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# TOOLS IN A TOOLBOX

## Leading Change in Community Colleges

By Jaime Lester

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## About the Author

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## About the Series

On July 30, 2018, the American Council on Education (ACE) convened close to 40 nationally recognized higher education researchers and scholars to discuss strategies to increase completion rates, close equity gaps, and support leaders at our nation's community colleges. Informed by that meeting, ACE invited proposals from the participants for a series of action-oriented briefs focused on key topics for community college leaders. This brief is the fourth in that five-part series.



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Leadership in higher education is an increasingly complex endeavor, and community colleges are at the heart of this new higher education ecosystem, with approximately 1,000 colleges serving 35 percent of the nation's students (McFarland et al. 2019). This brief reviews the literature on change management in multiple disciplines and suggests research-based tools to lead change at community colleges.

Indeed, leadership is often found to be the most important factor in catalyzing, managing, organizing, and sustaining change. Research has indicated that networks can contribute to more widespread change, and that leaders working at the grassroots level can create more localized change. Most importantly, our collective understanding of who should be defined as leaders and who should be engaged in change management has broadened to be more inclusive of individuals and groups across organizations.

With leaders being recognized at all levels of the institution, it can be helpful to outline approaches and associated action steps that can assist leaders who are working toward large-scale change. These approaches—strategic plans, relationships, data-informed decision-making, and new structures—articulate opportunities based in the literature on successful implementation of change. While not exhaustive, these are some primary strategies for success.

- Strategic plans can be an important tool when undergoing change, but to be effective, there needs to be consideration of diversity of voices, opportunities for tensions to arise and be visible, and goals that allow for flexibility, imagination, and innovation.
- Relationships are at the center of effective leadership, and deep transformative change in community colleges cannot occur without these relationships, collaborations, and teams.
- Similar to the need to consider relationships and trusted teams, data provide an entry point, even an excuse, to bring individuals together to cognitively engage in a learning process to identify new institutional practices for improvement which requires communication.

- Rethinking structures and related policies and practices to support organizational change is essential as a symbol for what is valued in the organization.

This brief offers these four research-based approaches to assist with change across a community college, as well as specific ways to take action.

## Introduction



Leadership in higher education is an increasingly complex endeavor: funding sources, technology, and, most importantly, students are all changing. As such, higher education institutions are also being asked to change. Colleges and universities must evaluate their operations, structure, and policies to meet a society that is focused on outcomes and outputs (e.g., graduation rates and career readiness).

Community colleges are at the heart of this new higher education ecosystem, with approximately 1,000 colleges serving 35 percent of the nation's students (McFarland et al. 2019). While the core mission of community colleges remains the same—teaching and learning for all citizens—these colleges have a history of adapting and changing to meet the needs of their constituents and responding to external pressures on higher education. Especially now, community college leaders are looking for guidance when responding to change but are often frustrated by the lack of specificity in how to manage change. Organizational change recipes, such as that of John Kotter's *Power and Influence* (1985), can imply easy, or at least logical, solutions, but there is no recipe or silver bullet. In addition, change is not always for the better. In a study of change at a community college, one study found that a new president who initiated tighter administrative controls and centralized decision-making led to more destructive change, reducing employee morale, increasing employee turnover, and silencing shared governance (Levin 1998). Therefore, it is crucial for community college leaders to be attentive to positive change that focuses on organizational development and individual well-being.

Further complicating the act of leading change are the differences across institutions and levels of leadership. As with any study of leadership and change, context matters. Institutional size, geographic location, student demographics, and community needs are just a few of the variables that impact how a leader will engage in and enact change. In addition, leadership is a contested term with many nuances and definitions. On the one hand, leaders can be positional, meaning that their relative role in the institutional hierarchy and subscribed responsibilities define them as leaders. On the other hand, leadership can also be non-positional, whereas leaders are defined by how they take power and authority in their efforts to create change; these leaders do not have formal roles of authority in the institutional. Leadership, in this brief, includes both those leaders who are positional and non-positional.

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Despite these complexities, there are approaches to assist community college leaders in change management. Leaders can and do create and manage change every day in community colleges. As Kezar (2013) noted in her work on organizational change, leadership on all levels, positional and non-positional, is essential in any change process that engages organizational reform. This brief reviews the literature on change management in multiple disciplines and suggests research-based tools to lead change at community colleges.

## Leadership for Change Management

The importance of leadership in change management is well documented in the literature (Kezar 2013). Indeed, leadership is often found to be the *most* important factor in catalyzing, managing, organizing, and sustaining change. The study of leadership has identified altering reward structures, creating new visions and missions, refining strategic plans, and hiring new employees as the diverse components of leadership, particularly in higher education. Higher education leaders, who are primarily defined in the literature as positional and often at the upper ranks of the institutional hierarchy, motivate faculty and staff through the use of rewards (Eckel et al. 1999), create new structures and positions (Guskin 1996), and use planning mechanisms (e.g., strategic plans, missions, and values) to catalyze and support change.

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More recent work has created a distinction between leaders and managers. Leaders are individuals or groups that influence the behaviors and beliefs of others toward an organizational mission, while managers focus on controlling and motivating others to achieve a specific goal. Importantly, research has also argued that leaders and managers, including non-positional leaders, must work in a more networked fashion to create change, especially widespread or diffuse change (Kotter 2012). The notion that leaders need to consider networks has helped to substantiate a new definition of leadership and an understanding of how leaders from across levels of the organization can engage in change. Kezar and Lester (2011) found that non-positional leaders working at a more grassroots level were able to create

localized change, i.e., change on the unit or department level. However, more diffuse change required collaboration with positional leaders, often administrators, to effect change throughout the organization.

Change management has also evolved to include individuals from up and down the institutional hierarchy. For example, a recent study of technology change to support student advising in community colleges found that support for mid-level leaders was crucial to more transformational change. The study revealed that mid-level leaders are often navigating relationships with colleagues and helping to articulate the value of the work (Klempin and Karp 2018)—in other words, they were helping to merge the bottom-up with the top-down. Simply, our collective understanding of who should be defined as leaders and who should be engaged in change management has broadened to be more inclusive of individuals and groups across organizations.

## Approaches for Leaders Conducting Change Management



More recent research on organizational change in higher education acknowledges that more expansive views on leadership are needed to account for leaders across the institution (Kezar 2014). That more expansive view aligns with the additional understanding of institutional variation and how context matters in defining and designing change processes. Whether the college is urban or rural, small or large, or unionized or not are just a few of the characteristics that impact how planned change can occur on a campus. These views on leadership and change are more aligned with collaborative and cultural leadership that assumes that leadership is concerned with fostering positive change that is values-based and collaborative (Astin and Astin 2000). Leaders, positional and non-positional, are charged with engaging in collaboration across the campus to articulate, frame, and make meaning of institutional changes.

The following approaches and associated action steps can assist leaders who are working toward large-scale change and who acknowledge the value of leadership from across the institution and the role of culture in the form of mission, values, and goals. These approaches—strategic plans, relationships, data-informed decision-making, and new structures—articulate a network of opportunities based in the literature on successful implementation of change. While not exhaustive, these are some primary strategies for success.

### Strategic Plans

Strategic planning gained popularity in the 1960s with the promise of aligning individual or group behaviors with organizational goals. Despite its initial promise, strategic plans are rarely used beyond the first few years of the plans' development. Strategic planning as an exercise does have the potential of bringing a campus community together to articulate institutional values, goals, and even metrics for success. Culturally, strategic planning can connect those explicit values with decision-making, and then link those

decisions to units and individuals. For example, a community college strategic plan may articulate the importance of fostering student success with a goal of improving rates of student completion in developmental education.

Student support services may then see this as an opportunity to improve student academic service, or the mathematics department might reevaluate the developmental math curriculum.

Strategic planning is not effective in the long term if the plan is not constantly and consistently related to daily decision-making and practice. But why do strategic plans often sit on the shelf, so to speak? Several authors (Deetz 1992; Lyotard 1984) argue that strategic plans represent only a fraction of the organizational membership, primarily top management or executive-level administration.

Strategies are determined and decisions are made that seem nonsensical to the individual faculty and staff because the decision makers lack an understanding of the complex impact on teaching, learning, and research. The first solution is to be more inclusive in the process by creating work groups and creating feedback mechanisms (e.g., town halls). But Tierney (1992) goes a step further, arguing that the processes for creating strategic plans need to center around tensions across the college. For example, there are often tensions in faculty governance and administrative decision-making, with faculty questioning what, how, and why decisions are being made for the college. Providing forums for deep engagement in questions around decision-making with the potential for more inclusiveness can create more complex and effective strategic plans.

Lastly, strategic plans need to articulate stretch goals that are innovative and also realistic; otherwise, individuals are stymied by the overwhelming nature of goals that are too lofty and unrealistic. Argyris and Schön (1997) argue that change management is like a rubber band: organizations need to have a future vision and related goals that push them to innovate and change but should also not be too futuristic. Simply, if you stretch it too far, the rubber band breaks, but not far enough and there is slack in the band. Leaders need to find the optimal tension to push the college forward in the direction of change while also considering resources (i.e., finances and time) and human imagination. Strategic plans can be an important tool when undergoing change, but to be effective, there needs to be consideration of diversity of voices, opportunities for tensions to arise and be visible, and goals that allow for flexibility, imagination, and innovation.

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### Take Action: Have an Explicit Change Theory and Plan

For the last several decades, strategic plans have been viewed as the documents that summarize institutional direction and focus, with the implication that they also outline upcoming changes. The argument follows that by engaging the campus community in the process of creating a strategic plan, stakeholders converge on the important issues, pressures, and needed changes of the college. In reality, these plans often sit on a shelf and their meaning diminishes over time. Rather than rely entirely on the strategic plan, consider thinking more broadly about what is needed to create change. Kezar (2013) makes two important points in her work on leadership and organizational change: 1) leaders need to articulate a change theory, and 2) change plans need to be multifaceted.

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Change plans must be preceded by leaders who articulate an explicit change theory and process. Many leaders in higher education focus on the actions, such as the direct intervention, without any insight on *how* change occurs in organizational contexts. A change theory can combat this by helping articulate assumptions about human behavior, organizational culture, and the role of structure that may impact how change can occur at the individual institution.

Engaging in change requires a detailed plan that articulates the overall vision, identifies several specific goals, outlines the activities and relevant parties responsible for those activities, and has an evaluation plan. Implicit in the plan is the change theory that guides beliefs around how change occurs in higher education—but theory can and should also be made explicit in the plan. More specifically, a change plan could adhere to the following table (see Table 1), accompanied with an explicit and collaborative statement about how change occurs in organizations and within the context of the specific college.

A good resource for designing a change plan can be found in many institutional transformation grants for the National Science Foundation and other funders. Evaluation experts that are often found on college campuses are also resources as they create these types of plans on a regular basis.

**Table 1: Example of a Change Plan**

**Goal 1: Cultivate widespread knowledge of implicit bias, discrimination, and other equity issues in retention, promotion, and tenure (RPT) expectations and procedures to support underrepresented faculty through the promotion process.**

<b>Objective</b>	Institutionalize implicit bias training into faculty orientation, professional development, RPT committees, and other routine faculty engagement
<b>Inputs (Responsible Units)</b>	Provost’s Office Department-Level Support Human Resources Office of Diversity
<b>Activities</b>	Create a campus-wide implicit bias training Create a RPT committee training Integrate training into faculty orientation and other faculty engagement opportunities
<b>Outcomes</b>	Short-term: Collect baseline data; set improvement metrics; systematically identify all forms of faculty engagement to incorporate implicit bias training; develop/conduct presentations Mid-term: Implicit bias training is integrated into faculty orientation, and other form of faculty engagement Long-term: All faculty have completed implicit bias training and demonstrate improvement between pre- and post-test
<b>Evaluation Methods</b>	Monitor and report on the development of trainings, track training participation, collect and analyze training evaluations, collect and analyze pre- and post-training evaluations

*The example used in this table is related to faculty recruitment and retention with an effort to diversify faculty ranks. The overall goal is to address implicit bias with outcomes that span short to long term.*

## Relationships, Collaboration, and Teams

Relationships are at the center of effective leadership, and deep transformative change in community colleges cannot occur without these relationships, collaborations, and teams. Klempin and Karp (2018) examined the interaction among leadership, technology-mediated reform, and transformative change in community colleges and found that relationships across leadership levels supported successful diffuse change. In their study, mid-level leaders had established credibility with those advisors and faculty who were using the new student-advising system. The authors found that establishing credibility came from an adaptive and collaborative leadership approach whereby the leaders sought to create a collaborative vision for the change initiative shared by leadership, mid-level managers, and the academic advisors who would be primarily responsible for implementing the change. Advisors noted that public support by leadership who communicated the shared vision and acknowledged the work of the advisors helped to establish trust and transparency. In addition, mid-level managers understood the work being done by the advisors and could communicate the impact of the change on advisors. Being able to articulate the need for and the value of the system to those users helped to promote more widespread usage and created a link among college values (student success and advising), institutional decision-making (purchasing the system), and individual behaviors (engaging the system for student advising).

In another study of resource allocation to support Latinx students in community colleges, Rodriguez et al. (2017) found a successful model in administrators that asked existing teams within the Achieving the Dream Initiative to examine disaggregated institutional data to create support for student services. In this example, having informed teams that had already established relationships and trust created change agents who could support resource allocation. College leaders, at multiple levels of the organization, need to constantly establish and nurture new and existing relationships in order to establish support during times of change, which often make individuals feel vulnerable. Capitalizing on trust, creating transparency, and building collaborative visions will assist in successful change initiatives.

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#### Take Action: Develop a Leadership Team

In 1993, Estela Bensimon and Anna Neumann wrote a book about presidential leadership teams to understand how to create, manage, and engage an effective team. Their work concluded that “team-oriented leadership assumes that differences exist among people; it searches actively and affirmatively for them and seeks to bring them to light rather than insisting on talking only about the views that people share in common” (18). Effective leadership teams engage multiple perspectives, are constantly questioning and challenging each other in the decision-making process, and serve in a monitoring and feedback role for college presidents. Importantly, presidents have to trust the team and think in more complicated ways about the team’s work—not only task related activities (i.e., coordinating and planning decisions) but also sense-making or more cognitive activities (i.e., challenging and arguing from multiple perspectives while monitoring progress of the university leadership).

The work of Bensimon and Neumann, while older, arguably has greater relevance today in a climate where college leaders often hire like-minded individuals who have similar visions and values to the current leadership cabinet. Presidents can view their direct reports (e.g., provosts and vice presidents) as their only leadership and decision-making brain trust. But doing so reduces the number of perspectives when external pressures are becoming increasingly complex. To avoid having one brain trust, articulate the value of shared leadership on campus, and create a leadership team outside of direct reports. One potential source of a leadership team is an existing (or even a new) advisory board, a common committee used by units in colleges. Another is an existing governance

committee that would have elected and appointed members. Importantly, committees exist throughout colleges but often have a narrow focus; creating a committee to assist in decision-making with a broader charge still fits within the governance culture of higher education.

To be effective, these groups need to be representative of the constituents of the college, such as faculty, staff, and students, and be given the specific charge of critically advising the leader or unit. According to the research of Bensimon and Neumann, teams are not created by placing a group of individuals in a room periodically; rather, teams must develop relationships with each other, practice working together, and, most importantly, engage cognitively with each other. Achieving the cognitive function can be fostered by choosing team members who have a proclivity to fit within one or several of the defined roles outlined by Bensimon and Neumann (see Table 2), are reflective thinkers, and want to learn from others. Teams also need to meet often to build relationships and be monitored for a balance across the roles.

**Table 2: Roles in Leadership Teams**

<b>Role</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Definer	Defines and articulates team's tasks and perspectives
Analyst	Articulates a deep examination of the issues
Interpreter	Translates how campus constituents and external stakeholders will likely interpret issues and decisions
Critic	Redefines and reanalyzes the issues
Synthesizer	Summarizes the team's thinking and attempts to construct a composite understanding of issues
Disparity Monitor	Provides assessment of how team's decision-making is viewed outside the team
Task Monitor	Removes obstacles to team thinking and facilitates decision-making
Emotional Monitor	Observes team members' reactions and emotional state and re-centers the personal and human elements of the team

The focus of the leadership team roles is not formal positions or titles but the activities that the roles promote. For example, the definer of the team would be responsible for writing and providing a meeting agenda and keeping track of time to allow for all agenda items to be covered in the meeting. The interpreter, as another example, may constantly provide feedback on how a specific decision or initiative may impact advisors, while the disparity monitor may be cognizant of optics across campus. To provide a more specific example, in the case of implementing developmental education reform, the leadership team would be tasked with the options for reform. The critic would focus on why developmental education needs reform and would ask questions about student success. The definer would provide an agenda and set the boundaries of the problem by using data on student success. Importantly, the synthesizer would provide summaries of the team's conversation, such as recommendations of how to reform developmental education.

While there is not an exact prescription for each role member, having individuals who are focused on certain behaviors will encourage complex thinking about the decisions or considerations at hand.

## Data and Decision-Making

There has been a push in higher education, and education broadly, to employ decontextualized data to improve organizational outcomes (Coburn and Turner 2012). This data-informed decision-making is argued to be superior, as it moves decision-making away from “intuition and anecdote” (Hora 2018, 21) toward arguably more reliable numeric data to improve outcomes. The assumption is that decontextualized, hard data is more reliable and effective in improving decision-making and outcomes (Hora 2018; Mandinach 2012).

Yet research on decision-making in situ finds that hard data are often supplemented with contextualized information based on an individual’s experience and expertise within their domains (Hora 2018; Cook and Brown 1999). Decision-making of this kind allows for a “nuanced and ethnographically informed account of how educators use data” (Hora 2018, 24). This ethnographic research perspective, which centers individual and group cognition, activities, processes, and socio-cultural environments, can be employed to inform a better, more relevant understanding of workplace interactions and realities (Cook and Brown 1999; Hutchins 1995). Using data and metrics that emerge from and are contextualized by the perspectives of individuals and groups within organizations creates more effective decision-making and more trust and adoption by users (Hora 2018; Foss 2014; Hora, Bouwma-Gearhart, and Park 2017). Similar to the need to consider relationships and trusted teams, data provide an entry point, even an excuse, to bring individuals together to cognitively engage in a learning process to identify new institutional practices for improvement, which requires communication.

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### Take Action: Evaluate and Assess—Communicate the Results

The main work in data-informed decision management is not just presenting data, but spending the time as individuals and communities to make meaning of that data. All too often, college campuses are relying on town hall meetings, emails, and websites to deliver or make available data related to institutional priorities. Research shows that data cannot be decontextualized from individual experiences, local cultures, and historical events.

Organizational change requires engaged leaders, positional and non-positional, to engage in making meaning of the data through conversation and reflection. Doing so is not a one-time activity that can be completed in a large town hall with a presentation followed by a question-and-answer session; rather, leaders need to engage in different subcultures (e.g., faculty affinity groups) and within academic units to present and discuss the data.

For example, a leader could create and engage a leadership team with constituents from across the campus that represent different colleges, academic units, and groups to review and analyze data. This leadership team can help to create a communication plan that includes strategically reaching out to faculty and staff governance groups and respected members of the community. The agenda for each of these meetings would be to present data relevant to those groups, provide the leadership team's analysis, and engage in dialogue on the results and relevant interventions to address problems and opportunities. The intent would be

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**Seek the reasons behind the data, the why of the results, and allow the community to have direct input into effective future interventions.**

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to seek the reasons behind the data, the why of the results, and to allow the community to have direct input into effective future interventions.

The Harvard Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE) partnership has several examples of campus-wide engagement in data-informed decision-making. COACHE offers a job satisfaction survey to colleges and universities across the country. To promote the project and seek a high response rate from faculty, many campuses create a leadership team charged to educate the campus community about the importance of the survey. This same team has faculty, administrators, and institutional researchers work together to present the results of the data and seek input. Effective practices using COACHE results begin with providing summaries of the data and opportunities for feedback from the faculty community. This has been done on small campuses with all faculty assemblies, or with several smaller focus groups with faculty on larger campuses. Focused brainstorming where the community identified and rated the areas of concern into a priority list is just one example of how to effectively engage these small or large convenings. Importantly, members of the community are given several opportunities to make sense of the data and have a voice in how the results are interpreted and acted on.

### **New Structures, Policies, and Practices**

Change in community colleges often requires a rethinking of long-held structures, policies, and practices. Created with good intentions, structures, policies, and practices create routinization of work, help adherence to state and federal compliance, and provide

guidance for decision-making across an institution. On the other hand, structures, policies, and practices can sometimes inadvertently define institutional values. As McPhail and McPhail noted, “resource allocation sends a direct message about the mission priorities” of community colleges (2006, 96). Rethinking structures and related policies and practices to support organizational change is essential as a symbol for what is valued in the organization.

#### Take Action: Center the Vision in Everyday Decisions

New structures are not easy to implement. Large, diffuse change that impacts a significant number of campus employees or operations can be difficult to manage. But the literature on organizational change in higher education does have a consistent tool—vision and values. Organizational culture, which includes vision and values, provides a cohesive force by creating shared patterns of behaviors and beliefs. By centering vision and values in everyday decisions, individual members of the organization are able to connect their work to the values and overall mission of the organization, even as structures change.

One of the most important activities to center vision and values is repetition. At every opportunity, in written and verbal form, leaders need to repeat elements of the college vision and values and ask campus employees and stakeholders to articulate how individual and unit decisions are consistent with the vision and values. Often, leaders begin to feel as if they are being too repetitive and comment that everyone in the organization must now know the vision and values. But the introduction of new employees and the constantly changing landscape of higher education that introduces new internal and external pressures require a continued articulation of vision and values.

Kezar and Lester (2011), in their work on grassroots, or non-positional, leaders in higher education, described a community college that experienced a demographic change in its surrounding community that resulted in a diverse student population with a primarily Caucasian faculty. A group of faculty and administrators began working from the bottom up to reshape campus values toward diversity and multicultural pedagogy. Common across their tactics was the repetition of the discourse of diversity; they had external speakers come to campus, created new faculty learning communities, supported the work of student groups, presented on demographic data related to their student population, and provided forums to educate faculty colleagues about multicultural pedagogy. The

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community college did experience a change in values over time, with diversity becoming a central aspect of a future strategic plan. Diversity became the value that centered the everyday actions of faculty and staff. Persistence and consistency cannot be discounted as valuable tools in helping to catalyze and sustain change over time.

## Conclusion



Every day on college campuses, faculty, administrators, and staff are engaging in change. Sometimes these are small-scale improvements that seek to address a flaw in practices or to implement a new technology or innovation. Diffusing that change on a broader scale is where the challenge begins. This brief offered four research-based approaches to assist with change across a community college, as well as specific ways to take action.

- Focus on creating an intentional change plan that clearly articulates a set of goals and activities.
- Implement new forms of engagement in decision-making, such as the creation of a leadership team.
- Evaluate and use data that provides accountability to the goals articulated in the plan and additional mechanisms for engagement and ultimately buy-in for needed changes.
- Reinforce vision and values into the everyday work of college constituents.

These recommendations are effective tactics not just for positional leaders, but also for those who are seeking to change from the bottom up. Plan intentionally with transparency and seek authentic engagement to change not just a practice or policy, but social and cultural norms. By doing so, change can and will be sustained.



## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Have an explicit change theory and plan.** Rather than rely entirely on the strategic plan, consider thinking more broadly about what is needed to create change. Effective leaders must articulate an explicit change theory and process. Have a detailed plan that articulates the overall vision, identifies several specific goals, outlines the activities and relevant parties responsible for those activities, and includes an evaluation plan.
- **Develop a leadership team.** Avoid having one brain trust—articulate the value of shared leadership on campus and create a leadership team outside of direct reports. Effective leadership teams need to engage multiple perspectives and represent the constituents of the college, such as faculty, staff, and students; be given the specific charge of critically advising the leader or unit; and constantly question and challenge each other in the decision-making process.
- **Evaluate and assess—communicate the results.** Spend time evaluating data and making meaning through conversation and reflection. For example, create and engage a leadership team with constituents from across the campus that represent different colleges, academic units, and groups. Give members of the community opportunities to make sense of the data and have a voice in how the results are interpreted and acted on.
- **Center the vision in everyday decisions.** Center the vision and values in everyday decisions so that individuals are able to connect their work to the values and overall mission of the organization, even as structures change. At every opportunity, repeat elements of the college vision and values and ask campus employees and stakeholders to articulate how individual and unit decisions are consistent with the vision and values.

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