



COMPLETION BY DESIGN + FRONTIER SET LEARNING STUDY

ISSUE BRIEF

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Background

In 2011, six community colleges¹ embarked on a ten-year transformative journey, first with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's (the foundation) Completion by Design (CBD) initiative, and then with the foundation's Frontier Set (FS) initiative. This journey began with CBD (completionbydesign.org) where institutions utilized the Guided Pathways whole-college redesign model as a structure, and the Loss/Momentum Framework (LMF) as a process, to engage in a comprehensive approach to centering students' experience in transformation. FS (frontieraset.org) continued the focus on a comprehensive approach to transformation adding evidenced-based practices in the quest to further improve outcomes for students.

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Study overview

While the foundation's early learnings focused on the impact of individual interventions, this retrospective analysis allows us to paint a more complete picture of the broad institutional transformation that occurred and factors that enabled that change. The foundation's priorities for this research focused on learning from these six institutions surrounding the following topics.²

EVIDENCING SUSTAINABLE TRANSFORMATION

What can we learn about transformation from these six institutions? Where is the deepest evidence regarding colleges' transformation journeys? How did CBD/FS enable transformation?

OPERATIONALIZING EQUITY

How does the focus on equity evolve at institutions? Did the CBD/FS frameworks and activities appear to have an effect on policies and practices related to closing racial equity gaps?

To conduct this study, data was gathered from the six CBD/FS institutions through document review and interviews with stakeholders who "lived the experience" of both CBD and FS via key roles on the campus teams.

Evidencing sustainable transformation

When asked if transformation occurred at their institution, study participants at each of the six institutions resoundingly responded, "Yes" their institution transformed over the 10 years of CBD and FS. They also unanimously responded, "No" their work is not done, and the transformation process is ongoing: "This isn't something we are doing; this is something we are *becoming*."

Study respondents conveyed they have realigned structures, culture, business processes and practices, all with the aim to improve the student experience and student outcomes. **Transformation was generally understood to have occurred when change was seen campus-wide, or globally across structures or processes.** For example, when data was made available to and used by all staff; when all staff felt ownership of the process and could see how they contributed to improvements; or, when the student pathway was considered *holistically* rather than as discrete student touchpoints are all indications of institution-wide transformation.



TRANSFORMATION MILESTONES ●●●●●●●●●●

Although the path to transformation is not the same across colleges certain efforts and milestones appear to be necessary to ignite and sustain transformation relatively universally. Transformation milestones fall into two categories:

Certain cultural and structural contexts need to exist, such as achieving buy-in across campus regarding the need for change; a strong data culture; and effective communication structures. These constructs need to be embedded campus-wide for transformation to begin and persist.

Processes, practices, and frameworks are operational milestones. These milestones look different across colleges and may not occur at all colleges, or may occur during different phases of the transformation, depending on each college's needs. For example, revamped advising may or may not be needed, and the process and end goals may be different across colleges.

CONDITIONS FOR TRANSFORMATION ●●●●●●●●●●

Resoundingly, **people are the center of conditions that need to be in place for transformation to occur**, both among the respondents and the documents in the CBD/FS resources.

- **LEADERSHIP.** Several respondents cited engaged and adaptive leadership are needed to kick off transformative efforts. Effective catalytic leadership trickles down across the institution, and it is important for those on the ground leading change efforts – deans, faculty, and student services administrators – to be on the same page rather than operate in silos.
- **CHAMPIONS.** In addition to a strong catalyzing leader who facilitates change, change effort champions among mid-level leaders, core staff, and faculty are needed for transformative efforts—champions who are creative, innovative, and willing to take risks.
- **ENGAGED FACULTY.** To fully realize transformation, institutions need to consider the classroom and engage faculty in design discussions “to really permeate the institution.” A large part of a student's experience is in the classroom, and what transpires in a classroom can be a deciding factor for whether a student continues or leaves the institution. Faculty must be engaged in student completion efforts from the design stage in order to ensure that they are bought-in and committed to helping students succeed.

In addition to the people, culture and data were frequently cited as transformation enablers. Many of the institutions suggested that, through CBD and FS, they learned the importance of a culture ready for change — one with a growth mindset and student-ready focus. Below are indicators of this culture shift, as shared by respondents:

- **Alignment in goals** across leadership, staff and faculty, along with a growth mindset and use of data to understand progress toward common goals.

- The “...**strategic vision** and deep campus engagement that comes through that. That’s something we continue to rely on... strategic vision is a big part of what helps us as an institution with driving transformation and change.” This college became a more “**student-ready** institution,” which is to say that rather than expecting students to be college-ready, the mindset among faculty, staff, and administrators shifted to meeting students where they are.
- The use of data and transforming to a **culture of evidence** is key in institutional transformation. Respondents from all six colleges discussed the need for a culture of trust, particularly around the transparency of data.
- Additionally, conditions set by **external factors**, such as the policy environment, were cited by some colleges as transformation enablers. External factors such as state funding bills “...added urgency” to the work that was being planned during CBD/FS.

“**Institutional transformation is a never-ending process of learning and improvement that incorporates all areas of the organization in an ongoing process of innovation, assessment, alignment, and process/practice evolution.**”³

[Continuous improvement is] **the organizational capacity to continuously be evaluating students’ experiences, identifying the most urgent barriers, and reorganizing/reconfiguring organizational resources to meet students’ needs.**⁴

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT, THE CYCLICAL NATURE OF TRANSFORMATION, AND SUSTAINABILITY ●●●●●●●●

Continuous improvement does not necessarily mean moving from one changed policy or practice to the next; **change is iterative and even those things that have been redesigned cannot be static.** As a respondent cautioned, transformation “doesn’t happen overnight, and it doesn’t happen in one year... it happens in small increments that are sometimes almost imperceptible.” Colleges are able to **sustain continual change because their structures embed the ability and desire to innovate, and they strive for excellence.**

CBD/FS ROLE IN TRANSFORMATION ●●●●●●●●●●

Respondents stated that although their institutions began the transformation process before engagement with CBD, **participation in CBD and FS accelerated their institution’s transformation process,** in the following ways:

LOSS-MOMENTUM FRAMEWORK (LMF)

CBD’s use of the LMF and the strong use of methodical data inquiry were specifically credited for kicking off transformation through a holistic approach to student success. At one college, the LMF was a “turning point” in transformation as it supports mapping the institution’s strategic plan and aligning goals and activities; the college continues to use the LMF in its ongoing strategic data work.

NETWORK

Several respondents emphasized the value of the CBD and FS networks and the ways in which their connections to other institutions encouraged, supported, and informed their work.

INTERMEDIARY

FS began the intermediary model, which evolved and developed over time. Respondents from all colleges found value in working with Aspen Institute. As their intermediary, Aspen advocated for the colleges. and served as a bridge to the foundation.

Operationalizing equity

Respondents from the six CBD/FS colleges affirmed that equity is a priority for their college. Each campus manifests its equity priority slightly differently. Several examples follow.

One college recently revisited their strategic plan, which now includes **equity goals in each section**.

Another college is **tracking the magnitude of gap closures** year by year; they have yet to reach their targets, but they are making gains. This respondent also noted that 50 staff and faculty **attended their voluntary equity summit** in the first year, this last year over 500 of the 600 to 800 full-time employees at the college attended.

Another college **disaggregates all data metrics** and uses rigorous evaluation methods to examine equity gaps, resulting in an understanding of equity gaps **for African American males, who are now the focus of programs**.

EQUITY DEFINITION ●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●

The six colleges have equity definitions that vary by focus and application. Some institutions apply broader definitions of equity rather than focus on a particular race/ethnicity or income group. One institution considers equity in the context of the community's demographics and being a minority-serving institution, and they focus not only on race/ethnicity but also student characteristics like gender and primary language to identify students unique needs. One institution emphasized there is not a "one size fits all" approach to equity, but rather an approach whereby the college supports each individual's specific needs in order to ensure student success.

EQUITY TIMELINE AND CONTINUOUS JOURNEYS ●●●●●

The respondents concurred that their college's equity journeys are ongoing, and responded similarly: "We've made a lot of progress but we're still not there yet."

- As with transformation, the **equity journey is continuous**. The colleges' equity journeys began between 15 to 30 years ago; however, progress takes time. Only recently have colleges institutionalized commitments to equity by embedding equity in their missions and strategic plans, and by putting plans into action.
- Institutions shared **key milestones along the equity journey**, including participation in national initiatives, disaggregating data, identifying gaps, and setting targets. The FS intermediary helped to provide frameworks for thinking about and operationalizing equity. This journey is a highly people-dependent, long-term change process that requires behavior and culture change. No one intervention or initiative will be the key – this is a cumulative process.

- This research identified a number of factors – operational, cultural, political – that facilitate **momentum for colleges’ equity journeys**, along with factors that act as **barriers to progress**. Campuses continue to emphasize hiring practices and professional development to ensure that they have “like minded” folks on campus. State and local political contexts can act as barriers to equity work, as can institutional resistance or lack of priority on equity.

EQUITY IN PRACTICE

The following are examples of how the colleges have applied equity principles and goals to practice to better support equitable student success:

A few colleges developed **population-specific initiatives** to advance equitable outcomes and experiences, including for African American males and incarcerated learners.

One college’s **equity dashboard** and progress updates share disaggregated data throughout the campus to illuminate areas of improvement and drive action. The same college emphasizes the importance of collecting and using student voice data.

Another college, given significant and longstanding gaps for Hispanic and Black students, invested in a **Black scholarship program** which, paired with coaching, resulted in improved outcomes. The college is planning to scale the program and is seeking additional opportunities to engage these students throughout the first year and thereafter.

Institutions have a range of **professional development** opportunities including a faculty pathways program to support improved instruction,

bringing in experts to conduct equity workshops with college staff, offering book groups as a safe space for staff to discuss issues related to race and equity, and annual equity summits to expand equity strategies and incorporate a “systems approach to change.”

One institution has convened three successful **faculty summer institutes** to redesign syllabi with a focus on underserved populations, using instructional strategies that benefit all students. “Faculty realized that it doesn’t mean you are not doing things right. It doesn’t mean that you lose your freedom to teach, how you want to teach, it just means being more mindful of the unique needs of the students... and that there are simply things you can do that make a difference.”

One college related that they conducted an institution-wide process to develop a **public-facing equity statement**. The statement, posted on their website, provides a comprehensive definition of equity and examples of underrepresented or marginalized student populations, including but not limited to race, equity, and income.



INCREASING EQUITY DATA USE AND SOPHISTICATION

Along with creating a culture of evidence for student success efforts, the study respondents related that their colleges are increasing their use and sophistication of data surrounding equity.

- **QUANTITATIVE DATA.** Respondents from all six colleges reported that their campus' data are currently disaggregated by race/ethnicity, and several other characteristics such as gender, Pell receipt or eligibility, income or economic status, etc. Some also examine data by regional or community-specific characteristics such as County Health Index, access to health, and others equity indicators such as disabilities.
- **ADDING QUALITATIVE DATA.** Several respondents emphasized the importance of and increased use of qualitative data in recent years, with an emphasis on representing the student voice.
- **SHIFTING STANDARD OF EXCELLENCE.** Respondents emphasized progress in decentering white students as the standard against which students of color are measured. They "...have shifted away from using white students as the benchmark...equity means that anybody who is at our institution is able to achieve these milestones and that...whiteness is not the goal...it is the success and the completion of each individual group and each individual...student who walks in the door."

CBD/FS ROLE IN EQUITY WORK

Respondents from each college attributed at least some degree of credit for progress in equity to CBD/FS. Respondents related that CBD raised awareness around underserved student populations; campus teams faced challenges with gaining buy-in and changing mindsets on campus and initiated a key milestone when colleges began to differentiate between “equality” and “equity.”

With FS, equity was more explicitly required to be central to transformation. Respondents to this research underscored the **critical role FS played in their equity journeys**, including:

- Positive peer pressure.
- Disaggregating data.
- Adopting equity language in mission statements and strategic plans.
- Changing institutional culture.
- Adopting new policies and practices to center students of color.

These six colleges' intermediary, Aspen Institute, advanced equity via the following methods:

- Cultivating personal relationships and emboldening site leaders to advance new ways to think and talk about equity with their colleagues.
- Providing frameworks and language to define and operationalize equity.
- Building internal data literacy around the use of disaggregated data to foster urgency and drive change.



Up next for the CBD/FS colleges

All six colleges continue with their transformation work, and in particular, with weaving a racial equity lens into a growing number of aspects. Additionally, a new priority for all six institutions is post-graduation and career outcomes, and longer-term social and economic mobility of their students. Additional priorities colleges are currently focusing on, or will be examining in the near future, include the following:

- Access
- Learning and teaching
- Data frameworks to continue identifying major insights
- Student sense of belonging
- Co-curricular activities that support collaboration between staff and faculty
- Advising students to select pathways and guiding students to identify their passion
- Adult students

The CBD/FS legacy

Respondents shared excitement around continuing transformation work and elevated two concepts—frameworks and methods, and culture—as being CBD/FS’s legacy. The CBD framework was described as powerful and having long-standing impact. Further, CBD/FS paved the way for institutional cultures that support data use to identify needs and track change, which, moving forward, will be particularly useful in service of equity and working to strong post-completion and labor force outcomes.

- **FRAMEWORKS AND METHODS.** Colleges voiced that they have embedded the methodical processes learned through the CBD/FS work in all their work and they “approach student success in a more balanced, comprehensive, long-term way.” The CBD framework was described as powerful and having long-standing impact.
- **CULTURE (CHANGE & EVIDENCE).** Respondents noted changing their campus culture was a CBD/FS legacy, specifically, a culture that is evidenced-based and open to change. CBD/FS paved the way for the development of institutional cultures that support data use to identify needs and track change, which, moving forward, will be particularly useful in service of equity and working toward strong post-completion and labor force outcomes.

“A grant, even if it’s a five-year grant is a moment in time in the life cycle of an institution; the legacy is what happens after it goes away.”

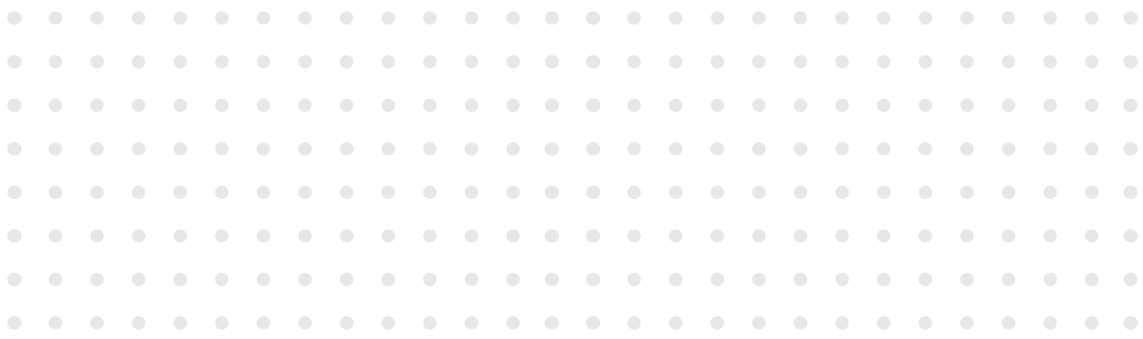


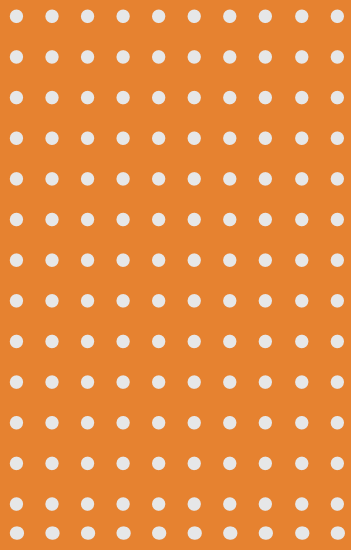
ENDNOTES

- 1 The six colleges are: in North Carolina, Wake Tech, Guilford Tech, and Davidson; in Ohio, Sinclair and Lorain; and Miami Dade in Florida.
- 2 Additionally, via this research, data and information were gathered to inform the foundation’s learning about transformation and how future investments can support institution transformation and closing equity gaps.
- 3 Aspen Institute, *Annual Reflections*, 2018.
- 4 Aspen Institute, *Consolidated Dashboards*, 2021

We would like to extend thanks to the community college leaders who participated in this study and so enthusiastically shared information with us about their experiences and reflections with the Completion by Design and Frontier Set initiatives. Each campus representative coordinated their schedules to make the time to meet with us and talked with us openly and thoughtfully. Their participation was invaluable to our efforts to understand the transformation process at their colleges and their experiences with the two initiatives.

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