LEADING THE WORK

SSTs require different types of expertise during different phases and are inherently cross-divisional and cross-functional. This makes SST design and implementation leadership critical, yet complex.

Higher education leans towards distributed and bottom-up leadership, but our interviewees made it clear that both senior and mid-level leaders have distinct and essential roles to play. Without strong involvement of senior leadership, mid-level leaders are left with (a) an unclear vision for the end goal; (b) lack of authority to implement work across functional areas; (c) a culture of talking rather than acting; and/or (d) not enough resources for high-quality design and implementation. Implementation is effective when senior and mid-level leaders are aligned in the goals for SSTs, understand and support their respective authorities, and work together to achieve both planning and launching SSTs.

Leading from the Middle, and the Top

Although there are common hallmarks of effective leaders our interviewees identified (see sidebar), these traits are enacted differently across leadership levels and contexts. Based on our interviews, colleges want senior leaders who **inspire, guide, and support** SST design and implementation efforts on campus. Mid-level leaders are subsequently empowered to operationalize the vision and make tactical decisions.

Our interviewees were clear that, when it comes to SST design and implementation, **"bottom up" does not mean "bottom only."** Mid-level leaders are often caught in an awkward position leading the work but constrained by the limitations of their positions. Senior leaders play an important role in helping mid-level leaders move the work forward when they cannot do it alone.

Importantly, leadership is both contextual and relative. Mid-level leaders are often viewed as senior leaders in relation to frontline personnel; and senior leaders still have an additional layer of leadership above them in terms of boards and system officers.

On the following pages are definitions along with important responsibilities for senior and mid-level leaders to build into your college's SST plans.
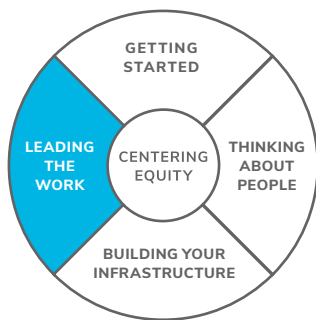
HALLMARKS OF EFFECTIVE LEADERS

- **Get ongoing input from front-line personnel, trusting their perspective and skill**

- **Support innovative thinking and risk taking; normalize iterating and improving**

- **Make clear decisions, communicating WHO makes the final decisions and HOW**

- **Make efforts to connect with the day-to-day student experience**

Senior Leaders

SET THE VISION. Express a vision for SSTs that includes their purpose and importance for student success, providing a clear model for mid-level leadership to focus their work.

BRIDGE ACADEMIC AND STUDENT AFFAIRS. Coordinate and communicate across the traditional silos to ensure consistent messaging and to bolster the cross-divisional and cross-functional nature of SSTs.

PROVIDE SUPPORT AND RESOURCES. Demonstrate clear support for SSTs. This includes providing verbal support; securing funds or personnel to support implementation plans; and translating the value and urgency of holistic student support efforts to their higher ups and boards to garner necessary resources.

EMPOWER OTHERS. Convey confidence in mid-level leaders, and back mid-level decisions whenever possible. Understand when to let the middle lead — typically around questions of design, workflow, or day-to-day practice — and when to step in to make hard calls.

TAKE ACTION. Know when it is time to stop talking or planning and move forward.

Mid-Level Leaders

PROVIDE CONNECTION TO BROADER COLLEGE WORK. Participate in higher-level discussions so that their perspectives and needs are incorporated into any final decisions made by senior leadership and align with other institutional and departmental efforts.

INFORM THE REFLECTION PHASE. Participate in planning meetings and professional learning opportunities such as institutes and trainings. Such an approach keeps them involved in planning and decision making while simultaneously providing them with support to take a stronger leadership role as implementation processes evolve.

LEAD THE SUBSEQUENT PHASES. Make tactical decisions as they are empowered to do so. Meet regularly across functions, team types, and divisions to create collaborative planning networks and generate a more comprehensive understanding of SSTs. Create and lead an iterative process to continue refining the SST model.

SUPPORT FRONT-LINE STAFF. Anticipate and understand the ways in which front-line advisors and coaches will be affected by changes. Maintain open lines of communication to address concerns, develop appropriate supports, and advocate on their behalf to ensure they are able to focus on their core responsibilities.

Below are two vignettes that illustrate the need for aligned leadership. Southern CA Medium-Large CC8 exemplifies what happens when middle and senior leaders are not on the same page, whereas Central CA Medium CC illustrates the power of aligned leadership.

Teams in Action: Too Much Autonomy in Southern California

At Southern CA Medium-Large CC8, senior leaders were verbally supportive of SSTs, building them into their Guided Pathways plans and identifying counselors for the teams. To not be "top down," they left the planning and implementation solely to work groups of mid-level leaders. The original SST proposal from these work groups was rejected by senior leadership, leaving the mid-level leaders feeling like they had been asked to do work that led nowhere. One design team member said, "We were on the right track in terms of conceptualizing it… [but] realized in the long run they weren't committed to this."

Senior leadership remained hands off during implementation planning. Mid-level leaders expressed confusion with regards to the vision for SSTs, and felt that they did not have the political, fiscal, or technological resources to launch the teams. For example, mid-level leaders did not have authority to connect the teams to college infrastructure such as the counseling appointment scheduling system or website. They felt that the teams were not explained or promoted to students or others in the college.

Ultimately, mid-level leaders felt that senior leaders avoided "difficult conversations," leading them to wonder: "Is our institutional response genuine, or just reactive…? Just follow the crowd or are we trying to make big change?" SST implementation at this college was proceeding at a "slow pace."

Teams in Action: Aligned Leadership in Central California

At Central CA Medium CC, senior leaders were also vocally supportive of SSTs and wanted the work to be led by mid-level personnel. Senior leaders said, "This has required key people to do the work on the ground directly with the programs to figure out what it logistically, operationally looks like." However, unlike at Southern CA Medium-Large CC8, mid-level leaders were not left alone to figure out design and implementation. Instead, senior and mid-level leaders met regularly to discuss progress, next steps, decision points, and resource needs.

This structure enabled mid-level leaders to do tactical planning while senior leaders stepped in to make decisions when necessary. The Vice President overseeing the work said there were times they needed to say, "We'll just try it… If we don't invest and try, we aren't going to do it." Senior leaders also ensured that mid-level leaders were appropriately resourced. They found funds to buy out mid-level leaders for design, implementation, and sustainability, and used their positions to give mid-level leaders authority to make decisions and get people to listen to them.

As a result, although mid-level leaders expressed that SST design and implementation was challenging and exhausting, they felt supported and valued throughout the process. The college was also able to launch their SSTs at scale during the pandemic and continues to sustain and improve them.

Transparency and Support in Action

We know most leaders want to display the characteristics we described earlier, but sometimes intent doesn't translate to action. Here are specific things you can do to nurture aligned leadership.

Foster Transparency

- Communicate clear expectations around timelines, workflows, and the north star

- Hold open forums at various points of SST design and implementation

- Provide context regarding the why, why now, and why not

- Answer questions as they arise and follow up when answers are not readily available

- Record meetings for non-attendees to ensure information dissemination is not confined to those who were "in the room"

- Engage institutional partners such as existing cohort-based programs, IT, IR, and collective bargaining from the very beginning

Provide Tangible Support

- Provide resources, incentives, and professional learning

- Give advisors, counselors and other front-line practitioners voice and choice in participation on SSTs

- Acknowledge a voice is heard even if an idea isn't possible

- Acknowledge and celebrate small wins

- Make space to hear about institutional barriers to student outcomes and incorporate proposals for possible solutions

At the senior-level of leadership, this also includes:

- Fund work appropriately

- Balance do-ers with decision-makers on teams

- Emphasize new norms that embrace the iterative and sometimes imperfect approach to design and implementation (making "the first pancake"!)

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