

SUPPORTING FRONT-LINE PERSONNEL ON STUDENT SUCCESS TEAMS

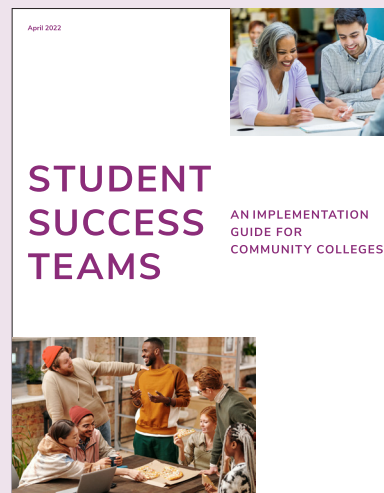
#4 IN THE *BREAKING IT ALL DOWN* SERIES

This is a companion to [Student Success Teams: An Implementation Guide for Community Colleges](#), which is based on over 80 interviews at nine colleges in three states.

This document draws on examples and composites from our original dataset to illustrate important considerations related to SST design.

Phase Two Advisory believes that reform is adaptive, not adoptive. Institutions should take what is shared here and refine it for their own culture and context.

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LEAD FROM THE MIDDLE

Our interviewees made it clear that both senior and mid-level leaders have distinct and essential roles to play in the design and implementation of Student Success Teams (SSTs.) While senior leaders inspire, guide, and support the work, mid-level leaders are best positioned to operationalize the vision and make tactical decisions.¹ Sometimes, mid-level leaders find themselves in a sticky position between senior leaders and front-line personnel, as they try to navigate changes from a place of limited inside knowledge and authority. Nevertheless, **mid-level leaders play an important direct and intermediary role in leading front-line personnel through changes** to roles, workflows, and structures.

In our conversations with colleges, we heard four types of support mid-level leaders should and do provide front-line personnel:

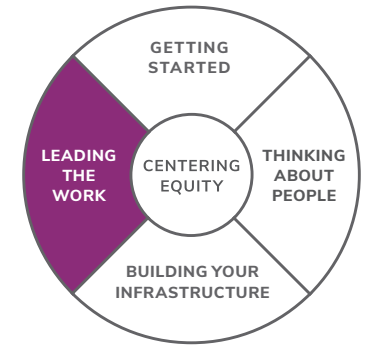
- Anticipating and understanding the ways in which front-line personnel will be affected by the implementation of SSTs
- Advocating on front-line personnel's behalf
- Maintaining open lines of communication between themselves, front-line personnel, and senior leaders
- Developing appropriate supports for front-line personnel

This document provides actionable insights to help mid-level leaders effectively support their team through the SST implementation and launch processes.

As you read the following pages, ask yourself: What does this look like in my college context? And, what strategies can I use to ensure that I lead this process in a way that works for my colleagues who are on the front lines of student support?

- **Mid-level leaders include managers, faculty, classified professionals, and support services administrators that typically report to executive or VP-level leaders, and hold titles such as department chair, dean, or director.**
- **Front-line personnel include advisors, counselors, instructional faculty, and other practitioners who typically report to department chairs, deans, or directors.**

At the colleges in our study, thinking about the “people side” of SST design and implementation meant thinking about roles, workflows, teamwork, and capacity to ensure people had the time and training to be successful in the new structure. The process of designing and implementing any new holistic student support approach, including SSTs, can raise “big feelings.” Stakeholders often report that they understand and believe in Student Success Teams, but feel nervous, anxious, or wary about the change and what it means to them. It is important to acknowledge these feelings, honor them, and let people mourn the sense of loss as their roles evolve and change. Support from leadership in various forms can play an important role in calming these anxieties, thereby creating space for successful SST implementation and launch.



¹See our [Implementation Guide](#) (p. 20-23) for more insights into the different leadership roles in SST design and implementation, and the relationship between them.

ANTICIPATE AND UNDERSTAND THE EFFECTS ON FRONT-LINE PERSONNEL

From the start, mid-level leaders should take time to anticipate — or proactively think through and strategically plan for — the ways in which front-line personnel will be affected by SST implementation. Anticipating what will change for front-line personnel lays the groundwork to provide the advocacy, communication, and support needed to minimize any confusion, anxiety, or resistance to change that can arise from individuals being asked to engage in new or revised professional roles.

At the colleges in our study, mid-level leaders used the **implementation planning phase** to anticipate, understand, and plan for support. The implementation planning phase is a distinct phase before launch that **addresses the “how,”** forcing more nuanced discussions around team roles, responsibilities, structures, and tools. During this phase, mid-level leaders asked themselves:

- What changes will front-line personnel be asked to make?
- How will front-line personnel's jobs be different, and in what ways will they be the same?
- Which other college departments or partners will be affected by these changes, and how?
- What anxieties might these changes bring up?

In other words, implementation planning creates built-in opportunities to **pause and reflect on the impact of potential changes before proceeding.** By asking yourself similar questions, you can identify what to advocate for to senior leadership, what to communicate to front-line personnel, and what supports to provide.

What types of changes might mid-level leaders anticipate? Based on our interviews, the shift to SSTs involves “quite a learning curve” which requires faculty and staff to learn how to:

- **Shift mindsets** from advising-as-registration to advising-as-shepherding-students-to-completion.
- **Build skills** related to revised roles, workflows, and technology.
- **Work cross-functionally** across offices and departments to provide cohort-specific expertise.

In anticipation of these learning needs, mid-level leaders can develop plans to create time and space for professional development,² while simultaneously navigating senior-level support and resource allocations.

² See our companion resource, [“Professional Learning for the “How” of Student Success Teams.”](#) for additional insight on understanding and supporting these professional learning needs.

ADVOCATE ON BEHALF OF FRONT-LINE PERSONNEL

At many colleges in our study, front-line personnel were asked to continue doing “business-as-usual” student support while also planning and preparing for SST implementation and launch. Overwork and burnout were real possibilities. As one interviewee noted, “You can’t stop taking care of students. But you can’t expect someone to take care of the students and do the change work all at the same time.” **Mid-level leaders — who often have more dedicated time for change management and strategic planning — can be powerful advocates for front-line personnel when it comes to workload management.** Mid-level leaders work directly with front-line personnel, and subsequently have a front seat to the challenges they confront day-to-day. At the same time, mid-level leaders have access to senior leaders, enabling them to share those challenges and help senior leaders understand what is required to better support the individuals directly supporting students. Mid-level leaders typically advocate for front-line personnel in three broad areas:

| | WHY THEY MATTER | STRATEGIES FOR MID-LEVEL LEADERS ³ |
|-------------------------------------|---|--|
| Boundaries | Depending on the type of SST ⁴ at a given college, front-line personnel may find themselves trying to balance their primary roles with their team responsibilities. They may also need to think about how to bound their professional scope while collaborating with others. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meet regularly to foster communication across reporting lines and better support front-line personnel on the respective teams. • Facilitate conversations about areas of distinction and overlap across roles, helping team members clarify what is and is not within each of their scopes. • Provide opportunities for SSTs to meet with other programs (e.g., equity-focused cohort programs) to discuss strategies for coordination. |
| Compensation | Building out the systems and infrastructure to undergird the work of SSTs requires focused time beyond front-line personnel’s day-to-day work. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where appropriate within your college context, consider buy-out time for chairs, design leads, and others involved to ensure that a person (or set of key people) can shepherd the design and implementation process. • Upon launch, advocate for stipends or hybrid practitioner/coordinator positions to ensure that front-line personnel who take on SST leadership roles are compensated for any additional duties. • Communicate “up” so that senior leaders understand the workload implications of SST implementation and launch, and can identify resources or refine plans accordingly. |
| Sustainable staffing support | Ensuring the long-term sustainability of staffing SSTs requires a great deal of attention to team members’ workload and stress levels, as well as strategic use of resources. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with HR to identify workable strategies for turning buy-out time into formal line-item positions embedded in institutional structures. • Advocate for new positions or personnel lines to support procedural aspects of advising or help students navigate appropriate resources. • Support cross-training opportunities to ensure that team functions are filled even when key personnel are out of the office. |

³ Throughout the remaining pages, examples of strategies and tactics come from the colleges in our study, as well as Phase Two’s work around the country with other colleges engaged in holistic student support reforms. Additional strategies can be found in our [Implementation Guide](#) (p. 20-23).

⁴ See our [Implementation Guide](#) (p. 9-11) or our companion resource [Understanding Different Types of Student Success Teams](#), for a refresher on the three types of teams identified in our study.

MAINTAIN OPEN LINES OF COMMUNICATION

Effective communication is critical to establishing trust and fostering transparency during the transition to SSTs. Mid-level leaders have regular contact with senior leaders and front-line personnel, allowing them to serve an important translational role. Key principles mid-level leaders shared with us to navigate this role while supporting front-line personnel included:

| | WHY IT MATTERS | STRATEGIES FOR MID-LEVEL LEADERS |
|---|---|--|
| Communicating in clear and timely manners about decisions and expectations | At several colleges we heard personnel share that they wished the college was “more forthcoming” about where their level of commitment was and how decisions were being made. Being upfront about timelines, workflows, and the north star is crucial for mid-level leaders as they help front-line personnel navigate change. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To the extent possible, let front-line personnel know who is making decisions, how they are making them, and the why or why not behind the decision. • As you articulate and clarify the expectations within an HSS approach, help front-line personnel start to refine their professional identities — collaboratively identifying where evolving roles align and where they remain distinct. |
| Navigating the different types and levels of communication | Navigating change means navigating communication between different stakeholder groups. Front-line personnel are acutely aware of the difference between messaging (e.g., making the case, celebrating progress) and communication (e.g., delivering action plan updates and adjustments), both of which serve important and necessary purposes. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be sure to communicate more “boots on the ground stuff” in addition to cheerleading. • Share student-facing communications with front-line personnel in advance to ensure they have access to (and can provide feedback on) the information students receive. • Work with senior leaders to ensure consistent messaging, while also monitoring the timing and flow of communication to front-line personnel and students. |
| Elevating the perspectives and skills of front-line personnel by getting their ongoing input | Creating space for feedback during the design and implementation planning phases helps create a collective understanding and solid foundation from which to build. Informal and formal mechanisms for feedback are equally important after SSTs launch to allow for continuous improvement and evolution. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage senior leaders to hold open forums throughout the process, and record meetings for non-attendees to ensure information dissemination is not confined to those who were “in the room.” • Attend department meetings to literally meet front-line personnel where they are. • If starting small before scaling up, give front-line personnel voice and choice in participating in SSTs. • For continuous improvement, consider developing an advisory board, creating a means for SSTs to share institutional barriers they are identifying in their work, and carving out time to pause, reflect, and iterate. |

DEVELOP APPROPRIATE SUPPORTS

Beyond skillfully managing communication, mid-level leaders also play a central role in developing the appropriate culture, conditions and resources to support front-line leaders.⁵ This includes:

| | WHY IT MATTERS | STRATEGIES FOR MID-LEVEL LEADERS |
|---|---|--|
| Committing to a norm of collaboration and figuring things out together | Colleges we spoke with shared their efforts to navigate historical contexts and relationships, which at times had included “only-sometimes” collaboration and “check-the-box work” with faculty and governance. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bring together stakeholders to create shared definitions and shift language (e.g., initiative vs. core function) to instill confidence in the longevity of the work. • Create a faculty tri-chair model to establish a conduit for cross-functional communication and to help build trust. • Bring together key stakeholders across governance and collective bargaining units to create job descriptions. • Collaborate across functional units to clarify professional roles and workloads, including contractual questions and boundaries. |
| Supporting innovative thinking and risk-taking | Front-line personnel and leaders at various levels all spoke about campus cultural challenges related to innovative thinking and risk-taking. One mid-level leader shared, “Campus culture values certainty and fears failure, making change management challenging.” | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with senior leaders to frame the work as hard and uncomfortable, but iterative and important. • Emphasize new norms and models, embracing imperfect or messy solutions. • Empower front-line personnel to try new things and “fail forward.” |

⁵ See our [Implementation Guide](#) (p. 27-28) and our companion resource [Professional Learning for the “How” of Student Success Teams](#) for an in-depth discussion around creating time and space for professional learning and ensuring there is a mechanism for putting professional learning into practice.

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This project was generously funded by The College Futures Foundation.

Want to learn more? Visit www.phasetwoadvisory.com/sst-guide

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