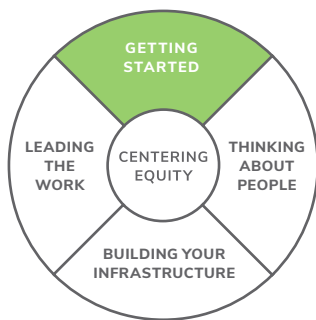


GETTING STARTED



Types of Cohort-Based SSTs

SSTs sound like a simple concept. In reality, they are not so simple. Because SSTs are cohort-based, there are usually multiple SSTs operating at a given college — each assigned to their own cohort. Colleges might assign students from each Guided Pathways meta-major to an SST, or assign all military veterans to one SST and foster youth to another.

Looking at the nine colleges in our study, we identified three different SST designs. Importantly, all three focus on supporting groups of students — this differentiates them from campus-wide teams that work behind-the-scenes to analyze institutional data or develop college-wide success strategies. Beyond SSTs' common focus on taking a holistic support approach, the three types differ quite a bit in their structure, workflow, and how they reach students.

As shown in the table on the following page, these types of teams build on one another, and grow in their sophistication and ability to provide personalized support for each student in the cohort. We typically see colleges starting their SST journey by implementing cohort-based backend coordinating teams. Once those are launched, colleges iterate, improve, and deepen their work to enable networked support teams, and ultimately inch towards a networked single point of contact approach.

For this study, we define SSTs as:

Cross-divisional teams of individuals who collaboratively engage in cohort management to support and assist a group of students from entry to completion, with a focus on equitable outcomes.

At its core, this means that a team structure:

- Identifies cohorts of students
- Assigns them to a team, and
- Provides cohort-based case management to meet students' needs in and out of the classroom in proactive and personalized ways.

Types of Cohort-Based SSTs

	PURPOSE	IMPACT
ROOTED IN EQUITY + STUDENT EXPERIENCE		
BACKEND COORDINATING	Work behind the scenes to coordinate support for students as a group; help streamline and improve programming and policies.	Students do not always know there is a team working behind the scenes on their behalf. The team's impact is felt in smoother policies, stronger programming, and engaging activities and workshops.
NETWORKED SUPPORT	Create an easily identifiable network of people students can go to for a variety of supports; build communication channels across team members to streamline and integrate their activities.	Team members are listed in a student's portal. Students receive targeted messaging from members of their team. When students reach out, the team member they contact has information to guide the conversation.
NETWORKED SINGLE POINT OF CONTACT	Provide personalized, holistic case management; ensure the single point of contact has access to behind-the-scenes data and resources to enable holistic engagement.	Students have a single "go to" for questions and concerns, and that person reaches out to regularly. That person helps to connect students to others as necessary with a warm hand off and follows up to ensure support was received and student issues are resolved.

Teams in Action: Evolution in Central NY

As part of the college's Guided Pathways and Holistic Student Support redesign efforts four years ago, campus stakeholders engaged in data exploration and process mapping,⁸ and discovered they needed a more coordinated, intentional system. "We needed to do more for our students. [They] bounced around here to there, and we had pockets of offices."

Using grant funds, the college built a Networked Support SST structure. They developed a Completion Coach role to provide case management; assigned professional advisors to academic programs; maintained instructional faculty advising; and implemented an early alert system. The college quickly realized the coach and professional advisor roles overlapped, and both had unmanageable caseloads (up to 900:1 for Completion Coaches). Moreover, students were confused as to who to go to — coach, advisor, or faculty.

Central NY Small CC decided to create a Networked Single Point of Contact, combining the coach and advisor roles to create an integrated holistic support position — the Student Support Advocate (SSA). SSAs provide academic advising and holistic case management to students in a meta-major and are students' first point of contact for questions and concerns. To effectively support students in areas outside of their expertise, SSAs work with their dean, an assigned financial aid advisor, and faculty members as necessary.

By combining two roles into a single first point of contact, the college was able to reduce caseloads closer to their goal of 300:1 and help students navigate the support ecosystem while building meaningful relationships. As one SSA explained, "I am just amazed at how much my role improved — [especially] my ability to help students and my level of connection with students over time."

⁸ See, for example, MDRC. (2019). [Step-by-step guide to creating a process map for higher education.](#)



Building on Existing Cohort Programs While Going to Scale

In designing SSTs, many colleges confront tensions between broad-based teams and targeted, culturally responsive ones. They wonder how to scale SSTs without losing the personalized, identity-forward, and focused work that successful cohort programs already provide. It is important to remember from the outset that SSTs should supplement, not replace, other equity-focused programming.

The colleges we spoke with tried to maintain, elevate, and learn from programs like Umoja, Puente, MESA, EOPS, and TRIO, so they could integrate the expertise of program staff into the SST design and implementation process. They spent time learning from staff in these programs to better understand programs' institutional histories, funding requirements, and practices. They also explored the unique needs of the students served by each program and potential areas of overlap and complementarity. Schools in our study deliberately connected equity programs and SSTs by:

- Bringing program staff into design discussions as experts in equity-forward case management and holistic support
- Collaborating across programs and SSTs on design to help reduce duplication of services and create streamlined communications strategies
- Including cohort programs in conversations to align data, technology platforms, and use across programs and SSTs
- Regularly meeting together to build relationships, share resources, and communicate across cohort programs and SSTs

For most colleges the biggest tactical question was how to support students who are eligible for both existing cohort-based programs and SSTs. Colleges emphasized the need for focused and intentional efforts to (a) clearly differentiate roles and value-add of each service and program, (b) navigate professional relationships and boundaries, and (c) coordinate communication from and between the two types of support so that students are not confused. Depending on campus dynamics, we saw colleges in our study take one of three approaches to engaging students in cohort programs, SSTs, or both.

1. Permitting Eligible Students to be Served by Both an SST and an Existing Cohort-Based Program. Based on the belief that more support is better, students receive outreach from both and are at liberty to reach out to whomever they choose. However, this risks student-level confusion from having multiple supports and information overload, and raises questions of which students get to access multiple programs and which students may be left out altogether.

2. Creating a Tiered Approach that Connects Students in Existing Cohort-Based Programs to an SST for Certain Functions. For at least one of the schools in our study, existing cohort-based programs are the front-line of contact for their students. Nevertheless, those students can still also engage with the broader services offered by an academic-program-based SST, such as career workshops or faculty engagement. This seems to be the ideal situation because it streamlines student contacts while maintaining access to as many supports as possible.

3. Assigning Students to One or the Other. This approach simplifies student contact, avoids mixed messages, and ensures that compliance for specific programs is met. Unfortunately, it also risks siloing or excluding students in existing cohort-based programs from the larger ecosystem of supports on campus. This is especially true if SSTs are connected to academic program and career information, as students in existing cohort-based programs would not receive that information.



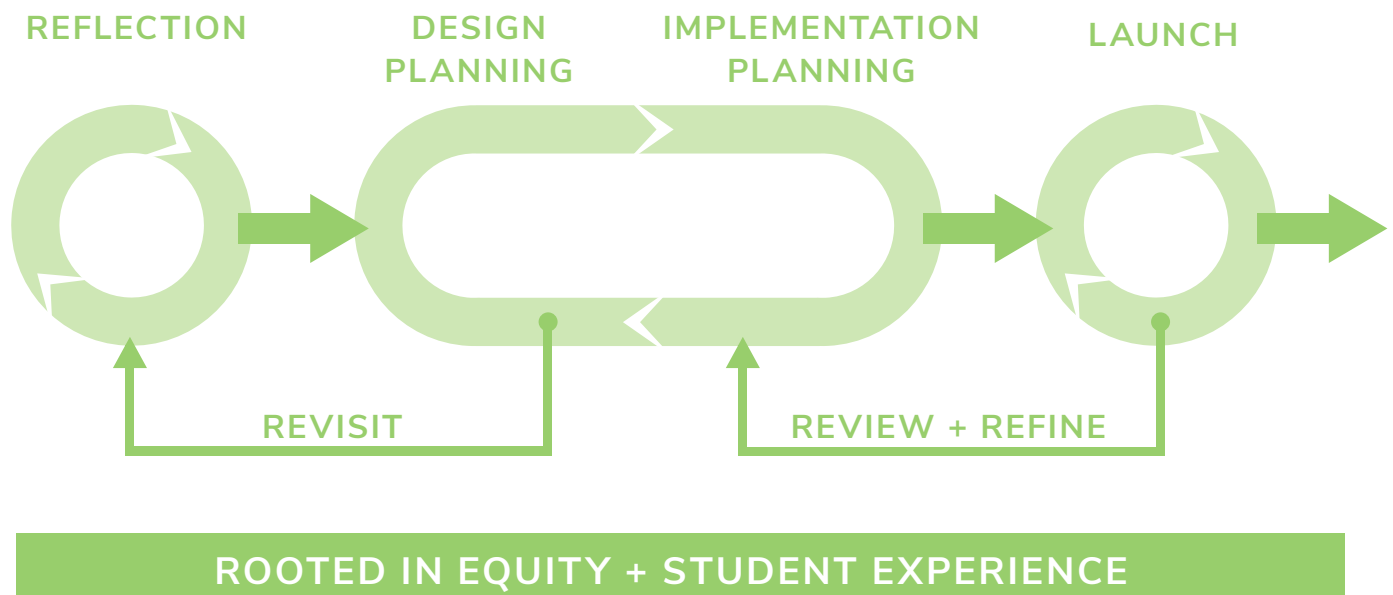
SST Development Phases

There is no standard timeline or set of steps to designing and implementing SSTs. The process is much messier than a recipe, timeline, or road map.

There is a common set of phases but the time colleges spend in each phase varies substantially. Some colleges spend a lot of time in the reflection phase, needing to dig into their student data and understand what works and doesn't. Others are able to quickly jump to envisioning a new holistic student support ecosystem, but need extra time to work out the implementation planning logistics. The iterative nature of the work means colleges often cycle among phases as shown in the diagram below. Some realize during design and implementation that they need to revisit their "why" and return to the reflection phase. Others realize after launch that they need to refine their design or implementation planning. Still others iterate their work to move ever-closer to a networked single point of contact.

Regardless, the most successful colleges are those that commit to a design and run with it, understanding the delicate balance between substantive planning and the need to act. Throughout the process, they also are thinking one to two steps ahead, constantly fine-tuning and refining their work while also **keeping an eye on a very clear vision of where they want to end up.**

Developing Your SST: A Process



Reflection: What is Happening at our Institution?

WHY? This first phase isn't SST-specific. It is the prep work that identifies SSTs as an approach a college wants to take and begins to build a coalition of the willing. Usually, the reflection phase is part of a larger set of efforts, such as Guided Pathways redesign, joining Achieving the Dream, or Title III/V strategic planning.

WHAT? Colleges recognize that reform needs to happen. By exploring data, talking to students, and interrogating their practices, colleges realize that their student support ecosystem needs to be refined. SSTs emerge as a potential strategy to address challenges arising from this institutional reflection, and the college starts to communicate the “why” of their intended work to the broader college community.

Activities during the reflection phase include:

- Data (quantitative and qualitative) exploration centered on understanding the experiences of different student populations, particularly racially-minoritized, low-income, first-generation college-going students, and those who are struggling or have left the institution
- Case making with a larger community to start building consensus around the need for change
- Activities such as process mapping⁹ to uncover the root causes of challenges revealed in the data analysis
- Beginning to craft a vision for what the goals and success metrics for any change might be

WHO? To get the work done, colleges convene cross-functional groups of individuals from across the college; not just within student services, but also IR, clerical staff who engage directly with students, and students themselves. This means that the folks involved in the original reflection phase for holistic student services reform may not be the ones who are ultimately responsible for designing and launching it. But, those involved in reflection should be the individuals who have access to data, and who have enough connections in the college community to share their message widely and effectively.

TO WHAT END? A deeper, equity-forward understanding of and empathy for students at your institution; a commitment to creating a strategic, personalized, and proactive support ecosystem for every student; identification of SSTs as a strategy to create that system.



⁹ See, for example, MDRC. (2019). [Step-by-step guide to creating a process map for higher education.](#)

Design Planning: How Will We Fix It?

WHY? A cross-functional group of folks come together to figure out what the future state will look like: What kind of team are you building? What problem is it trying to solve and for whom? What do you think it will do and who will be on it?

WHAT? The design group engages in an imagining process that identifies a team structure that will meet the challenges identified during the reflection phase. Every college builds teams to meet the needs of its students and to fit in its constraints, but the three types of teams we identified across our nine colleges are a useful starting place to frame potential design decisions. While not all-inclusive, the table on the next page provides a sampling of how colleges might design teams differently depending on their intended outcomes and institutional constraints. The key is that the design group makes decisions regarding their future team structure.

WHO? Successful design groups are made up of individuals from across the college, but ideally are led by those directly involved in supporting students and include representatives from governance and collective bargaining structures. Remember to also include students! This ensures that designs are attentive to the realities on the ground. At the same time the design group needs to include leaders who can make decisions and ensure that future design plans are aligned with broader institutional goals and contexts. The design team must also have clear insight from leadership on who will “approve” the final design and what considerations will guide that decision.

TO WHAT END? An SST design vision — a broad sense of what SSTs will look like, do, and accomplish to support equitable student outcomes, and how that success will be measured. This vision will serve as a “north star” and set of guideposts for implementation decisions.



Designing Student-Focused Teams

Keep in mind, these types of teams build on one another, and grow in their sophistication and ability to provide personalized cohort management for each student in the cohort.

QUESTIONS TO ASK	Who should be on the team, and what role will they play?	What do team members need to do or focus on?	How will team members work together?	What tools will the team need to use?
BACKEND COORDINATING	Individuals who can provide broad expertise related to policies and programming connected to the identified cohort while maintaining most of their traditional professional scope	Review cohort-specific data, policies and processes to identify trends and pressure points; take action to address issues and report on progress towards improvements	Meet monthly; refine and/or develop new policies and processes in between meetings	Robust data infrastructure; real-time outcomes data that can be disaggregated
NETWORKED SUPPORT	Individuals who can provide targeted expertise and work as a cohesive team to establish integrated communications and support to the identified cohort while maintaining most of their traditional professional scope	Learn from one another to develop team expertise, identify trends, and respond to student needs; develop support and communications (e.g., milestone messaging and workshops)	Meet weekly or bi-weekly; coordinate as needed between meetings to plan and host programming	Systems to communicate with students; user-friendly access to real-time data
NETWORKED SINGLE POINT OF CONTACT	Individuals who can serve as single points of contact (e.g., success coach, advisor) and others who can support them with targeted expertise for the identified cohort	Points of contact monitor caseload to identify students in need of support; the team meets to talk about specific students (e.g., early alerts) and supports the single point of contact with consultations and warm-handoffs	Single point of contact and team lead meet weekly, bringing in other network members as needed; communicate regularly in between meetings	Case management systems, flags or other mechanisms to identify students with specific needs via real-time data

Implementation Planning: How Will We Do it?

WHY? Once colleges have decided the driving purpose of their SST and what they want students to experience, the focus then must turn to how to bring this purpose to fruition. Addressing the “how” forces more nuanced discussions around team roles, responsibilities, structures, and tools. This requires implementation planning — a distinct phase before the implementation itself.

WHAT? We find that the most successful colleges spend substantial time in this phase, figuring out what needs to happen, planning for challenges and contingencies, and clarifying new workflows before they move to the actual launch. (See sidebar for questions to consider.) **The remainder of this guide is structured around key considerations that should be built into your design and implementation planning.**

During this phase, colleges also dig into the constraints that may limit how they can make their planned design real. In fact, they may need to make some modifications to the original design once those constraints become evident.

Though the focus of this phase is on planning, don't forget to communicate updates on progress and important decisions, especially with governance, collective bargaining, and other individuals whose work will most likely shift once the teams are launched. These communications should include practical information and not simply focus on messaging or buy-in. Also, think about professional learning that will be required, and keep messaging the “why” and the north star of the SST approach.

WHO? Implementation planning groups (often conceived of as “work groups”) need to think about the various implications of the design on everything from roles and responsibilities to workflows and underlying technology. This means that implementation planning needs to be led by those most affected by the change and who are frankly the most expert in the work that needs to be done. They also need a clear understanding of their authority to act on implementation decisions, so these work groups need strong involvement, support, or advocacy from senior leaders. Work groups also need to include individuals from other offices that are implicated in the new design, including IT, IR, and HR, as their understanding of and input into the changes will be critical for building out new structures and roles as the teams evolve.

TO WHAT END? An implementation plan, and the groundwork for the SST approach. Procedures and practices are clarified so that teams can jump into their new workflows once you are ready to launch, and can be assessed to make sure they don't create new inequities.

Questions at this phase get more granular. They also continue to vary across colleges and the “right” answer will be highly contextual. Key things to think about include:

- Do you want to roll SSTs out in phases? Or do you want to start at scale, making the change happen for the entire institution all at once?
- How will you cohort your students? How many teams will you have, and how many students will each serve?
- What data will you need to collect to measure success and build continuous improvement into your process? How will you access it?
- What practices, procedures, or protocols will you build to ensure consistency and quality across teams?
- What underlying technologies or tools will teams need?

Launch: Let's Try it!

WHY? At some point, you just need to get the work going and launch the SSTs. It's important to acknowledge that this first foray into implementation is unlikely to be the last version. Rather, the first semester of launch is likely to be a period of exploration, challenge, and learning. We had one college refer to this as “the first pancake”—it's edible, but it's ugly.

WHAT? In addition to supporting students via SSTs, during this phase, it's important to establish who is responsible for the maintenance and sustainability of the teams as an institutional structure. This person (or at some colleges, small group of people) will develop mechanisms like check-in meetings, progress reports, or data collection to understand what is working and what is not. You'll want to think about which things need to be addressed immediately and which ones you can address later in a more formal process of continuous improvement and refinement. You should also continue to engage in professional learning related to individuals' new roles.

TO WHAT END? SSTs! And a plan for continuous improvement.

Continuous Improvement: How Can We Make it Better?

It's important to figure out what you've learned from your “first pancake” and identify ways to make it better through a continuous improvement process. This requires self-reflection even as you continue to engage in success team activities. Data collection and analysis — both quantitative and qualitative — offer important insight in this process, particularly in relation to equitable student outcomes.

Compare data collected to the markers of success that you identified at the outset. Once you've engaged in some reflection, you will be able to think about which pieces of your model need to be refined and changed, and how you will launch those refinements in future semesters.

