How do community colleges improve student outcomes?
Department chair communication with faculty plays an important role.

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Introduction

Change is a reality for organizations like community colleges, which must adapt to changing environments or risk becoming irrelevant—or extinct. This study explored the ways department chairs communicated with faculty during key moments of change in two colleges that have seen improvements in student retention and completion. The study linked successful communication practices of department chairs with faculty participation in change efforts. As they informed, motivated, and supported faculty, the chairs in this study gained and sustained faculty engagement and in doing so impacted student success. The chairs prioritized inclusive, collaborative communication, framing change as a learning process driving continuous improvement focused on student success.

Key Points

- Chairs emphasized the benefits of change instead of focusing on the negative side.
- Chairs shared information but prioritized seeking faculty input.
- Chairs used targeted rather than blanket messaging.
- Chairs prioritized efficacy ("we can do this") over discrepancy ("something must change") messages.

The Project

Community colleges are accessible institutions for many Americans due to lower tuition costs, proximity to home, and open-entry admissions policies. Community colleges are more likely than four-year institutions to enroll low-income and first-generation students. Hispanic students disproportionately enroll in community colleges. Community colleges serve as an entry point to the middle class for many Americans, and half of all college and university graduates studied first at a community college. Yet completion rates for community college students are poor, with only a third completing a credential within three years of enrollment. To compete in the new economy, Americans need some form of higher education. Change may be vitally important, but it is not easy to achieve. Higher education must improve student outcomes, but higher education struggles to change. As some have noted, "it is easier to move a cemetery than to change a university."

To explore factors that might contribute to success in improving student retention and completion, this study examined the communication strategies of 15 department chairs at two community colleges that have achieved impressive gains in student outcomes. Department chairs were asked to recall their verbal and written interactions with faculty during change efforts focused on improving student retention and completion. A faculty member in each chair's department was also interviewed to validate the chairs' recollections.

The chairs and faculty at both colleges vouched for a culture focused on student success: "I'm sure you've heard [our] mantra is student success, so from the chancellor to the custodian, it's all about student success." As one faculty member put it, "that's communicated a lot to us, that we are literally only here and our doors are only opened to serve students."

As front-line supervisors of faculty, chairs helped faculty move forward with change efforts in moments such as this one, described by a faculty member: "I think she did a really good job about reminding us of what the big goal is, what the big objective is. Because when you're in the grind, and you're down in the trenches, you don't see that. You're just like, 'why, why, why. I'm exhausted, I'm going nowhere, I'm spinning my wheels.' But to be reminded of that [goal], you're okay." In this way, chairs were instrumental in moving the college forward, one day at a time.

Chairs described their work as being a translator between administration and faculty: "The administration has their focus, and our program, our faculty, have another focus. And what I try to do as a supervisor is blend the two." One of the chairs explained, "for me, being that go-between for faculty and administration, I have to work really hard at trying to digest, what is administration expecting here? And how can we turn it into work?"

The close, cohesive department was often described in contrast to administration, which was labeled at times as distant and disconnected—even if faculty and chairs felt supported by and had faith in the leadership. The close proximity of faculty to chairs, who also taught classes, meant that both groups experienced change in the same ways. Faculty said they felt motivated and supported as they watched their department chairs grapple with the changes in the classroom.

A faculty member affirmed the importance of the departmental unit when describing faculty who were struggling with the changes: "They work it out with their chair and they're putting their trust in that little world and their department. They're just holding on to that."

A key finding of the study was the importance of communicating appreciation and support for faculty as they enacted the changes. According to one faculty member, "given the choice between $100 or just somebody stopping by my office and telling me that I'm doing a good job, I would take the encouragement any day."

For Decision-Makers: Impact on Policy and Practice

The academic department is a key location during times of intense change focused on student success. As frontline supervisors of faculty, department chairs are best situated to enact this change. To have the most impact on student outcomes, decision-makers should:

- Hire department chairs who advocate for student success and who will communicate early and often throughout the change process.
- Develop policies that require department chairs to teach every semester in order to maintain credibility and empathize with faculty.
- Provide training that enables department chairs to create messages that inform, motivate and support faculty, specifically by:
  - emphasizing the benefits of change and the ability of faculty to meet the expectations of the change.
  - framing the change in ways that align with faculty values and norms.
  - signaling a willingness to listen empathetically and address the emotions associated with change.
- Provide support for chairs, who are responsible for enacting and leading change within academic departments.

About this Brief

Further Reading

Bess, J. L, & Dee, J. R. (2014). *Bridging the divide between faculty and administration: A guide to understanding conflict in the academy*. New York: Routledge.

Bolman, L. G., & Gallos, J. V. (2011). *Reframing academic leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Esterberg, K. G., & Wooding, J. (2012). *Divided conversations: Identities, leadership, and change in public higher education*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.