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EXPLORING CROSS-FUNCTIONAL TEAMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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While higher education provides a pathway to opportunity in America, many postsecondary institutions have low graduation rates, especially those that provide access to students from disadvantaged backgrounds.[1] Race and income are too often predictors of student success.[2]

Colleges and universities must change in order to improve these realities, and to promote that change, the Gates Foundation invests in learning about how institutions transform.[3] Such transformation can take many forms, including new policies, programs, or services that aim to increase access to higher education and improve the quality of that education.[4] However, transformation efforts are hard for a variety of reasons.[5]

One major challenge that institutions face when launching transformation efforts is that they operate in "silos," meaning that they have separate departments—for example, student services, financial aid, and advising—that operate independently with little communication or coordination.[6] Many successful transformation efforts include a core group of people who are working together to influence outcomes on a specific issue.[7] The decentralized nature of most colleges can create challenges to implementing a shared vision and making progress that students can see.[8] Siloed teams may not have access to all the information needed to address a problem adequately, and multiple teams may implement contradictory solutions.[9]

Cross-functional teams (CFTs) are one potential response to the problem of silos. CFTs are defined as staff members from different functional areas working together to achieve common institutional goals.[10] Bringing together members with different specialties can lead to faster transfers of knowledge, fewer redundancies, and higher-quality decisions.[11] But CFTs do not always work effectively: they may have unclear governance, a lack of accountability, or

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unclear goals.[12] There has been little research on CFTs in the context of higher education, so the Gates Foundation engaged MDRC to investigate the question.[13]

Launched in 2021, this project explores how institutions are assembling and using CFTs to advance their transformation efforts. MDRC partnered with three community colleges and one state agency overseeing higher education to explore their efforts to create these cross-functional teams. The researchers set out to document the interpersonal dynamics of these teams and to pilot test a tool at one institution to address barriers to CFTs' smooth operation. This brief shares descriptive findings and recommendations, with the goal of providing funders, researchers, and practitioners suggestions for future research.

About the Project

The researchers identified and made contact with institutions from the Frontier Set (a project on institutional transformation funded by the Gates Foundation) and OnPath (an MDRC project that aimed to improve student persistence and success at community colleges).[14] The project partnered with four institutions that expressed interest, had the ability to participate, and proposed existing CFTs to study in the project: Davidson-Davie Community College (in North Carolina), Hudson Community College (in New Jersey), Union College of Union County (in New Jersey), and the Washington Student Achievement Council, a state agency overseeing higher education in the state of Washington.[15]

Each institution identified one or two CFTs, which all shared a general goal to improve outcomes for students while making them more equitable. MDRC worked with five CFTs across the four institutions to record the composition of the CFTs, identify barriers to their smooth operation, and develop areas for improvements.

Before beginning data collection, the research team conducted a literature scan and organized guiding themes that informed the data-collection activities. They reviewed organizational charts, meeting agendas, project reports, emails, and process maps provided by the CFTs—71 documents in total. They also sent surveys to members of the participating CFTs (58 responded),[16] conducted 25 virtual and in-person interviews with CFT members recommended by the CFT chairs, and observed 6 meetings of CFTs.

In addition to the data gathered, the researchers conducted design work with one of the participating CFTs to develop an early model of a solution to improve its function. To this end, the researchers held a series of meetings with the CFT to identify its barriers to successful operation. The researchers designed a tool that could address those barriers and met with the CFT several times to improve the tool's design. The output of this work was a prototype that the CFT pilot tested for two months.

An Overview of the Institutions and Their Cross-Functional Teams

All participating CFTs aimed to improve enrollment or other administrative processes, with a focus on closing gaps in student success among students from different backgrounds. Specifically, they were involved in the following topics:

- College enrollment. One CFT was working to increase college enrollment, particularly for students from underrepresented populations.

- College admissions. One CFT was working to streamline the college application process. The application process contained confusing questions that the college wanted to improve, particularly for students whose parents did not attend college and students whose first language is not English.

- Student orientation. One CFT was streamlining the student orientation process to reduce the amount of information students received and to provide more clear and inclusive materials for students from a wide range of backgrounds and circumstances.

- Student services. One CFT was working to provide student services in one centralized location in an effort to reduce wait and processing times for administrative processes such as registration and applying for financial aid that might otherwise require students to visit multiple offices.

- Online learning. One CFT was working to improve the online program experience for online learners, with the goals of retaining students, giving students the support that they need, increasing course success rates, and closing gaps in those success rates among races and ethnicities.

Three of the CFTs were formed based on directives from leaders and strategic planning efforts. The other two CFTs were formed by their chairs, who saw an issue and brought the CFT together to address it. Their members represented departments such as enrollment, advising, student affairs, institutional research, information technology, bursar's offices, and registrars. Across all CFTs, over 70 percent of the members were director-level staff members, and the rest reported to the director-level staff members. The size of the CFTs ranged from 4 to 21, with larger ones having two or three chairpeople, while the smallest CFT in the project had one chairperson.

Findings

This project collected data on how the members of the CFTs related to each other, how they coordinated their work, and how they used data about students. While the researchers gathered survey, interview, and observational data on the institutions, they only collected limited data and did not employ a rigorous research design that would support assertions about what elements might have caused certain outcomes. Neither the institutions nor the CFTs were selected randomly, since the researchers recruited from a preexisting subset of institutions and the institutions nominated the CFTs that

participated. The findings from this project can describe how some CFTs operate and can be used to generate hypotheses for future research, but they are not necessarily generally representative of CFTs and colleges elsewhere.

The members of CFTs reported positive relationships with each other.

Good interpersonal relationships can help CFTs to be motivated in pursuing their goals, disciplined in their work, and receptive to ideas from different perspectives.[17] Having open communication among the members can also prevent "groupthink," where members feel pressured to agree with the group's idea at the cost of creativity and individual responsibility.[18]

In interviews, the researchers heard that members in each of the five CFTs liked working with each other. Members said they felt free to share their ideas and opinions and appreciated how the CFT chairs managed them. The researchers also observed in meetings that the chairs in all CFTs frequently welcomed ideas and engagement from the members. CFT chairs encouraged questions and did not brush off ideas or suggestions. In support of these findings, 67 percent of survey respondents agreed that they were comfortable taking personal risks, such as speaking up in a meeting or challenging a proposed plan (29 percent were neutral).[19] However, survey respondents felt mixed about other aspects of their CFTs, as only 50 percent believed that they shared in the decision-making process (41 percent were neutral),[20] and 53 percent felt as one unit with the rest of the team (31 were neutral).[21] These survey responses suggest there is still room for improvement regarding how well the members of these CFTs make decisions and work together.

The relationships among CFT members may have developed out of a shared history. As one CFT member remarked, "Everybody is really comfortable with one another, just because this is probably not the only committee that we're in together." Many respondents said that they were already familiar with other members of their CFTs, as they had previously collaborated with them or were currently collaborating with them on other projects. One respondent said that the CFT addressed disagreements respectfully, as most of the people on the CFT recognized that the respondent had experience in this domain and in managing teams. Another noted that the work in education is difficult and cannot be done by one person, so everyone has to help each other.

CFTs had broad goals, but sometimes lacked internal coordination.

For a CFT to coordinate work from different departments properly, each member should have a shared understanding of the CFT's goals, its planned outcomes, and each member's role.[22] Having a clear plan with measurable outcomes can help CFTs solve problems and implement their tasks, and can encourage cooperation among staff members from different departments.[23] It also increases the motivation and commitment of CFT members.[24]

In interviews, CFT members described broad goals, such as providing "the most comprehensive service to [their] students" or "streamlining the application process," and in the survey, over 80 percent of respondents felt they were aligned on what problem they were tackling. However, in the interviews, some CFT members had different ideas of how, specifically, to advance toward their overall goals,

which suggests that they had not yet made conclusive decisions about which goals to make a priority. For instance, one CFT member said that because that group's project covered so many issues, its members struggled to figure out what to tackle first.

Institution-level challenges affected the CFTs and their relationships with other departments.

CFTs are reliant on senior leaders (such as presidents and chancellors) who provide a vision for how the CFT and other academic and administrative departments can work together to create change, and the resources for them to do so.[25] This vision should clarify the direction in which the institution needs to move, and usually a group within the institution contributes to this vision and develops a strategy for achieving that vision.[26] At the same time, institutions of higher education contend with multiple competing priorities (such as those of administrators, students, teachers, and government regulators), often with few planned procedures on how to deal with conflicts among them.[27] For example, administrators may be looking to institutional metrics such as enrollment, while professors are thinking about learning conditions. While these goals are not necessarily incongruent, a lack of a single direction and efficient allocation of resources among these groups can lead to redundancies or uncoordinated solutions.

CFTs reported that senior leaders would approve of their ideas and get them implemented, but that the CFTs faced significant institution-wide constraints, such as heavy workloads and being understaffed, which could lead to some of the CFTs' work being made a lower priority. CFTs might also lack sufficient direction and coordination from their senior leaders. In one CFT, the members knew that they were contributing to the institution's broader mission, but they could not articulate the specific goals for the CFT itself. The research team believes that this lack of clarity could lead to lack of recognition from their peers and superiors, miscommunication, or multiple initiatives happening at once. One CFT member mentioned confusion in identifying how much of her time she should charge to the CFT versus her other work. She also mentioned how other staff members did not understand the CFT's capabilities and limits, which led to frequently changing requests from other departments. Without coordination between CFTs and other departments, CFTs risk becoming new silos themselves.

CFTs gathered data about students but needed more direct involvement from them.

Although more colleges and universities are using student data to make decisions, the result is not always a better student experience.[28] One explanation for this effect is that there are too many demands for data relative to the institution's capability to analyze and report on data. Another potential issue is that even once they have analyzed and reported on data, institutions may not be prepared to act on it properly. For example, decision makers are not always aware of how to interpret data on inequities and use it to make decisions affecting underrepresented groups.[29]

The CFTs gathered and analyzed student data from surveys, administrative records, and staff members' reports of what students had told them. The CFT members used these data sources to identify the issues that the CFT needed to address. They also mentioned seeking students' perspectives when they were implementing a solution, usually through focus groups and surveys. But respondents believed that they

could be doing even more to gather and incorporate students' perspectives. They mentioned that they could always use more responses from students in their focus groups and surveys. One CFT member noted that the CFT often can only make assumptions about how the students will interpret its programs and any changes they make to them. The research team believes that addressing these assumptions earlier in the process could help forestall any unintended consequences of a given solution.

Designing an Alignment Tool with One of the Cross-Functional Teams

After gathering information from all five CFTs, the researchers worked with one institution to create a prototype of a tool to help address two of the findings discussed earlier: improving internal coordination and the CFT's relationship with other departments. This CFT had difficulty in articulating a goal specific to its work. The researchers believed that this lack of clarity contributed to confusion about the CFT's role when its members met with their supervisors and other departments.

The researchers and the CFT developed a template together that helped the CFT identify institutional goals and specify how the CFT would contribute to them. A set of prompts guided the CFT in identifying the specific problem (or problems) that the institution wanted to address and the metrics the CFT would use to evaluate any potential solution.[30] Another set of prompts asked the members to identify how the CFT could specifically address this problem, what part of the problem it was addressing, and how it could collaborate with other departments or CFTs in this work. To reinforce these goals, the researchers provided a template where the CFT could track and update its goals, along with a regular schedule for its members to review those goals (see the supplementary materials for an example of the goal worksheet and tracker spreadsheet).[31]

During the design meetings, CFT members shared that they found the development process to be helpful in identifying the CFT's specific objectives. They also felt that other departments in their institution could use the prompts the researchers developed with them to clarify their roles and ways of working together.

Like the data-gathering work, this design work suggests that CFTs may need a clear plan for directing their efforts and managing decision points in their projects. Having these plans can help foster short-term wins that achieve objectives and reward the people involved with recognition.[32] Building on this pilot test, future designs for similar CFTs could include materials for chairs to use when assembling their CFTs, planning for their projects, and making decisions. These materials could also include ways to share a CFT's work more widely so that the CFT does not inadvertently work in a silo. Once the CFT has decided to act, it may also need tools to ensure that the project keeps moving forward. People tend not to follow through on all types of significant tasks, from voting to exercising. Planning prompts—simple encouragements to schedule follow-up tasks—can help define what a CFT should do next.[33]

Lessons and Future Directions

Overall, the researchers found positive interpersonal interactions and support within the five CFTs, with some challenges related to goal setting, the use of data for making decisions, alignment with leadership's vision. The design project with one of the CFTs also produced a tool that could help address some of these challenges. As the researchers worked with a small set of CFTs, the following additional areas could also be promising avenues for future research.

Explore the role of CFTs as advocates for change.

Given the strength of the interpersonal relationships within CFTs, there may be different ways to take advantage of them to create coalitions that promote broader change at institutions. It is hard to get an entire institution on board with transformation and systematic change, as change involves undoing current processes and organizational cultures, developing and testing alternatives, and solidifying a new way of operating.[34] In addition, human beings prefer to maintain their current situations and oppose actions that may change those situations in unfamiliar ways.[35]

Beyond their work on specific projects, CFTs can be tapped to motivate other staff members and teams to work toward institutional transformation. This effort would start with recruiting staff members who agree with the vision for change and have influence in multiple parts of the organization. For example, these recruits could illustrate to other staff the reasons for change.

Seek ways to encourage behavioral change among CFT members to ensure a CFT meets its goals or objectives.

Making optimal decisions and acting on them can be difficult. To address this issue, CFTs can reflect on how choices are structured for their individual members, for example, in how a member decides among multiple options or chooses to act (or not act).[36] Self-diagnostic tools such as scorecards can help CFTs evaluate their processes and identify small, contextual factors that prevent individual members from completing their work, such as redundant steps or unclear communication.[37] It would take many observation sessions to understand the idiosyncratic dynamics of any given CFT. However, templates like the one developed by the researchers in the current project could be an easy way to provide some structure to those interactions. Improving the decision-making process as a whole was one of the goals of the researchers, but informing people about common decision-making pitfalls may have limited effect unless they receive intensive training.[38] Future research could examine how to introduce tools and workflows that lead to sustained behavioral change in CFTs with minimal training time.

Explore how CFTs can remain grounded in the student experience.

The researchers did not observe any students in CFT meetings or see any students engaged in ways where they could contribute to designing a solution. The solutions and strategies proposed by the CFTs could focus more on clearly laying out how students can be involved not only in voicing their opinions but also in decision-making; these efforts may include soliciting information from them about their

needs, hearing about barriers colleges can remove from their experiences, and getting them involved in designing and prototyping solutions.

Looking Forward

Cross-functional teams have the potential to help institutions create and sustain desired changes. While CFTs are not the only way to achieve institutional change, they offer a potential mechanism for breaking down silos and addressing institutional problems, and when effective, can merge different skill sets into a cohesive group.[39] This project shed light on barriers to the success of CFTs in higher education, and on some potential ways to overcome those barriers. These findings can contribute to a fuller understanding of the broader role of cross-functional teams in transforming higher education.

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resources for students across the state.

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20. These percentages represent the average of each CFT member's ratings on 9 items (from 1, strongly disagree, to 5, strongly agree), grouped into the categories "disagree" (1 to 2.9), "neutral" (3 to 3.9), and "agree" (4 to 5). The items assessed shared leadership, which involves sharing leadership tasks and responsibilities among the members. See Wood and Fields (2007).
21. These percentage represent the average of each CFT member's ratings on 3 items (from 1, strongly disagree, to 5, strongly agree), grouped into the categories "disagree" (1 to 2.9), "neutral" (3 to 3.9), and "agree" (4 to 5). The items assessed the degree to which the members felt like they were part of a team. See Podsakoff, MacKenzie, and Fetter (1993).
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