

# The Logic of Creating Effective Systemic Change:

*How Five CBD Case Study Colleges Have Gone About Creating  
a Culture of Student Success*

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“white paper”



## **The concept of “systemic change”**

How can community colleges organize their efforts to pursue large-scale and lasting systemic change in the context of an agenda centered on student success and completion? That is the question this MDRC white paper addresses.

One thing seems clear: Changing the experiences of students means changing the roles of the advisors, instructors, and other members of the campus community with whom students come in contact. These role changes involve changes in *actions*, to be sure, but they are likely to involve changes in *attitudes* and *beliefs* as well, as people come to a new understanding of their institution’s mission and of how their own work promotes that mission. Organizational change theorists refer to this process as “sense-making” (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Kezar, 2013).

The paper presents a research-based model of the change process and sets forth eight key factors that, the literature suggests, contribute to sense-making and are therefore important for change to take hold. It also provides examples of how these factors have played out to date in five colleges that are participating in the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation’s Completion by Design initiative (CBD) and that have been the focus of case studies conducted by the MDRC research team. While the paper is grounded in the experiences of these CBD colleges, it is not intended to review or summarize those experiences. Rather, the paper’s broader aim is to stimulate a larger discussion of the ways in which colleges can initiate and support institutional changes aimed at helping more students attain success.

## A conceptual model of the systemic change process

**Figure 1**

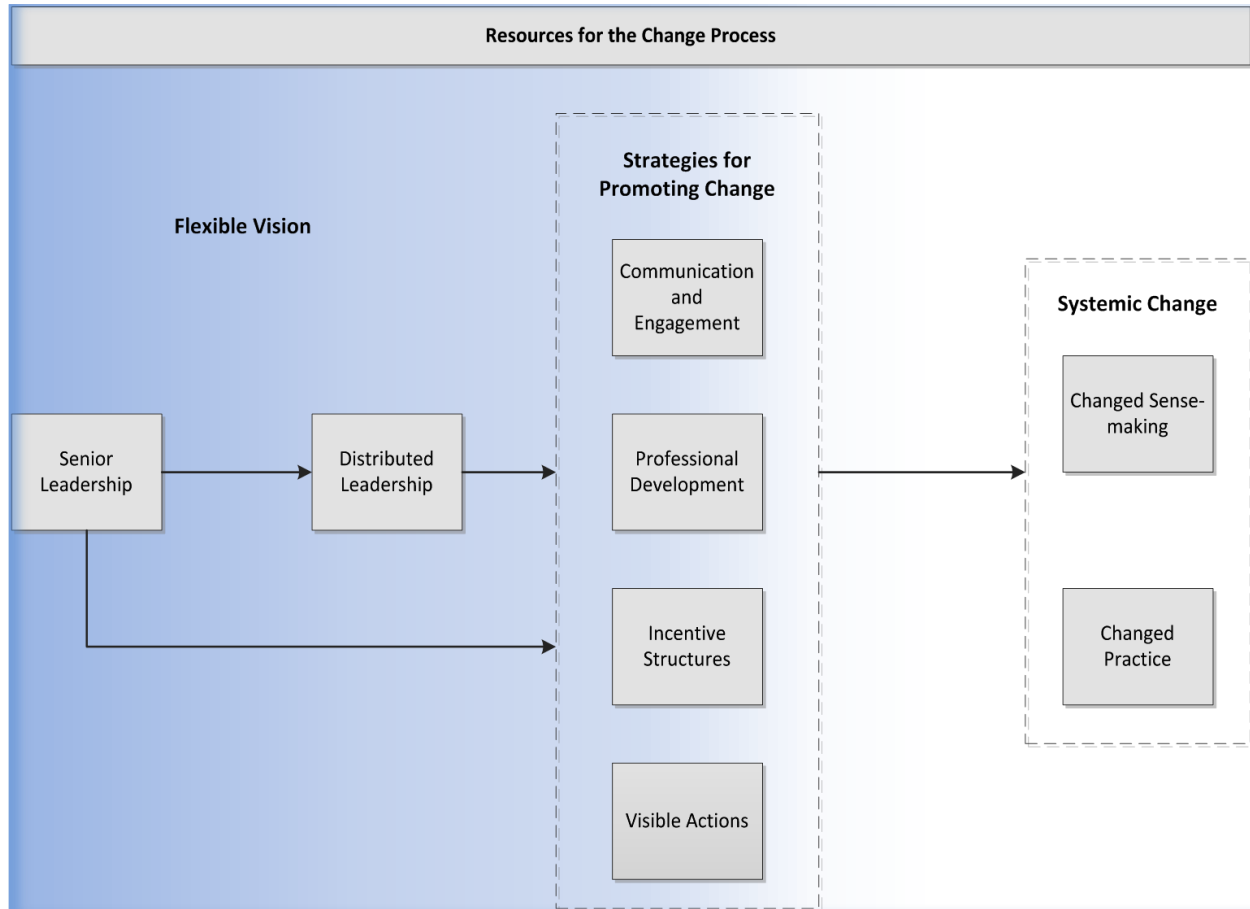


Figure 1 illustrates the systemic change process. The model may be helpful to college leaders planning systemic change efforts because it offers a shorthand description of how change occurs – what the key elements are, how they are related to each other, and how (reading from left to right) they tend to unfold over time.<sup>1</sup>

Defining a flexible vision of the desired change initiates the process and provides the backdrop against which subsequent actions take place. In the figure, the background is shaded to indicate that, at least initially, the vision is strongest among senior leaders and, over time, becomes diffused among other members of the college community. Senior leaders interact with the external environment (including state higher education policy-makers), make decisions about how to allocate resources, appoint individuals who occupy lower positions in the hierarchy to roles in which they share authority (“distributed leadership”), and guide the development of

<sup>1</sup> In identifying the key elements of the model, we have turned to the work of Adrianna Kezar, Professor of Education at the University of Southern California, and want to acknowledge her assistance throughout the process.

incentive structures, professional development activities, and strategies for communicating with and engaging line staff. These leaders also help orchestrate very early reform efforts and call attention to their success (“visible actions”). These processes help to create the changed practices and the changed sense-making that together constitute systemic change.

Like all models, this one is a simplification. In particular, the model excludes feedback; the arrows point in only one direction. In reality, college personnel respond to the reform ideas and suggest “tweaks” that improve implementation and refine the vision – hence, the term “flexible vision.” In the process, additional staff members emerge as reform leaders and new ideas for communication and professional development are surfaced. Thus, the model – and the reform process itself - should be understood as dynamic and continuously evolving as it unfolds.

### **Eight key elements of the systemic change process**

#### 1. Flexible Vision

It all starts with a vision. The vision expresses the desired goals and paints a positive and compelling picture of what the college will look like when the goals are achieved. The vision also articulates the means for achieving those goals; in this way, the goals become real and possible, not just unattainable ideals. While the goal of achieving student success is the fixed lodestar of the CBD initiative, the intermediate goals and the means for realizing them may change over time in response to changing circumstances, data, and experience.

The presidents and other high-level leaders of all the case study colleges have been the first to embrace and give voice to the goal of increasing student success through systemic change intended to transform their institutions. The college-wide transformation that CBD colleges are enacting involves reforms to discrete subsystems – advising, developmental education, and academic pathways. But college leaders are framing these changes as part of a *comprehensive* effort to improve student success and completion. Thus, the changes are intended to work synergistically rather than in isolation, and to affect *all* degree-seeking students, not just some of them.

In general, leaders have sought to help the vision of student success gain traction by emphasizing the ways in which it strengthens, rather than replaces, goals to which the institution already subscribes. For example, one president emphasizes the need for much higher completion rates while continuing to uphold the college’s open-access policy as a reflection of its commitment to greater social justice. Other leaders talk about pathways in the courses of study as responsive to the colleges’ traditional mission of meeting the needs of local employers.

The means the colleges have chosen vary somewhat, depending on each institution’s history, resources, and environment. New state mandates have unquestionably shaped some of the specific strategies that the colleges have adopted, especially those related to developmental education and the design of academic pathways, and in some instances the CBD college leaders have been instrumental in shaping the new state regulations. These leaders have worked within

their institutions to secure support for the state policies by emphasizing the ways in which these policies are consistent with the colleges' own visions for the future.

College personnel have already discovered the importance of remaining flexible -- being able to shift course rapidly and/or tolerate a slowing-down of implementation when external events impinge. The following example illustrates why it is so necessary to be able to "roll with the punches."

Because developmental education is so often the sinkhole of students' college-going ambitions, the use of multiple measures to assess whether or not students need academic remediation and streamlining the developmental sequence for those who do are consistent with CBD's goals

One community college participating in CBD was engaged in designing developmental education reforms when the state legislature unexpectedly passed a bill making developmental education optional for all students and eliminating the requirement that students take placement tests to identify their developmental needs. This legislation made it difficult for colleges to screen for students who could benefit from remediation (doing this would require looking at students' high school transcripts, SAT or ACT scores, or other data), and it had the potential to reduce enrollments in developmental classes dramatically or even to do away with developmental education altogether.

The CBD college responded successfully to these unexpected challenges. In order to do so, it had to be flexible and to devote attention to matters that were not originally anticipated – how to identify students needing remediation, how to induce them to enroll in developmental classes, how to support such students who chose to enroll instead in college-level courses, how to redeploy developmental education faculty, and how to support instructors in teaching college-level classes made more heterogeneous by an infusion of students with fewer academic skills.

## 2. Senior Leadership

Senior leadership is critical to the systemic change process. The college president and other senior leaders (typically, deans, division heads, and other high-level administrators) not only set the initial vision but also control resources and their distribution and establish the priorities of the institution. From the outset, the presidents of all the CBD case study colleges have signed onto the CBD mission and have given open support to the changes it entails.

The president's support for the reforms can make a real difference in convincing others to adopt them, as the following example from one college illustrates.

MDRC held a number of focus groups with faculty members at the case study colleges to understand their early thoughts about the many student success initiatives that the colleges have been putting in place. At one college, a focus group participant noted that faculty members greatly respect the college's president, whom they perceive as thoughtful, far-sighted, and strongly supportive of both students and instructors. For this reason, they have been willing to give new policies that the president supports the benefit of the doubt, even when they have had questions about these policies.

The president alone cannot make change happen, however, so a critical step is to select leaders who will become champions and drivers of change. In all the case study colleges, presidents designated a strong set of CBD leads. In most instances, experienced administrators at the colleges were tapped to take on the new CBD leadership roles; at one college, a new director of academic advising was hired specifically to be a “change-maker.”

The CBD leads are the individuals who are involved day-to-day in advancing the planning and implementation of new practices and in motivating and assisting people to see their jobs and their roles differently (“sense-giving”). Toward this end, they largely control the means for promoting changes in practice and culture discussed below.

### 3. Distributed Leadership

Systemic change – because it entails both altering a myriad of practices and reshaping the values of faculty and staff members – is a large endeavor that cannot be accomplished unless many individuals are engaged and dedicated to the process. Having a broad leadership base is more important for this type of change than for smaller, more discrete initiatives. And distributed leadership may be especially critical in institutions of higher education, which have a tradition of decentralized decision-making.

All the case study colleges have delegated important tasks to many individuals below the levels of the CBD leads, thereby creating yet more champions for the initiative. By distributing leadership in this way, colleges are cultivating a cadre of individuals who are “closer to the ground” and who may have greater credibility with their colleagues than senior college staff.

The case study colleges can cite ways in which distributed leadership has paid dividends. For example, a major reason for the easy acceptance of the newly developed academic pathways at one college was that faculty leaders were able to persuade their colleagues that the pathways would help increase the percentage of students completing individual courses as well as programs of study. At another institution, a faculty member who had been a very vocal opponent of the pathway concept was placed on the pathway planning committee. While her presence on the committee made for more intense discussions and a slower planning process, her acceptance of the final product was instrumental in having her colleagues go along with the change.

#### 4. Communication and Engagement

How and with whom the message of CBD is discussed is critical to the systemic change process, since many people will not fully embrace a new practice unless they come to believe that it will achieve a goal they care about better than the old practice. To motivate change among rank-and-file staff members, it has been useful for initiative leaders at the colleges to highlight the ways in which the desired changes align with goals that members of the college community already hold—helping students get a degree and do better in the job market. In the planning year, a particularly effective strategy was to present faculty and staff with hard data showing that most students at their institutions were not completing any degree, and that even when they did, many of the courses they had taken did not fulfill course requirements for their major at the four-year colleges to which they transferred.

The initiative's leaders have worried that if the changes are too closely linked to a time-limited grant, staff will view these as externally motivated and temporary, and that this will inhibit deep and lasting change. For this reason, colleges have generally avoided the CBD label, preferring terminology that positions the reforms as internally rather than externally generated. Thus, for example, one college presents the CBD changes under the rubric of its own "Student Achievement Initiatives."

The leaders deem clear, open communication about the reforms being undertaken, along with the opportunity for staff members to air their views and concerns, to be vital to the change process. Such communication helps staff understand the reasons for the changes and fends off charges that they are being imposed in a top-down, directive manner. An associate dean at one college noted that in his role as a change agent, he had created opportunities for staff to talk through their aspirations and reservations. His aim, he said, was to "overcome friction points" – whether arising from lack of awareness, understanding, or resistance. At another college, conversations about the competencies needed by general education students began within the individual disciplines, then within the divisions, then across divisions. These opportunities for dialogue helped faculty members who were skeptical about limiting student choice to understand how academic pathways with more restricted course selection options could promote student success.

To date, the colleges have found it challenging to convey important information to adjunct faculty and part-time staff, who constitute the majority of staff members at all the case study colleges. They are experimenting with different ways of doing this -- for example, through the use of online communications.

#### 5. Incentives

Change is never easy, and most successful initiatives that involve either systemic or non-systemic change consciously use incentives to induce people to do things in new ways. The case



study colleges are seeking to change the overall culture among faculty and staff both by offering incentives to existing staff and/or by hiring new staff members whose views are compatible with the college's vision. The following example illustrates how this has played out at one institution.

At one college, one of the key individuals in the CBD initiative also plays a key role in faculty personnel decision-making. Faculty promotions, bonuses, and tenure decisions all are handled by this administrator's office. Applicants for these personnel actions indicate what they have done in furtherance of completion. A large number of faculty members are thus prompted to think about the college's student success mission and about how their own contributions align with student completion. This creates a "win" not only for the individual faculty member, but also for the completion initiatives of the college as a whole.

At other colleges, leaders encourage faculty to become active members of completion-oriented committees in order to fulfill the institutional service requirement that is part of their job responsibilities.

The ultimate incentive is having a job, and hiring practices have also been revised to ensure that new faculty understand and are on board with the college's completion goals. At one college, candidates for jobs as developmental education instructors are asked to read an article about completion and write a short essay about it as it relates to the position they are seeking, an exercise that has proved revealing about applicants' attitudes with regard to the role of faculty in promoting student success. At another college that is shifting its developmental education instruction to a computerized format, only adjuncts who express willingness to teach in this way are hired.

## 6. Professional Development

Because change often entails different job responsibilities, another key ingredient of successful systemic change involves providing staff with opportunities to acquire new skills they need to do the new work effectively and confidently. Professional development can also induce changes in sense-making by helping staff members understand the "whys" as well as the "hows" of their new roles

Several CBD colleges have offered training on the advising reforms, or plan to do so. For example, one college trained advisors on the new My Academic Plan software and planned further training that would include a more general discussion of the advising reforms along with tips for time management. Another college held a series of webinars that, among other things,



addressed the different steps associated with the mandatory orientation sessions that advisors lead.

Colleges are also enhancing professional development for faculty. One college offered training for math developmental education instructors on how to teach the new modularized, computerized curriculum. Another college is focusing on pedagogical and curricular strategies for working with students with a variety of aptitudes and learning needs in the same classroom.

## 7. Visible Actions

Changing the culture and operations of an institution takes a long time, and significant improvement in college-wide completion rates is still many years in the future. It is easy for enthusiasm about systemic change initiatives to flag unless there are visible and publicized markers of progress.

All the case study colleges have implemented substantiated changes in the three main systems we are examining—developmental education, advising, and pathway creation. Indeed, some of the colleges initiated completion-related reforms even before, or early in, their CBD involvement. What is noteworthy is that these changes, as well as the reforms now being put in place, are being framed as part of the institution’s overall commitment to student success and completion. The presidents and initiative leaders have been able to draw attention to these changes at convocations and smaller meetings with staff as evidence of the college’s commitment to systemic reform. The existence of these reforms “on the ground” has helped staff to see the change agenda as reality, not just rhetoric.

## 8. Resources

The resources that are available establish the parameters under which college-level system change is possible. Outside funding has been used to help support the initiative’s leadership on campus. But at this relatively early stage, the colleges have rarely had to substantially reallocate existing resources or to hire new staff. Instead, they are changing the way that existing staff work.

All of the CBD colleges have used their BMFG and other foundation grants to support the positions of the CBD leads. In some cases, too, they have used these funds to buy out time or provide stipends to other staff (primarily committee chairpersons) to promote their involvement in planning activities. Using these additional resources to support the planning process has enabled the colleges to design, pilot-test, and implement new policies and practices at a pace and with an intensity that would otherwise be difficult to sustain.

Putting these policies and practices in place, however, has not for the most part entailed either adding new staff members or shifting existing staff to new positions. The following

example describes how colleges have largely used their current staff to implement new advising reforms.

To date, the reforms that have placed the greatest pressures on the colleges' human resources are ones made to their advising systems. Yet, three of the five colleges are implementing new advising models with the existing complement of advisors; a fourth college decided to add only a few new advisor positions.

One college extended its advising capacity by developing a mandatory online orientation for all new students. The online presentation conveyed important information in a catchy way – it included, among other things, a “game show” activity to inform students about student services and academic expectations – but did not require additional advising personnel. Another college served more students with the same number of advisors by informing students that they were expected to attend orientation during the summer, when its advisors typically had more time. However, the college implemented its orientation requirement as a “soft” mandate – that is, students were highly encouraged to comply but were not penalized if they didn't – because its advising staff would have been overwhelmed had all students actually attended. Whether the college will, in the future, feel the need– or be able– to impose a “hard” mandate and hire more staff remains to be seen.

One situation, however, has called for a sizable addition to the advising complement. At the fifth CBD case study college, planners decided to reorganize advising by broad programs of study involving common themes and gateway courses that students take before enrolling in courses associated with a more specific major. Advising in this way required a different set of skills than those held by the college's existing group of advisors, and when the state lifted a hiring freeze, the college decided to hire some 25 new advisors, at a million dollar price tag.

In conclusion, colleges striving to transform themselves into completion-centered institutions are likely to focus on the specific practices and processes they want to change – developmental education instruction, advising, course selection guidelines, and so on. But the systemic change embodied in CBD is as much about changing faculty and staff members' beliefs and values as it is about changing practice. Thus, institutions seeking to put in place a completion agenda may also want to think about how everything they do—creating leadership structures, adopting strategies for communication and engagement, offering incentives and professional development opportunities, highlighting visible changes, and allocating resources - can be used to induce faculty and staff to see their work as making the vision of student success and completion a reality.

## References

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Kezar, A. (2013). Understanding sensemaking/sensegiving in transformational change processes from the bottom up. *Higher Education*, 2013, 65, 761-780.