

# Challenges in Implementing and Sustaining Community College Organizational Change for Student Success

Jennifer M. Miller<sup>1\*</sup> & Christine Harrington<sup>2</sup>

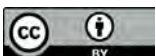
<sup>1</sup>State University of New York

<sup>2</sup>New Jersey City University

## Abstract

Community colleges are challenged with creating and sustaining student success organizational change. Institutional-level student success reform efforts are needed to combat the unacceptably low student completion rates, but colleges often struggle to initiate and maintain organizational reforms. After many years of reform efforts, researchers have provided theories for whole-college organizational change, in particular guided pathways, that show great promise in helping community colleges realize student success and completion gains while targeting and reducing racial equity gaps. A literature review focused on determining the internal reasons why institutions struggle to create and sustain organizational change was conducted. Contextual challenges, awareness and motivation, and change management process challenges within the institutions were several of the key causes identified. Within contextual challenges, organizational structures including college policies, practices, and governance, as well as leadership and funding challenges were cited as barriers to organizational change

\* Contact: [jennifer.miller@suny.edu](mailto:jennifer.miller@suny.edu)



for student success. A lack of awareness of the need for or how to change by faculty, staff, and administrators, along with a lack of motivation or resistance to the change can also create significant roadblocks for colleges. Change management process challenges within the institution including a lack of professional development for leaders in change management strategies was also cited as a significant challenge to developing and sustaining an effective organizational change effort. Knowing these challenges can lead to informed approaches that college leaders, faculty, and staff take to implement, hopefully helping institutions sustain change reform at scale over the long-term and ultimately benefit the overall goal of increased student success and completion.

*Keywords:* community colleges, student success, organizational change, institutional change, guided pathways, completion agenda

## Challenges in Implementing and Sustaining Community College Organizational Change for Student Success

Although community colleges are committed to student success and have put forth high levels of effort, implementing and sustaining the organizational change needed to significantly increase student success rates is an ongoing challenge. Unacceptably low graduation and transfer rates have led to calls for community colleges to go beyond their access mission and focus on improving student success (Bailey et al., 2015; Baldwin, 2017; Stout, 2016). Jones (2015) stated that much has been done to increase access to college since the founding of community colleges and their expansion from the Truman Commission, but less has been done to help students complete in a timely manner.

### Student Success Outcome Data

According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, 2022a) Fast Facts, there are 1,042 two-year colleges, 935 of which are two-year public colleges, in the nation serving 10.3 million credit and noncredit students. Even with compelling research and work in the field, moving the needle on completion rates is still a major issue facing community colleges and their students today. In May 2021, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2021), the graduation rate within six years for first-time, full-time degree/certificate-seeking students at two-year public postsecondary institutions was only 28%. Additionally, the percentage of students who had not graduated, were no longer enrolled, and had not been reported as a transfer at a different institution was 42% for two-year public institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). Of those students enrolled for credit, the majority, at 51%, are students of color. Within two-year public colleges there is much well-documented research on equity gaps in completion, especially based on ethnicity, race, and socio-economic status (Baldwin, 2017; Bensimon, 2018; Bragg et al., 2019; McClenney, 2019).

The time to complete a degree in a two-year college is complicated by the fact that most attendance is part-time and 72% of all part-time students at community college also work (AACC, 2022a). This data underscores the continued need for two-year public colleges to implement and sustain organizational change reform to increase the number of students who succeed in graduating on time or within three years for those who are part-time. Helping students graduate in two or three years has financial benefits for students and allows them to realize their career or transfer aspirations more quickly (Bailey et al., 2015; Baldwin, 2017; McClenney, 2019; Stout, 2016).

Failure to complete a degree has often been described as an economic and social issue for students given that they incur debt in addition to a loss of future income and economic mobility. For community colleges, however, it is also a moral and ethical

dilemma given the access and success focused missions of these institutions (Bailey et al., 2015; Baldwin, 2017; McClenney, 2019; Stout, 2016). Thus, organizational change reform efforts are needed.

## **Organizational Change Reform Efforts**

In response to the well-documented data around the lack of student completion, community college leaders with the support of foundations and governmental agencies have implemented large-scale transformational organizational change reforms (Baldwin, 2017; Stout, 2016; White, 2022b). These reform efforts have focused on addressing what has been referred to as the completion challenge, which is the term used to address the notion that students enter community college but many fail to complete their degree or transfer (Bailey et al., 2015; Baldwin, 2017; Jones, 2015; McClenney, 2019; Stout, 2016; White, 2022b). With the advent of the completion agenda to address this challenge, there has been greater attention, research, and activity focused on transformational college reforms to increase student retention and completion rates and ultimately graduation and transfer rates (Bailey et al., 2015; Baldwin, 2017; McClenney, 2019; Stout, 2016; White, 2022b).

At the start of the completion agenda era, many reforms were focused on particular areas like developmental education or on narrow pilot projects impacting a small number of students. During the mid-2000s, researchers and practitioners began identifying a more holistic completion agenda for colleges, particularly focused on community colleges, led by Achieving the Dream (ATD), Completion by Design, and the Community College Research Center (CCRC, 2022; ATD, 2022; AACC, 2018; Bailey et al., 2015; Baldwin, 2017; Stout, 2016; White, 2022b). A series of national reform efforts culminated in a whole community college reform movement, called guided pathways, focused on increasing student success and persistence and ultimately graduation rates (Bailey et al., 2015; Baldwin, 2017; Jenkins et al., 2022; Jones, 2015; McClenney, 2019; Stout, 2016; White, 2022b).

Guided pathways according to CCRC, “is a whole-college redesign model designed to help all students explore, choose, plan, and complete programs aligned with their career and education goals efficiently and affordably” (CCRC, 2022, para. 1). The whole-college effort focus includes all faculty, staff, and students playing a role in the change effort and premises that all students would be positively impacted by this reform. The initial research from CCRC and others led to the implementation of the guided pathways model as a methodology for change in community college policies and practices first supported by a national effort called the AACC Pathways Project (AACC, 2018; CCRC, 2022; Bailey et al., 2015; Baldwin, 2017; Stout, 2016; White, 2022b). The guided pathways approach involved colleges addressing the following four main practices: clarifying student paths, helping students get on a path, helping students stay on their path, and ensuring students are learning (CCRC, 2022).

In addition to those implementation factors which are focused on practice and policy changes directly relating to the student experience, the model calls for whole-college planning around the implementation including educating and engaging stakeholders in the model and ongoing evaluation (AACC, 2019). Additionally, the guided pathways model calls for assessing key performance indicators including credits earned in the first term and first year; program of study; persistence by term; gateway math and English completions in the first year; course completion rates in the first year; and accessing equity in those outcomes which are factors that researchers indicate are early momentum indicators prior to graduation and transfer data points (AACC, 2019).

Much of the research over the past decade supports the organizational change effort of guided pathways as one of the most promising reform efforts to increase student success (Bailey et al., 2015; Baldwin, 2017; Jenkins et al., 2022, McClenney, 2019; Stout, 2016; White, 2022b).

A significant number, now more than 400, of community colleges across the country are implementing guided pathways (Jenkins et al., 2022). Early research has shown that using a whole-college reform, like guided pathways, and beginning with the student end goal in mind is a promising strategy to help students persist and complete (Jenkins et al., 2022). Wheeler (2019) also highlighted the challenge of community college students completing their baccalaureate degrees and explored the need to expand guided pathways to inform transfer activities at four-year institutions. Despite the promise of guided pathways, community colleges across the nation have struggled to implement and sustain whole-college reform efforts.

## Challenges with Implementing and Sustaining Organizational Change Reform

Bragg et al. (2018) indicated that the community and technical colleges across the nation engaged in change have become involved in many different reforms over the years. The sheer number of activities around reform creates a challenge and struggle for colleges to identify the why, what, and how of their change efforts (Bragg et al., 2018). In many cases, colleges are continuing to use an ad hoc manner to address student success and completion (M. Baston, personal communication, February 25, 2022). Many efforts to change college structures to support students are pilots that only impact a small number of students (Bailey et al., 2015; Jenkins et al., 2022).

According to Kotter (2012), it is challenging for any organization to undertake organizational change efforts and many fail. Due to their complex structural models and leadership practices, higher education institutions find it even more challenging (Eddy & Mitchell, 2016; Kezar, 2018). Kezar (2018) shared that higher education institutions were particularly challenged by organizational change efforts due to their cultures and given the myriad of factors and stakeholders involved in the change.

White (2022b) also highlighted the challenges and the history of the completion agenda and maintained that for change to be effective, there must be a focus on people and processes. Often, efforts fail immediately or over time due primarily to leadership challenges at multiple levels (Kezar, 2018; Klempin & Karp, 2018; White, 2022b). Klempin and Karp (2018) explored this in their research on technology-mediated advising reform and found that successful change efforts required multi-tiered leadership and shared vision.

Based on insights from researchers and experts in the field, community colleges have a desire to undertake organizational change to support student success, but a majority are challenged with not just creating but also sustaining that change within their institutions (Baldwin, 2017; Klempin & Karp, 2018; McClenney, 2019; White, 2022b). Practitioners in the field who are creating, leading, and sustaining organizational change need to learn more about how to best structure change efforts for sustainability in the long-term (G. Schmidt, personal communication, October 1, 2021).

Colleges and their leaders are also challenged to create, sustain, and maintain culturally responsive supports for their students as part of the completion agenda. Bensimon (2018) argued the need to also connect the reform work to equity and particularly racial equity rather than as a generic form of reform for all students, which does not address the structural racism creating inequities for students of color. Bragg et al. (2019) shared that “it takes more than open access to create equity in higher education” (p. 5). Bensimon (2018) and Bragg et al. (2019) stated the implicit need to embed racial equity into guided pathways. “Guided pathways can be seen as a model for equity through its comprehensive approach to improving success for all students, but it is difficult to view it as a model that is about equity due to its silence on rectifying inequities for racially minoritized students, as well as other underserved groups” (Bragg et al., 2019, p. 3). Therefore, racial equity practices must be embedded in organizational change and leaders of color must have a voice in the reform effort (Bensimon, 2018).

## **Purpose and Scope of Literature Review**

Despite the urgency for organizational change reform, the current body of literature focuses primarily on the need for change and challenges. To our knowledge, we have not identified any literature reviews focusing specifically on the institutional reasons for colleges having difficulty implementing and sustaining college reform efforts, especially implementing guided pathways in community colleges. A deep understanding of the reasons or root causes of organizational change reform challenges and failures will provide community college leaders with more targeted strategies to improve change reform processes.

The purpose of this literature review was to identify the root causes of the challenges in implementing and sustaining community college organizational change for student

success particularly focused on guided pathways whole-college reform. Given the breadth of this topic, this study focuses primarily on the internal factors that community colleges face, although mention is made to select external factors identified in the literature. This focus on internal factors was intentionally selected because colleges will be more able to act on internal factors. Although this literature review focuses primarily on the institutional level, some national, state, and system-level change efforts are referenced as these macro-level change efforts can support and influence institutional level change. Additionally, the review of literature is focused on guided pathways as this has been one of the most significant whole-college reform efforts for community colleges undertaken in the last ten years (Bailey et al., 2015; Baldwin, 2017; Jenkins et al., 2022; Jones, 2015; McClenney, 2019; McNair et al., 2021; Stout, 2016; White, 2022b).

## Method

To explore the challenge of organizational change within community colleges, a search was conducted of peer-reviewed research found in the library databases. In addition, public scholarship including websites of professional organizations and books were reviewed. Informal conversations with practitioners in the field were also conducted. These different data points are important to fully understand the problem of practice from both the research and practice perspectives. The combination of these data points (peer-reviewed articles, public scholarship, and practitioner conversations) provided a more comprehensive understanding of the why and how of organizational change. This approach shed light on why whole-college student success reforms, like guided pathways, are difficult to start, implement, and sustain.

## Peer-Reviewed Articles

An initial literature review search was conducted using the following databases: Academic Search Premier, ERIC, Education Source, Educational Administration Abstracts, and APA PsycINFO. The search terms used were “community colleges” and “completion agenda” or “guided pathways” or “institutional change” or “organizational change.”

All peer-reviewed articles, both qualitative and quantitative, between the years of 2015–2022 were included in the search. The timeframe was selected based on the publication date for *Redesigning America's Community Colleges* (Bailey et al., 2015), a seminal book on the topic of guided pathways which is the main framework for the type of whole-college organizational change effort described in this problem of practice. Articles did not have to be available in full text to be included. This search returned 159 unduplicated articles.



As the focus of this literature review was on the root causes of challenges associated with implementing or sustaining guided pathways in U.S. institutions, the first inclusion criteria was that the article needed to focus on guided pathways reform efforts within the U.S. In addition, the purpose was to look at whole-college reform efforts. Additionally, articles that were not relevant to the problem of practice were also excluded.

Following a title review, 99 articles were eliminated and 36 additional articles were eliminated after an abstract review. Approximately 30% of the 99 articles were excluded because they focused on specific curricular changes, 15% were focused on social change, 10% were focused on healthcare change, 10% were focused on international or four-year institutions, 9% were focused on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) or nursing programs, 9% were focused on student service programs, 9% were not at all relevant in any way to the problem of practice, 4% were focused on dual enrollment programs, and 3% were focused on developmental education reform programs.

The remaining 24 articles met the inclusion criteria based on the problem of practice that community colleges are challenged with creating and sustaining student success, whole-college organizational change with a particular focus on guided pathways. Finally, using a snowball sampling approach which involved reviewing the reference list of these articles and other sources, five peer-reviewed articles that directly addressed the problem of practice but did not appear in the database search were also included. Of those 29, eight were primarily focused on guided pathways and 21 were focused on more general whole-college reform practices. Thus, a total of 29 peer-reviewed articles were included in this review.

## **Public Scholarship**

Peer-reviewed reference snowball sampling and other sources of public scholarship including books, articles, blog posts, and websites were reviewed and cited. These sources provided direct examples of relevant themes and challenges within the problem of practice.

### **National Organization Websites**

The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, 2022b) guided pathways webpage listed seven national organizations and consulting groups as partners with AACC in the guided pathways reform movement particularly relevant to this review of organizational change. The organizations reviewed included: Achieving the Dream (ATD), the Aspen Institute, Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE), Community College Research Center (CCRC), Jobs for the Future (JFF), National Center for Inquiry & Improvement (NCII), and Sova. Additionally, another website developed by AACC and its partners called the Pathways Collaborative was



cited as a resource (AACC, 2022c). The Pathways Collaborative website listed six additional national partners including American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), Complete College America, Office of Community College Research and Leadership (OCCRL), United Negro College Fund (UNCF), Carnegie Math Pathways/WestEd, and the University of Texas at Austin Charles A. Dana Center.

From review of the 13 websites listed, Carnegie Math Pathways, Complete College America, and the Dana Center were eliminated given their focus specifically on developmental education and UNCF was eliminated given their primary focus on four-year colleges. The remaining eight websites were reviewed using a similar search criterion to the peer review search where possible. The terms “pathways,” “guided pathways,” or “transformational change” were used if the website had a robust search capability; however, an additional visual search of the navigation was conducted for related terms. Additionally, two other public scholarship articles were identified from the American Council on Education and the Community College Research Initiatives at the University of Washington with a snowball sampling search.

A total of 29 additional public scholarship sources including websites, articles, reports, publications, toolkits, and blog posts were identified and included in this review. This is not an exhaustive list of public scholarship, but the articles cited are particularly relevant for understanding the challenges of community college organizational change.

## Books

Seven higher education change and reform-focused books and book chapters were also included in the literature review. The following books were cited: *Redesigning America's Community Colleges* (Bailey et al., 2015), *The Completion Agenda in Community Colleges* (Baldwin, 2017), *How Colleges Change* (Kezar, 2018), *Using Evidence of Student Learning to Improve Higher Education* (Kuh et al., 2015), *13 Ideas That are Transforming the Community College World* (McClenney, 2019), *Becoming a Student-Ready College* (McNair et al., 2016), and *Competing on Culture* (VanWagoner, 2018). This is a limited selection of books focused on community college organizational change; however, these books are specifically important to include given their focus on the challenges surrounding both guided pathways and the completion agenda. Additionally, although outside the timeframe selected, *Leading Change* (Kotter, 2012) was cited to illustrate research on organizational change strategies beyond higher education that are relevant to the problem of practice.

## Practitioner Conversations

In order to better understand the specific problem of practice focused on community college organizational change efforts, four informal conversations with national and college practitioners were conducted. The conversations were informally focused on the problem

of practice and the initial question was “What do you think are some of the challenges around implementing organizational change efforts at community colleges specifically guided pathways?” with follow-up open-ended questions related to their responses. The practitioners included a consultant who led national guided pathways implementation efforts, two community college presidents at colleges that were implementing guided pathways, and a community college assistant dean of student success that also serves as a state-wide guided pathways coach. The practitioners were selected based on their direct involvement with guided pathways organizational change efforts over the last five-year period at the national, state, and college levels and existing relationship with the authors. The conversations were held between Fall 2021 through Summer 2022. Conversations centered around the problem of practice regarding the challenges community colleges face in implementing organizational change for student success and the related topics of guided pathways implementation.

## Findings

A synthesis matrix was used to organize the peer-reviewed articles, public scholarship, and practitioner conversations. After a review of the literature, three main root causes for why creating and sustaining institutional student success organizational change efforts particularly guided pathways is challenging emerged.

The first root cause focused on contextual challenges to collaborating for change including structure, financial, and leadership challenges. Organizational structures including college policies, practices, and governance were cited by researchers as barriers to both student success and institutional change. The organizational structure of the college itself and its departments and programs, as well as cultural norms that create barriers to faculty, staff, and administrators working together across the institution, multi-level leadership challenges, and financial and external pressures are all reasons that organizational change efforts are not implemented or sustained.

The second root cause that emerged was around awareness and motivation challenges for organizational change focused on people in institutions. Lack of awareness of the need for or how to change by faculty, staff, and administrators, along with a lack of motivation or resistance to the change effort can create significant roadblocks for colleges.

The third root cause that emerged was change management process challenges within institutions. Leaders in higher education may lack professional development in change management strategies and that can create significant challenges when they are faced with the need to develop an effective organizational change process that is sustainable over time. Many leaders may also not realize that there are resources to support them should they face resistance or other challenges to implementation. Leadership

challenges, within institutions at all levels, was also a significant meta-theme found in the research that impacted all three of the main root causes.

## Contextual Challenges to Collaborating for Change

Contextual challenges to creating and sustaining change can include structures, policies, practices, and governance that comprise an institution, as well as the silos that exist between different departments of the college or within roles of college employees (R. VanWagoner, personal communication, June 29, 2022). Context also describes internal and external challenges facing organizational change such as lack of leadership support at all levels, financial and budgeting challenges, and the impact of the global pandemic. These contextual impediments can create challenges for faculty, staff, and administrators who need to work collaboratively on organizational change efforts to positively influence student success (Bailey et al., 2015; Fay et al., 2021; Guth, 2017; Klempin & Karp, 2018).

### Internal Structural Context Challenges

Within the context of structure, the definition of structure itself is a challenge. Van Noy et al. (2016) shared that there is little research on the definition of structure and how to measure it. In their study of pathways for career and technical programs, they proposed four dimensions of structure focused particularly on: program prescription, program alignment, access to information, and active program advising and support (Van Noy et al., 2016). However, these dimensions do not take into account the broader and complex college structures beyond programs including leadership, governance, funding, and reporting structures (McPhail, 2016; White, 2022a; Wyner, 2021).

McPhail (2016) indicated that while many colleges have launched whole-college change efforts, they have not changed their overall structures including divisions, departments, and student-level policies and practices to support collaborative transformational change efforts. In some cases, institutional policies and practices that have evolved over time are in direct conflict with one another or with the current needs of faculty, staff, and students (Bailey et al., 2015; McPhail, 2016). A contributing factor for this challenge to change is the rigid hierarchical structure of many community colleges (McPhail, 2016). Jenkins et al. (2021) shared, based on research from several years of guided pathways implementation, that further structural change is needed around direct and indirect practices and policies that support student success and completion, especially focused on equity and teaching and learning. McNair and Bonneville (2021) highlighted examples from colleges on the fourth practice of guided pathways which is ensuring students are learning as an underdeveloped area for research and implementation of college change efforts.

Structural change is difficult work as public higher education is comprised of entrenched internal practices, attitudes, habits, and perceived interests (Fay et al., 2021; Kadlec, 2020; Kezar, 2018). Kezar (2018) mentions colleges embarking on change also need to consider not just the reason for the change but the ethics around the change. She shares key mistakes leaders make around change include ignoring the change process and context, being too simplistic in their use of change models, and not using research to ground change (Kezar, 2018).

Collaboration of stakeholders around change is also a barrier. Given current community college organizational models, there are also too few opportunities for leaders to engage in institutional-level conversations and collaboration (Bailey et al., 2015; Lester, 2020). Most success-based conversations take place at the program or department level. Often only a few faculty and staff get invited to participate on institutional-level committees and conversations (Chase et al., 2021; Conrad & LeMay, 2020). Cross-institutional talents and perspectives are needed for organizational change (Kezar, 2018; Lester, 2020). Even when faculty and staff are invited to the conversations, the conversations too often focus on gaining buy-in rather than seeking their engagement, input, and perspectives (Chase et al., 2021; Conrad & LeMay, 2020; Kadlec, 2020).

### **Technical and Adaptive Context Challenges**

College conversations on change often focus on identifying technical solutions that are not sufficient to produce transformational change in the long-term (Kadlec, 2019b; Kezar, 2018; Klempin & Karp, 2018). The problems facing colleges in transformational change are rarely technical problems with easy solutions and are often adaptive problems which are often more complex and difficult to resolve (Kadlec, 2019b; Kezar, 2018; Klempin & Karp, 2018). Adaptive challenges include complex issues surrounding the changes of policies and practices that have implications around values and emotions for both the people and systems involved (Kadlec, 2019b; Kezar, 2018). Examples from guided pathways change could involve any number of seemingly technical solutions like redesigning onboarding, advising, and placement to consider the current research on student success, but once discussed by the college community are challenging given the history, context, and human perspectives surrounding those change efforts (CCRC, 2022).

### **Stakeholder Involvement Challenges**

Beyond the adaptive nature of most community college change efforts, research has also shown that a challenge to implementing reform is when it is led by only one person or a small group within the college (Chase et al., 2021; CCCSE, 2020). For instance, Baston (2018) noted that for colleges implementing guided pathways reform, student affairs leaders are often not included in the change effort, sharing that change redesign efforts, such as guided pathways, are typically led by academic affairs or other institutional staff. Reforms like guided pathways are whole-college efforts but due to the

institutional silo nature of many colleges, student affairs, academic affairs, and other college stakeholders may not work together to support the change (Baston, 2018; Fay et al., 2021; Gill & Harrison, 2018; Kadlec, 2019a). This often results in reform efforts that are not integrated across the campus and fail to be institutionalized, which is what is needed for long-term successful change efforts (Kezar, 2018; Kotter, 2012). Other strategic areas of community colleges such as enrollment, admissions, and financial aid are also often excluded from college reform conversations (Luna-Torres et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2020; Walleser, 2018). Another specific area of the research mentions that organizational change efforts are often not connected with strategic enrollment management (SEM) activities (Smith et al., 2020; Walleser, 2018). Without engagement from SEM leaders in organizational change, efforts to increase enrollment, streamline workflows, and enhance the student experience may not be effectively supported as SEM teams need to implement those initial student facing change processes within the complex culture of the institution (Walleser, 2018).

### **Senior and Board Leadership Challenges**

In much of the current research and public scholarship, the notion of leadership, or the lack of it, is a contextual construct that can derail change efforts especially large-scale guided pathways change (Chase et al., 2021; Conrad & LeMay, 2020; Fay et al., 2021; Guth, 2017; Wyner, 2021). Over the last several years, specific research has emerged on the contextual leadership challenges facing senior leaders who lead and manage organizational change reform including guided pathways.

Wyner (2021) indicated that without strong leadership from both senior leaders and the college board of trustees' student success reform may face large implementation barriers. When undertaking whole-college change efforts, often significant changes are needed to the structure and budget of the institution and responsibility for those changes lie with senior leaders (Wyner, 2021). Senior leaders also often fail to include the college board of trustees, who are the fiscal and policy leaders for the institution, in the organizational reform work which can adversely impact implementation, funding, and sustainability of the effort over time (Wyner, 2021). Gonzales (2019) added that often community college leaders' core beliefs and leadership philosophy for ethical decision-making is continuously challenged during reform efforts given the complexity of change.

Additionally, changes in senior leadership roles, especially at the presidential level, can have a significant negative impact on the implementation and sustainability of reform change efforts, especially guided pathways (Wyner, 2021). Fay et al. (2021) indicated that changes in senior leadership hindered progress for a large college reform effort due to differences in the leaders' approaches to policy, practice, communication, and structure. Institutions without innovative or consistent leadership often lose momentum for reform since the locus of control ultimately resides with the president and their cabinet (G. Schmidt, personal communication, October 1, 2021).

## **Broader Institutional Leadership Challenges**

Although senior leaders are vital to reform efforts, Kezar (2018) and Lester (2020) indicated there is also a need to broaden the focus of leadership to include more stakeholders across the organization. For change to be most effective, leaders at all levels and roles within the college must not just understand the change in theory but also embrace it in practice (Eddy & Mitchell, 2016; Klempin & Karp, 2018; Lester, 2020). Eddy and Mitchell (2016) shared that leaders who do not embrace innovative leadership approaches such as networked leadership, which refers to leadership that involves many stakeholders across the institution, had more challenges in leading reform work. Chase et al. (2021) described the difficulty for implementing change reform when department chairs and faculty are not included as leaders engaged in the effort. Kezar (2018) mentions the tensions between top-down of senior leaders and bottom-up of faculty and staff leaders in change leadership approaches as part of understanding the agency and leadership of change.

## **Financial and Public Health Factors Impacting Internal Change**

Financial challenges and misalignment between budgeting and reform efforts also can create significant barriers to organizational change. Major changes in organizational structure can be costly and slow in both human resources and supporting technology solutions (Kadlec, 2019a). Without the financial support aligned to the change effort, even a strong vision of student success embraced by leadership cannot succeed (Wyner, 2021). Jenkins et al. (2022) found that the ability to fund or budget for organizational change including staffing, technology, and other direct instructional costs becomes difficult given declining enrollment which impacts institutional funding models and other financial challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic, and that this often creates a barrier to sustaining the change effort. White (2019, 2022a) indicated that states with governing boards may create policy environments that impact internal institutional funding to support college completion and educational attainment and noted that these mandated policies can often pose a significant barrier to college-level organizational change.

It should also be noted that an unprecedented contextual challenge that greatly impacted higher education institutions' internal capacity for change was the COVID-19 pandemic. The global pandemic had far-reaching impact on how community colleges managed new and ongoing organizational change efforts. Floyd et al. (2022) shared an overview from the field on some of the challenges community colleges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic specifically in the areas of leadership, curriculum, funding, technology and digital access, and self, family, and community which all take time and effort from faculty, staff, and administrators and leave little time for organizational change efforts. Brock and Diwa (2021) highlighted how colleges used federal resources to support students and pivoted with services and online instruction, while pointing out that reform efforts such as guided pathways could be used to further help increase student outcomes even during this challenge (Brock & Diwa, 2021).



## Awareness and Motivation Challenges to Change

Based on the literature, lack of awareness of the need for or how to change along with a lack of motivation or resistance to change within institutions can create significant roadblocks for colleges (Bailey et al., 2015; Chase et al., 2021; Conrad & LeMay, 2020; Fay et al., 2021; Guth, 2017; Kezar, 2018; Klempin & Karp, 2018; McNair et al., 2016; VanWagoner, 2018; Walleser, 2018; White, 2022b). Not all community college leaders, faculty, staff, and administrators are aware of the need for organizational change efforts and even if they are aware, many may not know how to lead change or be motivated to engage in change efforts (White, 2022b).

### Awareness Challenges

Many mid-level leaders, faculty, and front-line staff may not be aware that there is a need for organizational change reform or, if they are aware, they may lack an understanding of how to make the necessary changes (Bailey et al., 2015; Chase et al., 2021; Conrad & LeMay, 2020; Rife & Conner, 2017; White, 2022b). The role of mid-level leaders, faculty, and front-line staff is different from senior leaders. Senior leaders are continuously evaluating macro-level institutional data while mid-level leaders, faculty, and front-line staff are typically focused on individual student support, teaching and learning activities, and managerial tasks. White (2022) underscored this point by highlighting that many senior leaders are aware of the completion agenda and the need to improve performance but others in the institution may not be. Faculty, in particular, may not be aware of reform efforts. Based on a guided pathways research study, CCCSE (2020) indicated that 45% of faculty respondents knew very little or nothing about reform efforts. Further still, Hussak (2018) shared that EAB surveyed 1,600 community college leaders on the barriers to implementing guided pathways and found that many faculty were only involved in the implementation efforts as observers rather than playing a more direct role. Rife and Conner (2017) highlighted in their findings from studying a community college in Michigan undertaking pathways reform that many campus faculty and staff remain unaware of the efforts and connections, as well as the possible role they might play. Researchers also identified a need to expand and engage more faculty and staff in the work for change efforts to be successful (CCCSE, 2020; Rife & Conner, 2017). Practitioners, faculty, and mid-level leaders are not frequently presented with data about how students are failing to succeed and may have limited time to analyze the data and engage in problem-solving.

Even if mid-level leaders, practitioners, and faculty do understand the need for change as part of the completion challenge, they may not be aware of current research and data that supports organizational change efforts to address the challenge. Mid-level leaders, faculty, and practitioners may also not be sure of their role in the change process or how to contribute to the change effort (Bailey et al., 2015; Chase et al., 2021; Conrad & LeMay, 2020; Klempin & Karp, 2018). Chase et al. (2021) shared that although practitioners can be familiar with the reform effort, they may lack a deep



understanding of the why and how of whole-college reform. Additionally, although engaging in reform efforts is expected for senior leaders, for mid-level leaders, faculty, and front-line staff, this work is often in addition to their primary responsibilities so they may not have the time necessary to invest in supporting change efforts given their other responsibilities.

Organizational change often starts with senior leaders who learn about change reforms from research, public scholarship, conferences, or through a network of colleagues; however, this top-down approach to organizational change can be a significant barrier and often results in lack of awareness at the operational level for administrators, faculty, and staff who will implement the change (Kezar, 2018; Klempin & Karp, 2018; Lester, 2020; VanWagoner, 2018; Wyner, 2021). In addition to this top-down approach being problematic for implementation efforts, colleges also often lack a mechanism for updating and messaging college stakeholders so they understand the need for the change and its impact on the whole college (Conrad & LeMay, 2020).

### **Motivation Challenges**

Many faculty and staff who have committed to student success reform efforts in the past may have been discouraged when they did not see a return on their investment of time and effort (Chase et al., 2021; Conrad & LeMay, 2020). White (2022b) noted that desire and motivation can be challenges to greater participation in the change effort especially if the change is considered a mandate. College faculty, staff, and administrators face many demands on their time and resources. When they do not see the direct impact of change or are informed about yet another change effort, this can be demotivating and may impact their willingness to re-engage in new efforts (W. Beesley, personal communication, October 15, 2021).

This demotivation has often been referred to as initiative fatigue. Kuh et al. (2015) described initiative fatigue as a phrase used to highlight how college stakeholders feel about the many different completion initiatives that colleges have undertaken over the years to support institutional change reforms. The term has implications for the psychological and physiological states of faculty and staff when faced with overwhelming or conflicting priorities (Kuh et al., 2015). For faculty and staff employed in colleges for many years, some have witnessed organizational change efforts ebb and flow and may not feel motivated to get involved in something they do not perceive will last (W. Beesley, personal communication, October 15, 2021).

In their research with department chairs, Chase et al. (2021) and Conrad and LeMay (2020) found that department chairs and faculty members were not interested in getting involved with guided pathways or related reform work because they were previously involved in other small-scale reforms that did not work or were abandoned. Faculty and staff sometimes opt to ignore the reform until it fails or until another reform is launched rather than embrace the current change effort (Chase et al., 2021; Conrad & LeMay, 2020).

Faculty and staff are incredibly busy and focused on students so their involvement in whole-college reform often means they will need to devote additional time and energy to activities outside the scope of their day-to-day work (Chase et al., 2021; Conrad & LeMay, 2020). The pandemic and the reduction in the college workforce due to retirements and enrollment declines has meant that faculty and staff are exhausted by their current responsibilities, making it even more difficult for them to take on additional work (Reed, 2020).

In addition to initiative fatigue, some faculty, staff, and administrators believe what they are already doing is enough and that there is no need to change how they or the college supports students (Chase et al., 2021; McNair et al., 2016). Some faculty, staff, and administrators also believe that it is the student's own effort that is the key to their success, and it is not the college's responsibility to change (Bailey et al., 2015; Chase et al., 2021; McNair et al., 2016). In some cases, resistance to change is based on personal fears or philosophies (Bailey et al., 2015; Chase et al., 2021; Kotter, 2012; VanWagoner, 2018; Walleser, 2018). Change can be stressful and threatening to employees as it disrupts consistency and creates uncertainty (Fay et al., 2021). In highly unionized environments, where faculty and staff have specific contracts describing their roles and responsibilities, there are often disagreements on routine matters let alone institutional reform efforts (Smith et al., 2020).

## Change Management Process Challenges

For organizational change to be successful, a series of actions or steps must take place and be sustained over time as part of the institutional culture (Kezar, 2018; Kotter, 2012). Kezar (2018) shares those challenges within a change framework specifically for higher education that include considerations around the type of change including the content, scope, level, focus, forces, and sources of change; context for change including the external factors and institutional culture; agency/leadership which includes top-down and bottom-up, collective, and shared leadership considerations; and approach to change which includes how colleges use scientific management, evolutionary, political, social cognition, cultural, and institutional theories for change. All of which, if not considered according to Kezar (2018), can be barriers to change within a higher education environment. Kotter's (2012) model maintains that organizational change fails due to complacency, lack of engagement of key stakeholders or a guiding coalition, underestimating and under communicating around vision, failing to create short-term wins, declaring victory too soon, and not anchoring the change in the culture. Although more linear and corporate than Kezar's (2018) model, both underscore that change is difficult in complex systems like higher education institutions due to factors around engagement, timing, vision, and leadership (Kezar, 2018; Kotter, 2012).

## **Limited Change Management Support**

Within many community colleges, there may be limited change management support to help design and develop an effective organizational change process (Lester, 2020). In fact, in the EAB survey of 1,600 community college leaders, Hussak (2018) reported that respondents indicated unclear processes were the greatest barrier to successful implementation even more so than financial or human challenges. White (2022b) indicated that challenges to implementation of change include lack of knowledge, ability, and reinforcement. Faculty and staff need to understand the knowledge around the why, what, and how of the change and the impact it will have on them (White, 2022b). Additionally, there is a need for individuals to perform the change and without individuals adapting to the new processes of change, the effort will fail (White, 2022b). Finally, reinforcement of the change is needed given that many institutions declare change efforts finished too quickly (Kotter, 2012; White, 2022b). Without a plan or framework for sustaining the change, along with ongoing professional learning support for change management, many leaders and institutions may be able to start the change work but may not have the skills and expertise to continue with it should they face funding, faculty, and staff resistance, or other challenges to implementation (Chase et al., 2021; Conrad & LeMay, 2020; Fay et al., 2021; Kezar, 2018; Klempin & Karp, 2018; White, 2022b).

## **Lack of Time and Support for Change Management**

Increased pressures on mid-level leaders in leading and managing reform can also make organizational process and culture change difficult. Mid-level leaders, which encompass a variety of titles but often include deans, directors, and department chairs who report to vice presidents and supervise front-line staff and faculty, are often responsible for understanding and leading change efforts (Chase et al., 2021; Conrad & LeMay, 2020; Klempin & Karp, 2018; McPhail & McPhail, 2020; Reed, 2020). The mid-level leaders are often not provided the support, resources, and skills needed to bring about sustained change (Chase et al., 2021; Conrad & LeMay, 2020; Klempin & Karp, 2018; McPhail & McPhail, 2020; Reed, 2020).

## **Lack of Education and Professional Development around Change Management**

VanWagoner (2018) shared that in addition to leadership and cultural changes, extensive and ongoing professional development is key to cultural transformation in community colleges. He also pointed out that when budgets are tight, colleges often decrease or eliminate professional development. This lack of support for professional development can be a significant barrier to the change management process of implementing and sustaining organizational reforms (VanWagoner, 2018). Educating college communities on how to best support the organizational change process and allow it to take root and grow within the institution is essential to sustainability (VanWagoner, 2018). In

one curricular reform effort at a large community college district, one challenge for faculty was even with their commitment to change to support their students they did not have the “professional training and expertise in curriculum development and design at the multi-college level that transformation of curriculum requires” (Fay et al., 2021, p. 23).

Many community colleges joined the national the AACC Pathways Project because they needed help and support in implementing the guided pathways reform effort (AACC, 2022b; Boerner, 2016; Pierce, 2016; Guth, 2017). Boerner (2016) quoted national expert Kay McClenney, then senior advisor to the president and CEO of AACC, who said “leading change is not something that most college presidents learn about in school, even in community college doctoral programs” (p. 29). The AACC project, with its institute workshops, technical assistance, and coaching supports, was a national professional development model to support colleges in operationalizing guided pathways institutional reform efforts (AACC, 2022b; Boerner, 2016; Guth, 2017; Pierce, 2016). However, only 43 of the more than 1,000 community colleges in the nation were able to participate in the AACC institutes leaving many colleges without formal assistance in implementing the student success reform (AACC, 2022a; AACC, 2022b).

### **Lack of Knowledge of Existing Resources**

Since whole-college change efforts like guided pathways are challenging, AACC and its partners launched the Pathways Collaborative web resource that provided practitioner-focused toolkits related to planning and implementing guided pathways. These toolkits included a series of white papers, research briefs, materials, webinars, and videos developed by researchers and experts in the field and were available at no cost to institutions. One toolkit focused on the challenges of senior leaders in leading the organizational change effort and another on the challenges of engaging administrators, faculty, and staff in the work (AACC, 2022d; AACC, 2022e).

Many other national experts and researchers have also developed and shared resources to assist colleges in transformational change efforts. For example, resources on how to combat reform myths, overviews on financial implications of organizational change reform efforts, tools for accessing equity impacts of enrollment practices, and implementation guides on developing student success teams have been developed (Fink & Jenkins, 2020; Johnstone, 2015; Johnstone & Karandjeff, 2017; Johnstone, 2018; Johnstone & Chaplot, 2019a; Johnstone & Chaplot, 2019b; Karp & Lyons, 2022). Specifically, these discussion guides, videos, briefs, templates, and PowerPoint slides were created to aid college practitioners with implementing and sustaining student success change efforts and they have been publicly shared online at no cost in an effort to provide change leadership and management support for colleges (Fink & Jenkins, 2020; Johnstone, 2015; Johnstone & Karandjeff, 2017; Johnstone, 2018; Johnstone & Chaplot, 2019a; Johnstone & Chaplot, 2019b; Karp & Lyons, 2022). However, not

all college leaders, faculty, and staff are aware that the resources are available or have the time to review and use them. Thus, the many professional learning resources available may not be enough to help colleges initiate, implement, and sustain whole-college student success reform (W. Beesley, personal communication, June 21, 2022).

## **Lack of State and Federal Support around Change**

### **Management Efforts at Institutions**

Statewide efforts have also been launched to help provide support to colleges embarking on the organizational change process. Now, 17 state-based student success centers affiliated with the Jobs for the Future Student Success Center Network offer resources and process support for implementing student success institutional reforms to colleges in their states (Baldwin, 2017; JFF, 2021; Pierce, 2016). However, many colleges do not have access to state-based collective support for their reforms (Andrews, 2021; Baldwin, 2017). Colleges in states without student success centers must undertake reform alone or with little or no support from their state agencies or systems (Baldwin, 2017). Andrews (2021) also highlighted there is no federal level policy support for funding for the guided pathways reform efforts, leaving states and colleges without larger national policy or financial support to undertake organizational change like guided pathways. Colleges may struggle not just to understand the process of change but also how to keep momentum going, especially given the myriad of challenges facing them including the COVID-19 pandemic, enrollment challenges, workforce needs, equity gaps, promoting diversity and inclusion, and shifts to virtual education (ATD, 2021).

## **Discussion and Recommendations**

Community colleges are challenged to implement and sustain student success organizational change due to three main reasons: contextual challenges to collaborating for change, awareness and motivation challenges to change, and change management process challenges within institutions. Additionally, leadership challenges to support change efforts are evident in all three reasons. These reasons create barriers for community colleges to embrace, implement, and sustain organizational change efforts, especially guided pathways that will ultimately increase equitable student success, including increasing persistence and graduation rates. These barriers to student success significantly impact the social and economic mobility of students, as well as their families, especially for students of color.

Further research around contextual challenges could be helpful to understand how colleges have overcome structural and funding challenges in implementing their change efforts. In fact, CCRC and others are continuing to research the contextual challenges within community college reform efforts particularly around structure and funding for

guided pathways implementation. Additionally, an in-depth review of external factors, like the pandemic, that impact internal organizational change should be conducted for additions to contextual challenges facing community colleges. Much of the research on change focuses on awareness and motivation challenges and less on the change process for colleges. There is limited research on how the change is implemented and sustained in organizations embarking on whole-college reform like guided pathways. In order to overcome these challenges, there are several possible options to provide specific supports for implementation and sustainability of the change effort.

## Implications for Leaders

Based on the findings from this literature review, there are several actions that community college leaders can take to improve implementation of whole-college reform efforts and ensure that these efforts are sustainable. First, in order to address contextual, awareness, and motivation challenges, community college leaders can seek out professional development and training opportunities for their faculty, staff, and administrators and provide campus-wide opportunities for collaboration and provide communication. Also, honoring past change efforts can build organizational trust to move forward with new change efforts. Second, to address change management process challenges, colleges can seek out external coaches who can provide support and guidance. Coaches can also make sure that stakeholders have access to resources they need to understand the change process. Finally, senior leaders and boards of trustees must embrace and design support for change leadership processes within their organizations. One way for leaders to embrace this change approach is within their strategic planning process, hiring and human resources processes, accreditation review process, and changes to campus-level policies and practices. For each of the three challenges, there are specific recommendations for colleges to implement and sustain change.

## Contextual Recommendations

To address the root cause of context challenges, it is recommended that colleges and their leaders:

- Provide regular opportunities for leaders to engage in institutional-level conversations and collaboration using new or existing college forums and committees (Bailey et al., 2015; Lester, 2020);
- Invite all college stakeholders including boards of trustees to participate in organizational change conversations (Baston, 2018; Fay et al., 2021; Gill & Harrison, 2018; Kadlec, 2019a; Luna-Torres et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2020; Walleser, 2018; Wyner, 2021);



- Develop consistent messaging around support for change reforms from senior leadership, boards of trustees, and other campus governing bodies (Wyner, 2021);
- Broaden the focus of leadership to include leaders at all levels and roles within the college who both understand the change in theory but also embrace it in practice (Eddy & Mitchell, 2016; Kezar, 2018; Klempin & Karp, 2018; Lester, 2020);
- Align budgets with institutional change efforts (Jenkins et al., 2022).

## **Awareness and Motivation Recommendations**

To address the root causes of awareness and motivation challenges, it is recommended that colleges and their leaders:

- Develop regular opportunities for professional development around change for all leaders (Bailey et al., 2015; Chase et al., 2021; Conrad & LeMay, 2020; Fay et al., 2021; Guth, 2017; Kezar, 2018; Klempin & Karp, 2018; McNair et al., 2021; VanWagoner, 2018; Walleser, 2018; White, 2022b);
- Expand and engage more faculty and staff in the work for change efforts to be successful (CCCSE, 2020; Rife & Conner, 2017);
- Communicate the importance of the change at all levels so mid-level leaders, faculty, and practitioners can understand their role in the change process and how to contribute to the change effort (Bailey et al., 2015; Chase et al., 2021; Conrad & LeMay, 2020; Klempin & Karp, 2018);
- Provide regular mechanisms for updating and messaging college stakeholders so they understand the need for the change and its impact on the whole-college (Conrad & LeMay, 2020);
- Use data, sensemaking, and organizational learning to help stakeholders see the need for change (Kezar, 2018; McNair et al., 2016);
- Help stakeholders understand the return on their investment of time and effort as part of the change effort and engage them in the development of the change activities (Chase et al., 2021; Conrad & LeMay, 2020; White, 2022b).

## **Change Management Process Recommendations**

To address the root causes of change management process challenges, it is recommended that colleges and their leaders:

- Use a macro change framework such as Kezar (2018) and engage the whole college in discussing the change such as guided pathways;



- Help faculty and staff understand the knowledge around the why, what, and how of the change and the impact it will have on them (White, 2022b);
- Reinforce that change may be a long-term process and use short-term celebrations to support the ongoing change efforts (Kotter, 2012; White, 2022b);
- Provide mid-level leaders the professional development support, resources, and skills they need to bring about sustained change (Chase et al., 2021; Conrad & LeMay, 2020; Klempin & Karp, 2018; McPhail & McPhail, 2020; Reed, 2020; VanWagoner, 2018);
- Communicate the change as part of the vision, mission, and values of the college (Kezar, 2018; Kotter, 2012; VanWagoner, 2018);
- Use existing resources, like the Pathways Collaborative practitioner-focused toolkits, to support planning and implementing guided pathways (AACC, 2022c);
- Develop or engage institution coaching supports (AACC, 2022c; ATD, 2022; JFF, 2022). Coaching, unlike consulting or mentoring, maintains that the answers to challenges of implementation lie with the college stakeholders undertaking the change effort and uses specific coaching strategies to support stakeholders in moving change forward (Boerner, 2016; Bragg et al., 2018; Bragg, 2019; McClenney, 2019).

College leaders at all levels could benefit from thinking strategically about implementing and sustaining organizational change efforts. The three challenges to implementing and sustaining the change efforts can be significant barriers to colleges' supporting student success. However, if colleges and their leaders are more aware and understand the change process and the type of activities that support change as referenced in the recommendations, it can have a significant impact on sustaining and implementing the change reform efforts and ultimately supporting student success outcomes (Bailey et al., 2015; Baldwin, 2017; Jones, 2015; Kezar, 2018; McClenney, 2019; Stout, 2016; White, 2022b; Wyner, 2021).

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