support PACTS practitioners from a third-party, academic perspective.

Today, LATTC offers pathways in six different fields — Advanced Transportation and Manufacturing; Applied Sciences; Construction, Maintenance and Utilities; Design and Media Arts; Health Sciences; and Liberal Arts — comprising 70 programs of study. The pathways centralize the student experience, with dedicated counselors, support staff, and occupational-focused liberal arts classes, all in the same physical location. There are Pathway Deans, Pathway Chairs, Pathway Navigators, and even pathway-specific financial aid offices. LATTC students can apply, matriculate, get a student ID, attend orientation, see a counselor, take tailored liberal arts courses, and complete a certificate/degree or become transfer ready, all in a single building.

Today, LATTC offers pathways in six different fields — Advanced Transportation and Manufacturing; Applied Sciences; Construction, Maintenance and Utilities; Design and Media Arts; Health Sciences; and Liberal Arts

And the early results have been striking. In the 2011-12 academic year, LATTC awarded 1,029 degrees and certificates. In 2014-15, that number was 1,772, a 72 percent increase, even as full-time enrollment remained static (see Figure 1). The increase in degrees and certificates awarded to African American students was 82 percent, and for Hispanic students it was 69 percent (see Figures 2 and 3), signaling that LATTC's goal of improving equity through PACTS is also on its way to being realized.

Figure 1

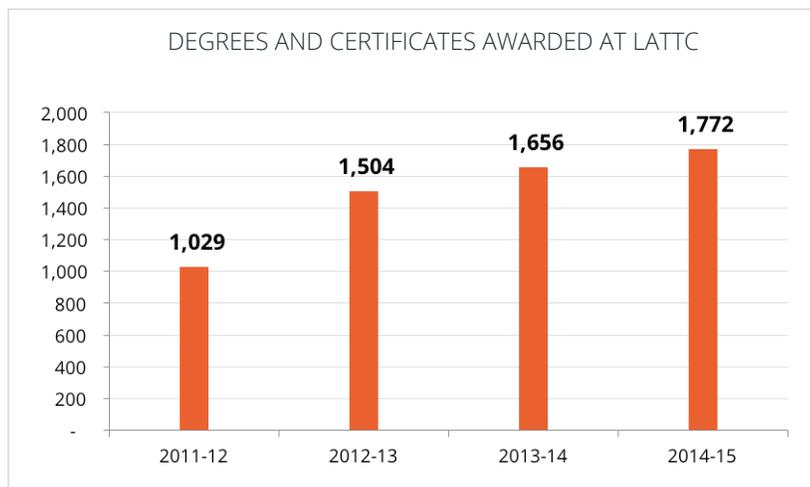
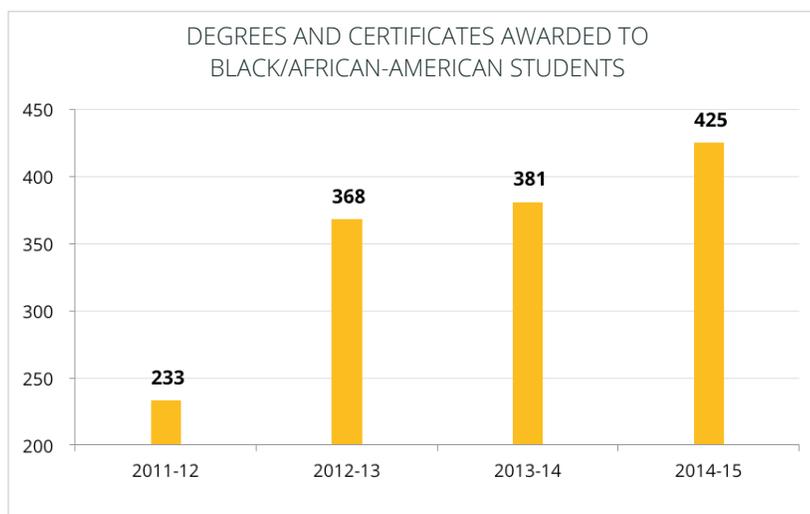


Figure 2



DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION AND PRACTITIONER INQUIRYⁱ

Developmental evaluation enabled CUE researchers and the faculty and administrators at LATTC to collaboratively outline an evidence-based understanding of how pathways work, what makes them sustainable, and the improved outcomes students can achieve through participation in a pathway.

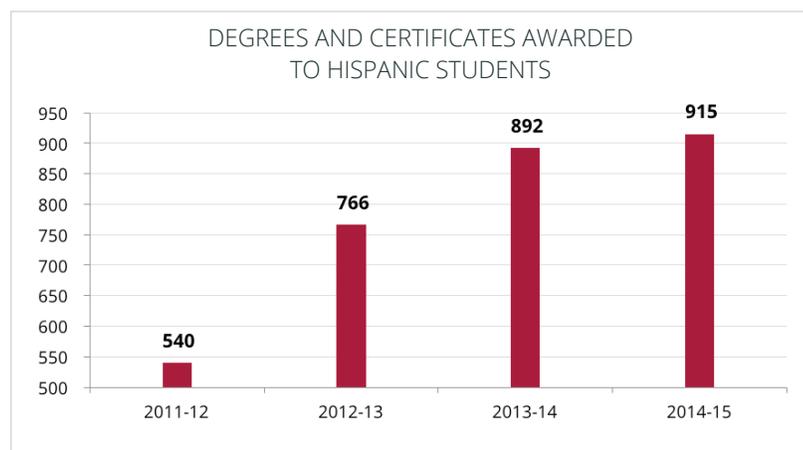
While traditional methods of evaluation set out to prove whether a reform succeeded or failed, developmental evaluation methods require that researchers enmesh themselves in the messiness of implementation and that they be quick inventors of interventions to teach practitioners to do something new or in a different manner.

Developmental evaluation requires researchers to accept chaos as normal and to learn how to act spontaneously as situations develop. Thus, the evaluators are not outsiders to the developmental process, but rather key players who draw on interdisciplinary knowledge to act as facilitators, coaches, friendly critics, analysts, tool developers, and instructors to support organizational change.

Various strategies and tools were employed during the developmental evaluation of PACTS. First, CUE researchers engaged in a continual process of data gathering and synthesizing to enable timely generation of insights regarding emerging issues. Data was collected through surveys/questionnaires; observations of meetings, classrooms, and other implementation sites; interviews with faculty and administrators; and document analysis. Rapid feedback memos communicated summaries of the analysis of collected data, along

Continued on Page 7

Figure 3



Additionally, the CUE-LATTC partnership helped cement these reforms at LATTC for the next generation of students by building the capacity of faculty and staff. CUE researchers embedded themselves on campus, identified the professional development needs of key LATTC practitioners, and created tools and training on inquiry methods to improve their practices and help sustain PACTS for the long term.

There is a strong national push for the implementation of academic pathways, which are being touted as “game changers.” However, the literature on pathways to date remains highly descriptive in nature, primarily discussing the structural changes necessary for implementation with less attention focused on the social and cultural aspects of implementation, which prior policy research has identified as critical to the successful implementation of reforms. This report addresses this gap and describes LATTC’s innovative approach to improving student outcomes by aggressively restructuring their institutional model and implementing pathways on a campus-wide scale, *while at the same time* engaging practitioners in the methods of developmental evaluation and critical action research. PACTS implementers worked to understand the theory behind the reform and to develop the new capacities that are necessary for implementation with fidelity to the principles of pathways.

In this report, we describe the methods that LATTC and CUE used to build PACTS while simultaneously developing the capacity to implement PACTS. It showcases the learning and inquiry tools created by CUE researchers to develop the implementation capacity of LATTC’s faculty and administration — a partnership that eased PACTS implementation and led to a more productive campus culture. And personal accounts from faculty, administrators, and CUE researchers demonstrate the on-the-ground importance of this campus transformation.

DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION AND PRACTITIONER INQUIRY (CONTINUED)

with reflection questions and potential next steps. CUE also developed tools for addressing emerging issues, such as data collection plans and group-facilitation resources. Finally, CUE facilitated change laboratories¹, which are structured spaces for external collaborators and local practitioners to conduct joint inquiry into the processes, practices, and outcomes of the PACTS initiative. These change laboratories served as a primary venue for delivering trainings on critical topics of practice, as well as a key site for documenting the learning and change process.

¹ Patton, M.Q. (2011). *Developmental evaluation: Applying complexity concepts to enhance innovation and use*. New York: Guilford Press.

² Engeström, Y., Virkkunen, J., Helle, M., Pihlaja, J. & Poikela, R. (1996). The Change laboratory as a tool for transforming work. *Lifelong Learning in Europe*, 1(2), 10-17.



Name: Maurice Burnett

Title: Pathway Counselor,
Advanced Transportation and
Manufacturing, LATTC

Joined LATTC: 2002

USING DATA TO GIVE EACH STUDENT A CUSTOMIZED GAME PLAN

Implementing PACTS required a shift in routines and responsibilities for many at LATTC, but counselors were especially impacted. As more Pathways were rolled out, more counseling staff moved from the general office – dealing with thousands of students from all across the campus – to a Pathway office, where they had to tweak their services for a smaller group of students in a particular field. For Maurice Burnett, that came naturally.

“Becoming a Pathway Counselor has actually given me more of a chance to utilize my social work skills to empower students and get to know them,” says Burnett, who has an MS in Social Work. “It’s helped me to focus on removing barriers from individual students so they can focus on their academics.”

Burnett was one of the first counselors to take on the new role, becoming the ATM Pathway Counselor in November 2014. At the time, he says, there were still a lot of questions – but also a lot of room for professional growth.

“Obviously that first year the PACTS infrastructure wasn’t totally in place for counselors,” he says, “so I had to step up and use those counseling skills to make it intelligible for students and for faculty. I had the space to create some new programs and some new material and now, instructors and students and counselors will come to me as a resource on PACTS.”

Students are finding it easier to access financial aid and other student services under the new system, says Burnett, and the continuity of a single counselor makes them more likely to reach out for help. The partnership with CUE has made his work easier as well.

“We had workshops and trainings on PACTS with CUE right from the beginning,” says Burnett, “but one of the big things they provided was some concrete data on our students that we can use to target our services. I’m big on giving students customized game plans, so that was good for me.”

I. Declining Completion Rates Bring Campus Together to Plot New Directions

Los Angeles Trade Technical College is not like other community colleges, as many faculty members will attest. Career/technical education (CTE) courses make up more than 70 percent of the offerings at LATTC, and only about one-third of its students hope to transfer to a four-year institution. Many faculty and staff are themselves LATTC alumni with deep roots and investment in the college and the surrounding community. With most of its students older than 25 and often taking just a couple courses at a time, the primary focus at LATTC is on immediately applicable job skills and knowledge.

But while many students found the variety of CTE coursework useful, LATTC — along with many other community colleges — saw completion rates steadily declining in the late 2000s, as students struggled to balance degree requirements with their growing financial worries and complex job schedules. Despite steady enrollment trends, LATTC awarded 33 percent fewer degrees and certificates in 2008-09 compared to 2005-06. It was time for a change to the framework offered to students. In late 2009, campus leaders began brainstorming ideas for a new, competency-based model that would give students easy access to the classes and skills they need to complete a degree program.

“The students in my program often didn’t even leave the Design and Media Arts building. Often they would put off taking liberal arts classes until they had completely finished their major programs — but some of them would just leave without ever finishing their AA.”

— *Carole Anderson, Chair of the Design and Media Arts (DMA) Pathway, LATTC*



Early leadership on PACTS came from the Student Success Committee, a monthly gathering of LATTC faculty, staff, and students charged with identifying and recommending policies that enhance students' ability to thrive. Over the course of nearly two years, the committee achieved consensus on a bold new vision for the college and its students. They wanted all students, regardless of their background or academic goals, to be able to leave LATTC with a set of core competencies that are easy for them to access while completing necessary coursework. They wanted to maintain high expectations of students, particularly that they complete a degree, certificate, or transfer, ideally within three years. And they wanted to build camaraderie and a renewed sense of purpose among faculty, who were discouraged by the school's low completion rates.

LATTC stayed focused on consensus building, asking for input from the entire campus on this set of priorities. The "Days of Dialogue" held in 2011 and 2012 convened the entire campus community to dig deep into the question of what defines competency. Nearly 300 students, faculty, staff and administrators attended each session, where they were broken into small groups and equipped with data on student success and completion rates to inform their discussions. These monthly meetings fostered critical dialogue between factions of the LATTC community that normally may have talked past one another — manufacturing students and administrators, counselors and English professors. By late 2012, the LATTC community had identified the skills and knowledge that every student ought to have, regardless of their academic goals, as well as the supports they needed to access those competencies. These became the basis of the PACTS framework.

"PACTS provides the framework for faculty, staff, and administrators to understand the reform journey we are on to improve student success."

— *Larry Frank, President of LATTC*

LATTC's insistence on collaboration and consensus-building was essential throughout PACTS implementation. PACTS required faculty and staff to take on new responsibilities and form interdepartmental relationships, so fostering a team atmosphere was crucial to success. CUE provided tools and training sessions to support the school's efforts to help every stakeholder see their role and responsibilities in these newly formed interdepartmental teams.

With the central framework of PACTS in place, LATTC set about the complex process of testing the new practices and strategies they were designing to support improved student outcomes. It was the beginning of significant physical and philosophical change on campus, as PACTS leaders developed and refined new planning tools, counseling practices, student interventions, and office structures.

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Name: Jess Guerra

Title: Pathway Chair,
Advanced Transportation and
Manufacturing, LATTC

Joined LATTC: 2005

FOCUSING ON WHAT EACH STUDENT NEEDS TO BE SUCCESSFUL

As co-chair of the Student Success Committee, Jess Guerra saw PACTS develop from an idea about simplifying the student experience to a campus-wide system change.

“From the very beginning, we knew we wanted a system that would ensure that students had all the competencies they needed to succeed in their program,” says Guerra. “Regardless of whether they wanted technical education, to be on a transfer track, or even just take one course for a promotion at work, what basic things did they need to be successful?”

Guerra serves as the Pathway Chair of Advanced Transportation and Manufacturing, the first “incubator” field in which PACTS practices were developed and tested. He’s especially hopeful that PACTS is encouraging more CTE students to incorporate liberal arts courses into their schedule.

“This used to be quite a challenge for students – ‘do I take my liberal arts course or my CTE course on Wednesdays?’” says Guerra. “Not anymore. Now we’re locating those liberal arts classes in a familiar place in the Pathway building and scheduling them for convenient times. And in some cases we’ve even been able to contextualize them to the Pathway. So our ATM students can take Post-Civil War History, talk about the industrial revolution, transportation systems – it all ties back to their industry.”

Guerra says teaming up with the experts at CUE “has been reassuring.”

“When you’re undergoing institutional change at the scale that we are, it’s been hugely beneficial to have someone from the outside come and tell us we’re on the right track,” he says. “They’ve brought a legitimacy and credibility that has been very positive for us.”

II. Tearing Down Silos To Build a Better Student Experience

Three central themes guided the early stages of PACTS implementation: **incubation, collaboration, and restructuring.**

Incubation: LATTC opted to use single pathways as “incubators” to develop and test the new system. The Advanced Transportation and Manufacturing (ATM) Pathway includes about 1,100 students in programs such as automotive and motorcycle repair, diesel technology, and alternative fuels. Beginning with the ATM Pathway, PACTS leaders began breaking down the traditional silos and barriers between student services and academics — for example, relocating a counselor to the ATM building. Instead of walking across campus to meet with a counselor or even to simply schedule a meeting, students had immediate physical access to a counselor who was familiar with their program and their personal goals. Once refined and standardized, these practices could be rolled out to other pathways.

Examples of practices and technologies that were developed in the incubation period include embedded Pathway Counselors; “PACTS Plans,” comprehensive education plans for each pathway that include sample course schedules and paths to an associate’s degree; using clicker technology to gauge students’ awareness and understanding of available resources; and short video clips featuring faculty delivering key information about PACTS and specific pathways. These videos are now [available on LATTC’s website](#) for prospective and current students to get a quick primer on the pathways system.

The incubation process also served to sway faculty and staff who were skeptical of or opposed to the PACTS model. Practitioners who were most energized and invested in the new system generally oversaw the incubator pathways. Pilot programs received extra attention from administrators; developed cleaner and clearer curricula; found it easier to guide students into the most efficient class schedules; and could apply for external funding through subject-specific grants. While the incubation period required extra work and a good deal of experimentation and learning from failure, faculty who were on the fence observed that the benefits of PACTS demonstrably outweighed the downsides.

Collaboration: Integrating assessment, academics, and student services must be a priority for any college attempting to transform its campus through pathways. At LATTC, PACTS required collaboration among practitioners and departments not accustomed to working closely together. This required more work for some than for others. Instructors within a pathway needed to convene to develop a coherent pathway curriculum and share instructional material. Pathway Counselors needed to transition from providing general counseling to thousands of students to providing pathway-specific services to a smaller cohort. Pathway Chairs needed to

LATTC PRACTITIONERS AS RESEARCHERS: INQUIRY INTO PRACTICES

Some of the literature on guided pathways repeatedly mentions the importance of practitioner inquiry but fails to define the know-how and how-to of practitioner inquiry. A key principle of CUE’s equity model is that change and improvement of practices happens through social interaction and that inquiry is the primary tool to obtain individual and collective buy-in. CUE uses the methods of inquiry to assist practitioners in noticing how things work, what messages are communicated through language, gestures, and actions, and how values and beliefs can harm or benefit students. In essence, the purpose of inquiry is to “strangefy” everyday practices that are carried out without premeditation.

At LATTC teams of practitioners engaged in a comprehensive and rigorous inquiry process supported by tools created by CUE researchers. These included:

Data use close to practice: Teams of instructors learned how to use data methods to calculate equity gaps at the course level and determine the additional number of students or course completions needed to close equity gaps.¹¹

Peer observations: Teams of instructors learned how to use a peer-observation protocol focused on student engagement and the instructor’s questioning strategies, and how these two aspects unfold in the classroom for different racial/ethnic groups.

The syllabus as an artifact of classroom culture: This structured review of syllabi fostered LATTC

Continued on Page 13

coordinate communication among these disparate team members to ensure a smooth student experience.

“One of the biggest lessons for me was that ideas don’t have to come straight from administration in a top-down way, but from faculty themselves. Sometimes you can get so driven and set on your goals that you forget to take a step back and listen.”

— *Leticia Barajas, Vice President of Pathways, Innovation, and Institutional Effectiveness, LATTC*

The campus culture at LATTC was highly receptive to change, and high-leverage faculty and staff members “bought in” at the outset, easing the implementation process. Many LATTC faculty attended the college themselves and bring strong personal commitment to the job. In addition, PACTS was developed and discussed with a high degree of transparency — initial planning meetings included faculty, staff, and student representatives. And the Days of Dialogue allowed all LATTC practitioners, as well as students, to test their assumptions and root out potential issues with PACTS and its implementation before the process began. This early input and pushback from the entire community helped to make the process truly collaborative.

Restructuring: Campus leaders took the initiative to create new structures, processes, and routines directly related to racial inequities in student success. Faculty and staff were ready to battle low completion rates and historical inequities by confronting the core traditions of community college. LATTC developed new routines around data collection and interpretation, as well as their student intake process. Disaggregating data by race/ethnicity became a core aspect of these new routines.

Student Experience

From the moment students step foot on the LATTC campus today, their experience with academic and student services is more streamlined and cohesive than ever. Before PACTS, students would need to deal with separate buildings, staff, and operating hours to access services such as financial aid and counseling. Now, everything is consolidated in a central location convenient to the student’s academic program.

“Students can apply, matriculate, get their student ID, go through orientation, see a counselor who will follow them throughout their time at LATTC, and apply for financial aid, all in the same place,” says Jess Guerra, Chair of the ATM Pathway. “That part of the student experience is different immediately.”

Another key piece of the student experience under PACTS is Guided Choices, which offers students pathway-specific basic skills and liberal arts courses. Prior to PACTS, faculty reported that it was a challenge to get students to register for and attend the general education courses that allow them to complete an associate’s degree because those classes were too frequently scheduled at inconvenient times and locations. Now, focused scheduling allows students to take CTE and complete general education requirements without conflict.

LATTC PRACTITIONERS AS RESEARCHERS: INQUIRY INTO PRACTICES (CONTINUED)

instructors’ capacity for creating a syllabus that welcomes students, encourages them to attend instructors’ office hours, and presents course assignments/requirements in a positive and optimistic tone rather than a fearful one.

Walking in students’ shoes: Teams of student support staff learned to “walk in students’ shoes” through onboarding, assessment, and counseling sessions, and then how to use this information to draft recommendations that improve these processes for students, particularly students of color.

Content analysis of documents and website: Teams of student support staff and counselors learned how to use a document review protocol to assess new PACTS orientation materials (including the online orientation) and draft recommendations for improvement.

ⁱ Gutierrez, K. D., & Vossoughi, S. (2010). Lifting off the ground to return anew: Mediated praxis, transformative learning, and social design experiments. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 61(1-2), 100-117.

ⁱⁱ Dowd, A. C., Witham, K., Hanson, D., Ching, C., Liera, R., & Castro, M. F. (2017, forthcoming). *Bringing data to life: How savvy college leaders find the “actionable N” to improve equity and sustainability in higher education.*



Name: Leticia Barajas

Title: Vice President of Pathways, Innovation, and Institutional Effectiveness, LATTC

Joined LATTC: 2005

SETTING HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR STUDENTS, FACULTY, AND ADMINISTRATORS

Leticia Barajas has deep roots at Los Angeles Trade Technical College beyond her 11 years of service in administration. An alumni of Los Angeles Community Colleges, Barajas started working for the district straight out of high school. And before all of that, her father was a LATTC graduate. For her, she says, leading the effort to bring PACTS to campus was deeply personal.

“When you look at the student body here at LATTC, you see overwhelmingly students of color and immigrants and other at-risk populations,” says Barajas. “The stakes for these students are so high. I think it’s fundamental to do this work correctly the first time – to set high expectations for both ourselves and the students.”

Today she serves as one of the main points of contact between LATTC faculty and CUE staff. She says the campus partnership with CUE helped bring difficult issues to light in a safe environment – and helped her become a more effective campus leader. In one instance, she says a CUE Feedback Memo drew her attention to an issue she may not have otherwise noticed.

“They pushed me to be more inquiry-based in meetings, so my role becomes more that of a facilitator,” says Barajas. “For me that’s been one of the biggest lessons, not only from CUE but from PACTS as a whole – that ideas don’t always have to come straight from the top. It’s changed my practice, my language, my leadership. And it was critical for the part of PACTS implementation where I needed to be out there convincing people.”

Barajas’s colleagues describe her as the “caretaker” of PACTS, not only overseeing the technical aspects of implementation but also communicating the vision of the initiative to other LATTC decision-makers. But she explains that the success of PACTS is the result of multiple campus partners working together.

“This is really the story of the commitment of an entire campus that recognized that we could do better for our students,” she says. “It required the courage to take on tough issues, to take on ‘the establishment’ and the core traditions of community college, and transform the campus. Without faculty leadership and buy-in, we couldn’t have succeeded. We consider PACTS to be our belief system.”

Guided Choices also offers certain general education courses that complement students' pathway focuses. To fulfill a history requirement, for example, students in the ATM Pathway take Post-Civil War History, focusing on the industrial revolution, automobile manufacturing, and the spread of national transportation systems.

III. Bringing in CUE as a Trusted Partner To Improve and Expand Pathways

The work at LATTC caught the attention of Estela Mara Bensimon, director of the Center for Urban Education and professor of higher education at the University of Southern California. In July of 2014, Bensimon and CUE began a developmental evaluation of PACTS, seeking to both document the extraordinary efforts of LATTC practitioners and directly support implementation. This approach situated CUE researchers as an integrated part of the LATTC community, allowing for a close and trusting relationship between them and LATTC practitioners.

Beginning in August 2014, seven CUE researchers and PhD students embedded themselves on campus to document and support the launch of six pathways. CUE staff attended any meeting related to PACTS implementation as both observers and facilitators/participants. These meetings got CUE into the weeds of implementation. For example, CUE researcher Jason Robinson recalled observing a meeting in which a team of administrators, faculty, and staff were designing a student survey that included questions intended to assess students' self-efficacy: "Part-way through the meeting they asked if I

"In our PACTS principles, we said we would leave no one behind. This would not be a boutique program. All of our students have an inherent right to be exposed to these opportunities."

— *Leticia Barajas, LATTC*



had any feedback related to what they were trying to accomplish. Based on my familiarity with some of the self-efficacy literature and research, I was able to provide them with a few relevant research-based ideas that supported their work in that moment.”

CUE also sent representatives to monthly meetings of the Student Success Committee, where LATTC leaders develop recommendations for all other decision-making bodies on campus. The committee also discusses big-picture items such as aligning PACTS with California’s Student Equity Plans and coordinating with the state’s Student Success and Support office.

Through its partnership with CUE, LATTC could receive real-time observations and feedback from trusted experts. By fully immersing themselves on campus, CUE staff armed themselves with a deep understanding of the logistics of PACTS implementation; personal relationships with LATTC practitioners and an awareness of their goals, fears, and doubts about the process; and an earned status as a legitimate, neutral arbiter.

Over the course of the developmental evaluation, CUE provided feedback, support, and recommendations to LATTC leadership in a variety of ways.

Rapid Feedback Memos (RFMs): These memos provided descriptive summaries of the observations and data collected by CUE researchers, along with reflective questions and potential next steps. These memos typically were presented to LATTC leadership and/or key PACTS practitioners, and served as a launch pad for discussions about ongoing challenges and potential spaces for improvement. For example, in RFM #2, delivered in January 2015, CUE researchers noted uneven participation in PACTS-related meetings and, in addition to bringing this to the attention of the leaders, proposed a “change lab” to foster collective efficacy among the PACTS chairs, counselors, faculty, and deans.

CUE provided LATTC faculty and staff with a safe, confidential space to air concerns or frustrations about implementation, and the RFMs were the mechanism through which those concerns became synthesized and surfaced for deeper examination. PACTS leaders reported that the memos were critical in helping them not to “lose sight of the little things.” (*See the appendix for a sample RFM, feedback timeline, and other information.*)

Change Laboratories: Based on CUE’s conversations with PACTS leadership and individual interviews with faculty and staff, CUE would set an agenda and participant list for a day-long event focused on the most critical pieces of PACTS implementation at the time. Change labs were a primary venue for delivering interventions and trainings on certain topics, as well as giving LATTC practitioners a chance to step back and reflect on the connections between departments and how PACTS might impact them and their colleagues.

A sample change lab might look something like this: After an opening discussion about the agenda and goals, LATTC practitioners break into small groups based on their roles (e.g., a group of counselors, a group of Pathway



“I don’t think we could have moved forward with PACTS as quickly as we did without CUE. They provided a safe place to have initial conversations and removed a lot of potential toxicity. We had a saying: ‘If you can’t say it to CUE, where can you say it?’”

— Jan Gangel-Vasquez,
Chair of the English
Department, LATTC



Name: Laurence B. Frank

Title: President, LATTC

Joined LATTC: 2013

CHAMPIONING PACTS FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

Laurence Frank arrived at LATTC with a deep understanding of workforce development and higher education, largely acquired through his work as deputy mayor of the city of Los Angeles and through his time as a faculty member at UCLA's Center for Labor Research and Education. Through his position at the mayor's office, Frank had partnered with LATTC in various workforce-development initiatives, and had been struck by the innovation taking place at the college, in particular the efforts to design the PACTS initiative to improve student success.

"Before PACTS, many of our students would get lost on their journey here at LATTC," says Frank. "They would dabble in this sector, take classes in that program of study, attempt a math class without success, dabble again, take another math or English course and fail, and eventually drop out. More than half of our students who took math courses failed at some point as they tried to progress. PACTS as a strategy connects students to a particular course progression through cohorts and guided choices, and helps make sense of the math or English courses when they come. Students are also able to focus on certain industry-recognized certificates that, when completed, can still lead to career success."

Since his arrival at the college, Frank has been an adamant supporter of the PACTS initiative. He takes every opportunity to celebrate and encourage the hard work of faculty, staff, and administrators, while also reminding everyone that PACTS signifies "a commitment to go to our students instead of expecting them to come to us."

With a career that has focused on economic and community development, Frank recognizes the challenges of implementing an initiative such as PACTS, and the benefits of the LATTC-CUE partnership.

"This work requires deep effort and commitment from all our faculty, staff and administrators. Efforts that spring from the field and not from 'on high' hold a far better chance to take root. CUE is able to draw this work forward from people's natural instincts and the commitments that brought them to LATTC in the first place. CUE brings relationships and trust-building outside the established corridors of authority, research that encourages insight, along with skillful facilitation that elicits shared vision and implementation. CUE delivers great support to the college, frontline workers, and administrators alike, and through all of us, helps deliver the goods to our students."

Chairs, etc.). Each group member shares a personal experience with a particular aspect of PACTS — connecting students to financial aid resources, for example. With the entire group, participants analyze the similarities and patterns in their experiences and identify possible areas of improvement for quickly getting students the financial aid help they need.

Change labs represented the most complex and fruitful aspects of the CUE-LATTC relationship. The content of the change labs was shaped in large part by the LATTC community, not prescribed by CUE. At the same time, the labs provided a space for CUE to perform serious and frank interrogation of campus practices, and for LATTC practitioners to develop the skills to address problems in implementation. Participant evaluations of the change labs were uniformly positive and noted that CUE researchers were sincerely invested in positive campus change.

Tool Development: CUE researchers designed checklists, templates, and toolkits specifically for LATTC, mainly to assist administrators and staff in their collection and analysis of student data. For example, LATTC and CUE leaders collaborated to develop a process by which the school can easily track students' progress through a pathway, including credit accumulation, grades, attendance, and completion outcomes.

Early on, LATTC introduced clicker technology to conduct surveys of students on their experiences with classes and administrative processes. The devices immediately register student responses on-screen, generating discussion and cultivating a sense of student community. Additionally, the clicker practice required that department chairs, counselors, and instructors ask the questions and then process the responses together — giving them a valuable window into the day-to-day student experience. CUE provided the resources to analyze the data collected from the clicker surveys and presented it back to LATTC in a report, along with recommendations about how to proceed with ongoing implementation of this tool.

IV. LATTC-CUE Partnership Adds Important Perspective and Capacity

In developing and implementing PACTS, LATTC took on a remarkably complex mission to improve outcomes for all students. The school's partnership with CUE gave them extra time and space to focus on that work, while trusted third-party experts provided real-time feedback and reminded LATTC practitioners of details they may otherwise have missed. CUE played four important roles in supporting PACTS implementation:

Real-Time Expert Feedback: CUE researchers were able to compile the experiences and concerns of LATTC practitioners, organize them in detailed reports, and quickly communicate recommendations and feedback. Tools such as RFMs and change labs allowed LATTC to make mid-course corrections in real time. Faculty attest that PACTS implementation would not have moved as quickly without CUE guiding conversations, fleshing out points of disagreement, and providing space for dialogue.

EQUITY AND EQUITY-MINDEDNESS

Equity-mindedness drives all of CUE's work. Equity-minded individuals are aware of the sociohistorical context of exclusionary practices and racism in higher education and the impact of power asymmetries on opportunities and outcomes, particularly for African Americans, Latinas/os, and Native Americans. Equity-minded individuals are:

- 1. Color-conscious (as opposed to color-blind) in a critical sense.** Being color-conscious means noticing and questioning patterns of educational outcomes that reveal unexplainable differences in outcomes for minoritized students. It means viewing inequalities in the context of a history of exclusion and discrimination.
- 2. Aware that beliefs, expectations, and practices assumed to be neutral can have outcomes that are racially disadvantageous.** Racial disadvantage is created when unequal outcomes are attributed to students' cultural predispositions or when practices are based on stereotypical assumptions about the capacity, aspirations, or motives of minority populationsⁱ (Bensimon 2012).
- 3. Willing to assume responsibility for the elimination of inequality.** Rather than viewing inequalities as a natural catastropheⁱⁱ equity-minded individuals allow for the possibility that inequalities might be created or exacerbated by taken-for-granted practices and policies, inadequate knowledge, a lack of cultural know-how, or the absence of institutional support — all of which can be changed.

Continued on Page 19

External Validation and Perspective: As a community college with limited resources, LATTC’s decision to transition to pathways as a campus-wide system was a bold restructuring — one that few other similar institutions had attempted. CUE played an important role in legitimizing LATTC’s work to surrounding institutions as well as to skeptical faculty and staff. “[CUE researchers] became intimately involved in the implementation of PACTS,” said CUE’s Jason Robinson. “Through our frequent observations, feedback, and interventions we made it clear that we genuinely cared about what LATTC administrators, faculty, and staff were trying to accomplish for their students. This degree of investment from an institution like USC in turn provided LATTC practitioners with a sense that what they were attempting was uniquely innovative and important, and I believe this helped build the wave of buy-in and support that was needed to move PACTS through its early phases of implementation.”

“CUE made us look at ourselves differently and more closely. At one point they told us to go out on campus and spend a day observing, as if we were students. I never would have thought to do that, but it really opened my eyes to a lot of things.”

— Carole Anderson, LATTC

Mediation and Conflict Resolution: In change labs and committee meetings, CUE facilitated difficult conversations about changing roles and responsibilities, allowing LATTC faculty to air grievances and talk through problems in a safe environment. Since CUE researchers had no “skin in the game,” they could approach issues more objectively, says Jan Gangel-Vasquez, chair of the English

EQUITY AND EQUITY-MINDEDNESS (CONTINUED)

4. Aware that while racism is not always overt, racialized patterns nevertheless permeate policies and practices in higher education institutions. When policies have a disproportionate impact on students of color, they have the effect of maintaining racial hierarchies.

ⁱ Bensimon, E. M. (2012). The equity scorecard: Theory of change. In E. M. Bensimon & L. Malcolm (Eds.), *Confronting equity issues on campus: Implementing the equity scorecard in theory and practice* (pp. 216-246). Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, LLC.

ⁱⁱ Coates, Ta-Nehisi. 2015. *Between the World and Me*. New York: Random House.



Department at LATTC. “CUE provided a safe space to have these interactions and difficult conversations,” says Gangel-Vasquez. “Some of the historic enmities that always rumble on college campuses would have cropped up had they not been there.”

On-the-ground Support: Through feedback tools and other materials provided to LATTC practitioners, CUE directly aided PACTS implementation. CUE researchers served as extra eyes and ears in meetings, and many faculty describe change labs and other CUE-led sessions as powerful professional development, strengthening their leadership and facilitation skills. CUE’s physical proximity to LATTC’s campus — the two are separated by about one mile — also played a key role. “I don’t think this would have worked as smoothly if CUE were located elsewhere,” says Leticia Barajas, Vice President of Pathways, Innovation, and Institutional Effectiveness at LATTC. “Since they’re on campus every day, they’ve developed an understanding of the campus culture and we feel a deep connection with their staff. They’re really part of the fabric of the institution and we see them as colleagues.”

V. The Conditions That Helped LATTC Succeed

Instead of focusing on abstract “best practices,” LATTC invested in developing faculty, staff, and administration into *best practitioners*. Their change strategy aimed for broad involvement and buy-in and they did not allow themselves to become impatient or rush to get results. They created a structure and culture for organizational learning exemplified by their actions following the introduction of a new practice or artifact (e.g., the use of clickers to assess students’ needs and create customized intervention plans). After a trial run they gathered together and talked candidly about what worked and what did not. They did not take things for granted, but instead constantly interrogated PACTS by asking: *How is our implementation of PACTS being experienced by students? Are PACTS practices aligned with our goals for student success?*

Scholars of organizational learning often point to higher education institutions as examples of organizations that are unable to learn from their data and that lack the structures necessary for reflection and reframing. The LATTC-CUE partnership provides an equity-minded model for organizational learning and identifies the conditions that enabled LATTC to learn and create its own agenda for self-change.

What makes LATTC able to learn and engage in self-change where other institutions fail? A big part of the story is attributable to the following characteristics of LATTC:

Seeing Oneself in Students: The leaders of PACTS, as well as many of the faculty and staff, see themselves in the students they serve. Most LATTC leaders come from working-class backgrounds, are first-generation, and studied at community colleges — many at LATTC. At other colleges it is all too common to hear faculty and leaders talk about students as a walking mass of deficits: “They’re just here because they want the financial aid,” or “These kids

The LATTC-CUE partnership provides an equity-minded model for organizational learning and identifies the conditions that enabled LATTC to learn and create its own agenda for self-change.

have no idea what they want.” LATTC leaders understand their students on a personal level and avoid this kind of language.

Tolerance of Criticism: As described above, CUE’s developmental evaluation incorporates Rapid Feedback Memos that describe CUE’s observations about what is working and what needs to change. The memos are very direct and could easily elicit defensive reactions. LATTC’s leadership takes this constructive criticism to heart and willingly engages in addressing problems.

Change Labs: The change labs organized by CUE address on-the-ground problems rather than generalized topics about pathways. They are tailored to build capacity among department chairs on basic leadership skills, including data use, instructional leadership, principles of change, leading productive meetings, and facilitation. LATTC leaders took full advantage of these opportunities to develop skills for themselves and their colleagues.

Willingness to Take Risks and Fail: Higher education leadership is notoriously conservative and risk averse, and therefore prone to maintain the status quo. PACTS represents a willingness to let go of the status quo. LATTC’s administrators, faculty, and staff are essentially attempting to redesign a college from the inside, very much on their own. If their experiment succeeds, they will become one of the first community colleges to be organized into holistic and integrated pathways.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As project manager and lead researcher of LATTC's developmental evaluation, Jason Robinson, Research Assistant at the Center for Urban Education, was responsible for coordinating the day-to-day activities, conducting interviews and observations, and implementing the core activities. Deanna Cherry, CUE's Lead Facilitator, was responsible for planning and facilitating the Change Labs with leaders and administrators. Photography by Emile Wamsteker.

Since 1999, the Center for Urban Education (CUE) has led socially conscious research and developed tools to help institutions of higher education produce equitable student outcomes. Located in the University of Southern California's Rossier School of Education, CUE is committed to closing racial-ethnic equity gaps and improving student outcomes in higher education. Rather than remediate students, CUE remediates practices, structures, and policies.



APPENDIX

Rapid Feedback Memo	Topics Addressed
1	Developing shared understanding of PACTS first principles, extending beyond structural and procedural change, and distributing leadership
2	Engaging faculty, focusing on practice, and collecting and using data
3	Collecting and monitoring PACTS data
4	Fostering collective efficacy and social networks of frontline implementers
5	Enhancing PACTS orientation

Change Laboratory	Theme	Activity Topics
1	Supporting Organizational Change	CUE's theory of change, facilitation essentials, and understanding how teams function
2	Fostering Collective Efficacy - Part I <i>What can we do to enhance our success?</i>	PACTS challenge-success case studies, understanding PACTS through an organizational change lens, and team planning
3	Fostering Collective Efficacy - Part II <i>What can we do to make a difference for students?</i>	Student experiences before and after PACTS, student deficit perspective vs. practitioner learning perspective, and team planning

CUE's Developmental Evaluation

Data Collection (ongoing)

Summer 2014						Fall 2015	
RFM 1	CL 1	RFM 2	CL 2	RFM 3	RFM 4	CL 3	RFM 5



Rapid Feedback Memo #2 – Jan 2015

The purpose of this rapid feedback memo is to reflect back potential key insights drawn from observations at LATTC that can help to inform decisions related to next steps in the PACTS initiative. This memo addresses three issues that touch on leadership, change, and learning. As a caveat, this memo jumps directly into issues and it may create the impression that we are only seeing “problems” and ignoring strengths. That is not our intent. In fact, we have observed that LATTC has many of the ingredients that are essential for a change effort of the magnitude of PACTS. There is strong and unified leadership that is not afraid of admitting mistakes, learning from them, and trying again and again. There is passion for PACTS among many. As exciting and energizing as PACTS is, it cannot be overlooked that it is disrupting the status quo and while there are pockets of resistance, overall we have observed a high level of tolerance for ambiguity; considerable patience; and creative thinking and doing. It is because of these qualities among the PACTS community that we feel it is safe to be direct.

General Observations

1. Participation in meetings

- **The issue:** Not everyone participates in meetings, typically a couple of people seem to come prepared to offer items and raise issues. Many individuals who have key roles in PACTS tend to be quiet. There are many possibilities: 1) they feel disengaged; 2) they do not feel sufficiently expert on the topics and prefer to listen; 3) they are apprehensive about disagreeing; 4) they are afraid to risk putting forth ideas that may be shot down.
- **Strategies:** More intentional assignments that create opportunities for individuals to have speaking roles at the meetings; talk with individuals prior to the meetings and ask that they bring up X, Y, Z; monitor body language and invite individuals to speak if they appear to have something in mind; prevent more assertive individuals from dominating the discussion; check in with individuals to find out what they are thinking; at the end of the meeting go around the table and ask participants if they have any final comments or observations.

2. Silence around Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Instructional Quality

- **The Issue:** The prevailing theme(s) around student success focus on structural issues related to Tier 1 and there is very little talk about academic practices that will impact the outcomes of PACTS. When academic issues come up they tend to be about breaking the rules, e.g., instructors who do not provide students syllabi; instructors who hold office hours during unreasonable times; and instructors who do not attend department meetings. The response to these issues has been to enforce rules via directives or reminders that instructors are expected to meet their obligations. It goes without saying that syllabi, office hours, and participating in department meetings are important professional responsibilities that should be honored by

- instructors out of a sense of collegial respect. The focus on rules, directives, and procedures may infuse a culture of compliance that is not conducive to PACTS. We are aware that in the context of collective bargaining there needs to be great care in sticking to the rules.
- **Strategies:** Cultivate a professional culture that focuses on the values, norms, and practices of collegiality, collaboration, and a sense of individual and collective responsibility for student success. Clearly, the instructor who holds office hours at a time when he/she is less likely to get students to visit may not realize that he/she can treat office hours as an opportunity to get to know students more personally and assist them more directly. So it is not about office hours, but about how office hours can be a purposeful intervention for student success. The same goes for department meetings, the question that may need to be raised is “Why might instructors avoid department meetings?” “What goes on in department meetings that would make people feel that they are missing out in something very important?” In the section on recommendations for Change Labs we address this problem with specific suggestions.

3. Data Practices and Data Use

- **Issue:** There are three issues around data: 1) Opportunities to collect data might be overlooked. It is not always clear whether there is a method of tracking who participates in activities. At one meeting there was talk that more than half of the students who attended the first day of orientation did not show up on the second day but it was unclear if this was anecdotal or based on registration records. 2) Unclear whether data are being collected with a clear plan and structure for its use. Lots of data are being collected, e.g., through the clicker technology but how it will be used for the purposes of learning and institutional change is not evident. 3) Data to assess academic outcomes, establish benchmarks, and focus on equity needs to be collected systematically. It is important that as PACTS comes to the end of the first year LATTC be able to provide facts about participation and outcomes.
- **Strategies:** CUE has created a draft of a data plan for the four quadrants that constitute Tier 1 (see attachments) and will provide a plan for collecting academic outcomes data that will enable the establishments of benchmarks. CUE will also offer assistance on how to create a structure for data use by chairs, deans and instructors.

Change Lab Topics

CUE proposes three Change Labs designed to address the three issues described above.

1. Change Lab on Collective Efficacy

This one-day session will involve the department chairs, deans, and counselors in activities to strengthen collective efficacy. Collective efficacy as applied to PACTS simply means that its success depends greatly on individuals’ behaviors,

motivations, and perceptions. Chairs, deans, and counselors need to believe that PACTS is the right thing to do and it can work. Individually and collectively, they need to feel they understand their role and have the knowledge and tools to make it work. That is, they have confidence in themselves and in the group. One of the strategies for developing collective efficacy is to create an activity setting that enables participants to learn from one another's successes and failures.

2. Change Lab on Data Practices and Data Use for Student Success

At this one-day session department chairs, deans, and counselors will be provided with the how-to of learning from data and using data to identify practices that need to be remediated. The session will draw on data from the “clickers” session, fall student outcomes, and other sources available to LATTC.

3. Instructors as Institutional Agents

Institutional agents are individuals in positions of power within organizations and institutions who use their human, social, and cultural capital to transmit resources, opportunities, and services to their students. By virtue of their positions, knowledge, and access to resources instructors, chairs, deans, and counselors have the potential to be institutional agents. There are many opportunities for practitioners to engage in the practices typical of institutional agents—direct support, integrative support, providing access to important networks—but often they are not aware of them. To enter into the topic of institutional agents participants will learn how to carry out routine practices such as a syllabus, office hours, assessment, and teaching methods in the mindset of an institutional agent.

Next Steps

- Set dates for change labs
- Determine responsibilities
- Review LATTC's Calendar for Spring 2015
- Discuss administration of self-efficacy survey





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