Changing Systems to Improve Outcomes: A Midterm Review of PTR Implementation Partnerships

Edmund Graham and Heather McCambly

> " *Every system is perfectly designed to get the results it gets…* "
>
> — Dr. Paul Batalden

Dr. Bataden's quotation, a frequently repeated adage originating in the field of healthcare improvement, sums up one of the driving forces behind the design of the Pathways to Results (PTR) initiative—to dismantle and redesign systems to produce equitable outcomes. This notion of systems producing the exact outcomes for which they were designed can also be applied to the Pathways to Results methodology itself. After five years of leading PTR initiatives we began a process of deep review and reflection, including interviews and focus groups with a diverse set of PTR team leaders and a broad analysis of team artifacts and outcomes. This analysis revealed a number of critical strengths (e.g., raising the issue of equity, building capacity for using local data), as well as some important shortcomings. Further analysis of the PTR process and qualitative data revealed that indeed these shortcomings were partially built into our methodology.

The most critical realization was that the one-year project does not create time or space for both deep inquiry *and* improvement. Improvement efforts were often limited to a hasty planning process, which left teams to pick up after the summer on actual implementation with little guidance, causing improvements to lose momentum in some cases. This one-year period also limited the Office of Community College Research and Leadership's (OCCRL's) ability to learn about, support, and disseminate information about what it takes in practice to move equity-minded inquiry and planning into actual change.

In light of ongoing reflection, we decided it was time for PTR to evolve. The result was the creation of what is colloquially referred to as "PTR Year 2" or more formally as "Pathways to Results: Implementation Partnerships." The idea was simple: an opportunity for teams to work in a supportive community to leverage their work from the initial PTR process to launch an equity-minded improvement or series of improvements and evaluate the impacts. Teams would be selected based on their commitment to equity, their use of

HIGHLIGHTS

1) The Pathways to Results model has evolved to better support implementation and scaling work on community college campuses

2) Each participating team has unique implementation or scaling strengths--one from each team is highlighted here

3) Areas for further development of the project model have emerged related to equity in intervention design, resilience, and strengthening networks for accelerating change

pathways**to**results

About Pathways to Results

PTR is an outcomes-focused, equity-guided process to improve student transition to and through postsecondary education and into employment. The process engages community college practitioners and their partners to identify and understand the problematic aspects of systemic design--whether processes, practices, policies, or pedagogies--and to find sustainable solutions that will support equitable student outcomes. Seven years after its launch by the Office of Community College Research and Leadership (OCCRL) and the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB), the PTR methodology has supported 47 of the 48 community colleges in Illinois, with over 100 projects completed or in process to improve career pathways and programs of study.

meaningful data, and on the potential scalability of their intervention to other pathways or other institutions. The proposed interventions for these projects would need to be both evidence-based and scalable in terms of solving a common problem of concern to other Illinois community colleges. These teams would be coached through the implementation process and receive guidance along the way to build scale and sustainability into the project design through integration with other campus initiatives, braiding resources, stakeholder engagement, gathering evidence of effectiveness, and more.

The initial framework for this project was built on an extension of PTR's suite of tools and theories such as equity-mindedness (Dowd & Bensimon, 2014), participatory action research (for example see Argyris, 1993; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000), and systems thinking, as well as three new areas related to supporting successful implementation and scaling. Although not the focus of this brief, these theories or concepts include:

Goals of the Implementation Partnerships Project

- Strengthen **alignment** between equity or outcomes gaps and a scalable institutional change
- **Implement** the selected improvements and support **rigorous evaluation** of their success
- Build **relationships** across teams that support **accountability, innovative feedback, and acceleration** as teams learn from one another
- **Document and disseminate findings** about the interventions that show promise for implementation across the state, and to scale on the selected sites and beyond

- **Networked Improvement Communities** (Bryk, Gomez, & Grunow, 2011), a problem-centered approach, championed by the Carnegie Foundation, to organizing multiple institutions to address complex completion or student success concerns in higher education and to accelerate improvement through community, shared learning, and shared goal setting.

- **OCCRL's Transformative Change Initiative** (Bragg, et al., 2014), a set of guiding principles and strategies that assist community colleges to scale-up innovations that improve student outcomes and program, organization, and system performance.

- **Design Thinking or Design Studios** (Morris & Warman, 2015)**,** a popular approach in industry to problem solving and product development. The goal is to create a problem-centered environment where assumptions about common solutions or static systemic conditions are suspended in order to rethink avenues to transformation.

Emerging Insights for Implementation and Scaling

Five colleges were selected to participate in the inaugural year of this expanded implementation and improvement process. These colleges, all of whom had completed a PTR Year 1 project within the last year, represent urban, rural, and suburban settings from across the state of Illinois and vary in size from about 2,000 students up to 11,000 students. Teams' strategies or innovations varied, but their goal was the same: to improve student success as measured by completion, retention, or academic performance. Much like the students these institutions serve, each college started at its own level of readiness for change and scaling, and at various levels of readiness to tackle their ultimate improvement goals. The following summarizes the improvements implemented by the five teams. Additionally, each of five PTR summarized in this section was featured in a separate case study brief. These case study briefs feature more information on the specific innovation implemented by each team.

Innovations from Five Implementation Teams
Harry S Truman College: Providing embedded and contextualized reading support to close equity gaps for men of color, as well as looking for curricular changes to better meet interests of male students in cosmetology
Illinois Central College: Developing an integrated pedagogical model to enhance student learning and improve opportunities for student engagement in a nursing program
Oakton Community College: Building institutional capacity for data collection and analysis to inform the scaling and sustainability of work-based learning programs and non-credit (workforce development) to credit transitions
Rend Lake College: Implementing a credit and credential attainment strategy—degree audits to award "left behind" certificates and re-engagement of stopped-out students who are near completion—to improve student retention and completion
Sauk Valley Community College: Integrating technical math (college level) into the curriculum and implement a contextualized developmental math intervention to reduce equity gaps and improve overall completion in a pathway

It is important to note that this pilot initiative, still only halfway through its first year, came to fruition in one of the most fraught political and financial climates for public colleges and universities in Illinois history. The state budget stalemate created a climate of uncertainty and in all cases has shifted priorities within institutions. Despite a five-month delay in project funding, the five colleges all stayed engaged and committed to their projects. The cooperative engagement between the teams and OCCRL was critical to keeping this effort alive, as was the unwavering support of the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) and its staff.

This following section features a key strength or insight from each site that helped accelerate their implementation or scaling efforts. These strengths represent a short list of potential strategies relevant to other community college leaders looking to implement and scale equity-driven changes.

Harry S Truman College: Using evaluation and braided resources to carry equity through implementation

The Harry S Truman (Truman) team, like the other four implementation teams, found themselves in limbo as the state budget climate froze the expected receipt of implementation funds. Truman's strategic effort to braid multiple funding streams to meet the critical goals for men of color in their pathway helped to launch their project months in advance of receiving ICCB funding.

While one funding stream sat frozen, Truman learned they were recipients of a Title V[1] grant that could kick start their reading intervention and went a long way towards setting up the infrastructure for the team's efforts. Similarly, as new improvements and needs were revealed over the course of this team's evaluation process, they were able to leverage funds through their own strong communication of emergent evidence with leaders and stakeholders. For instance, as needs for professional development related to classroom management emerged, rather than rolling related expenses into their project budget, the team opened avenues for sharing their successes and their concerns with instructional and academic leaders. As a result, these new needs were integrated into professional development priorities and programming at the college level.

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[1] The U.S. Department of Education's Developing Hispanic-Serving Institutions Program

Not only did this ongoing evaluation surface new concerns related to student success and outcomes, it also played a critical role in centering their original project goal—enhancing the completion of men of color in the program—into their own implementation work. While this equity gap inspired the project and the strategy, in practice the intervention was open to all students, not only men of color. However, the Truman team felt that only through careful, disaggregated use of evaluation data—both qualitative and quantitative—could they confirm their intervention is improving outcomes for this key population. The team's leadership is prepared as they continue to evaluate to adapt or add to the intervention to strive for outcomes equity.

The deep engagement of program faculty in the entire project, including this notion of equity and improvement, has also situated this team in an ideal place for scaling within their institution. The team is preparing the evidence needed to show other academic leaders the efficacy of the intervention and the buy-in from faculty willing to advocate for the value of this reading intervention.

Illinois Central College: Investing in long-term changes in pedagogy to move the needle on student learning as a mechanism for addressing student success gaps

Illinois Central College (ICC) is another perennial PTR team, having participated in the PTR process six times over seven years. This team, by its own admission, began its Year 1 project with an initial deficit-type assumption that declining exam performance was a result of declining quality amongst its student cohorts. If this were in fact the case, then process changes to address things like recruitment and marketing processes, or even orientation or stronger tutoring programs, could have been the kinds of solutions needed to address this issue. As the team closely analyzed their data from an outcomes-focused equity lens, it became clear that the poor exam performance did not seem to be due to poor orientation practices or even student quality; rather, the learning occurring in the classroom was not meeting students' needs as professionals (nurses) or to succeed on the licensure exam.

Many efforts to improve community college student success begin from an assumption that either students' starting aptitude is to blame *or* that solutions should be centered in process or structural changes like advising, orientation, or guided course sequences. Indeed, these types of issues, while challenging to solve and often critical to success, sometimes prevent teams from analyzing the classroom pedagogies and curriculum. This is perhaps for good reason: while process features can often be changed within the course of a single academic year, a deep curricular or pedagogical change requires overwhelming faculty buy-in and as many as two to five years to implement due to curriculum design and approval processes.

These hurdles did not deter the ICC team. They relied on deep faculty engagement and leadership to begin a three-year process to integrate broad nursing concepts in what is called a "concept-based curriculum," an integrated, applied, and active approach to learning. This pedagogical design is meant to help students bring knowledge to bear on unscripted situations more aligned to the practice of nursing in a way that helps them flex academic, problem-solving, and soft-skills "muscles" simultaneously. ICC is also striving, despite challenges, to embed a plan to address and assess how this change promotes equity in student success and add interventions or make changes as needed to address persistent achievement gaps.

The ICC team has broken their curriculum redesign into a number of different processes and is using PTR to design, implement, and consider scale for each component. This year in particular, ICC is focused on three primary areas: 1) assessing and promoting engagement amongst faculty, 2) engaging in resource sharing for both transparency and to ensure long-term implementation efforts are informed by sufficient and appropriate evidence, and 3) mapping the curriculum to ensure it aligns with newer concept-based design and with workforce needs and demands. Unlike the other four Year 2 teams, ICC will not implement a pilot within the first year of the project. However, for the type of deep change in learning and instruction needed to improve these student outcomes, nothing short of this long-term commitment would be transformational. The engagement of faculty using these data was critical to setting this course and committing to the long-term process necessary for more than incremental change.

Oakton Community College: Using data to strategically scale successful work-and-learn and non-credit-to-credit transition interventions

Near the completion of their inquiry and planning (Year 1) project, Oakton Community College (Oakton) did not require additional time or resources to implement their selected solutions to address the achievement gap for adult and returning students. In fact, both its

work-and-learn (work-based learning partnerships with financial support and aligned curriculum and credentials to meet workforce needs) and non-credit-to-credit transition interventions were already being piloted in their manufacturing pathway by the end of the first project year.

As such, Oakton's objective for the implementation year was quite different from those of other teams and instructive in the context of scaling change. In short, Oakton needed to use data in a few ways. First, to continue to measure the success of the two interventions they would put in place to better serve their adult students, a population they realized was receiving no transitional supports despite rivaling a large feeder high school in terms of the number of students entering the institution every year. Second, to take what the Oakton team had learned about this need to better serve adult students in transition and apply it across the institution based on data that could demonstrate similar needs in specific programs or pathways. For the Oakton team, creating the opportunity to scale these interventions required making a case with data (disaggregated by race, ethnicity, age, income, and special populations) useful to institutional agents who hold resources or responsibility necessary to making the change happen. These agents include career and technical education deans, program chairs, department heads, and others. Oakton is using this opportunity to make robust data available across many programs to facilitate planning conversations that would set a path to scale successful interventions across the institution.

When discussing issues of equity and scale as potentially in conflict with one another, Oakton's team and work sees them as interrelated not only in their systemic effort to scale where equity gaps are revealed, but also in their framework for rolling out change. The Oakton team sought to scale these interventions within a framework that braids the two values together. This framework includes four considerations: 1) establish criteria for scaling success up front, 2) determine whether there is IT and human resource capital to build it to scale, 3) evaluate to determine that the solutions address the defined problem, and 4) ensure that the student populations experiencing inequitable outcomes are receiving the intervention and showing improvement.

Rend Lake College: An exemplar in continuous improvement through distributed leadership to address institutional retention

After digging deeply into their institutional data in five sample programs of study, the Rend Lake College (RLC) team began with an important but relatively straightforward problem and solution. Across these programs, six percent of students who did not persist or transfer had actually completed coursework for at least a certificate, but never received it, and an even higher percentage of students were within one semester of completing a degree or certificate in these pathways. These numbers combined to represent 20% of the students lost somewhere between one form (application for graduation) and one semester from completion. The initial plan was to address this problem by implementing a scaled audit process across the institution to award credentials or identify students who might be reengaged to complete credentials. This turned out to be merely a starting point for the RLC team, as they used the opportunity to continuously uncover the barriers standing between students and credential attainment. Although their discoveries are too many to list here, the strategy that can be gleaned is important to share.

The RLC team, which began small but grew with time, took steps to learn and reflect at multiple points in their change process. They conducted student surveys, analyzed students' financial aid standing at the point of stop out, analyzed the success of processes in place meant to *prevent* students from stopping out, and examined the barriers that could prevent students from to returning to RLC after stop out. As the number of opportunities for improvement grew, RLC leadership was able to broaden their scope of work by empowering a group of partners to carry out multiple interconnected strategies rather than putting too great a burden on one department or one project team. They also reacted quickly to discoveries, making immediate changes wherever possible--e.g., quickly introducing and passing an immediate removal of the graduation fee for all students, introducing an auto drop process to catch a swath of students incurring debt for courses they never attended, and more. These quick wins did not replace their long-range goal of a sustainable degree audit and reengagement strategy to improve retention, but it did spin off to encompass multiple areas of need ranging from auto drop policies, to mentoring needs, an early alert effort, a new student success center space, and more.

This approach eventually culminated in the creation of an all-new PTR Year 1 team tasked with going deeper into these issues specifically from the perspective of part-time and nontraditional students in a way that was also inclusive of issues related to instruction and pedagogy. In the end, there are at least four identifiable leaders carrying out work for this project, including the primary team leader, with each making immediate changes in their area of work and committing to long-term improvement.

Sauk Valley Community College: Leveraging broad engagement and alignment with institutional priorities to address new facets of equity in practice

Sauk Valley Community College (SVCC) has returned to the PTR process to analyze and improve a new pathway each year for the last five years. Its team has become so invested in PTR that they have institutionalized its use into their approach to program review and continuous improvement, creating an institutional PTR team that is responsive to needs that arise on their campus. The SVCC team is unique in its engagement of a diversified group of stakeholders including robust leadership from faculty and industry, in addition to academic administrators. Of course, this level of prolonged engagement in a process builds capacity--capacity for strong communication, for working through disaggregated student data, and for sustaining improvements. This kind of engagement also creates an opportunity for deepening engagement as a college with how improvements can more meaningfully address equity.

Because of PTR's strong focus on career pathways, many teams struggle with how to achieve dual purposes when it comes to the concept of "equity." On one hand, Perkins frames equity around issues of gender representation in specific fields (e.g., men in nursing, women in welding). On the other, the broader landscape in higher education considers "equity" in terms of access and success metrics related to specific achievement gaps for students around different aspects of identity--with race and income often centered in the conversation. SVCC has launched many projects geared at gender equity in nontraditional fields. Early in this Year 2 project, SVCC was looking at equity in terms of non-traditional (gender) populations within their multicraft program--a massive undertaking considering the social and historical context of gender and the workforce already affecting students as early as elementary school. This team already had a suite of interventions in place to try to address this issue in their own community reaching back as far as middle school students.

In OCCRL's discussion with the broad SVCC partnership, the group was able to have a series of "aha" moments that would not have been possible with a less invested or broad team base. First, they realized that their ongoing efforts for gender equity might already be sufficient, but that their efforts to reach equity in enrollment and completion for students of color or low-income students were not. From there, the team's institutional researcher and the lead faculty recognized that much of the racial or ethnic diversity in the program seemed to "get lost" in the pathway's introductory course as a result of needed math or reading skills that inhibited their success, despite what seemed to be the students' best efforts. This program had no specific supports to aid students in critical skill development within the context of the program curriculum. The industry representative provided insight into the importance of strong and contextually developed math, reading, writing, and problem-solving skills for workforce success.

Administrators were able to see the opportunity in this discussion for scale and sustainability through a connection with an institution-wide effort to redesign developmental education. It emerged that a program-specific intervention to improve contextualized skills building for greater outcomes equity through an integrated college-level math intervention and a skill-building intervention for developmental needs could act as a pilot program that could be rolled into larger, permanently funded institutional efforts for improvement if successful. This result was only attainable as a result of the sustained engagement (to achieve a broadened definition of equity) of a broad partnership (to identify different facets of needs and resources to drive this particular intervention).

Conclusion and Issues for Further Exploration

In addition to looking for the strengths and insights to be gleaned from each of these teams, a number of themes for improvement or further inquiry have come to the surface. These themes force an examination of the first iteration of the Implementation Partnerships structure and will be addressed thoroughly in the final case studies and project report. Three of the most critical themes for the purpose of encouraging successful scale, implementation, and equitable change include:

- **Moving equity beyond inquiry or symbolism.** Within the first few months of the project it became clear that achieving a commitment to equity beyond the point of inquiry and into the realm of action was a greater struggle than initially anticipated. In other words, within current systems it can be a challenge for practitioners to center the issue of equitable outcomes into implementation, particularly when an intervention is made available to all students. With the concept of "equity" being a hot topic in the field of postsecondary educational action and research (Dowd & Bensimon, 2014; Hurtado & Halualani, 2014), it is still a struggle on the ground to make equity a priority as a matter of course rather than as the exception. Addressing this struggle would include how to move the topic of equity from the symbolic step of looking at achievement gap data to a guiding force in intervention design.

- **Applying a framework for resiliency to the project structure and team development.** As these colleges operated in a highly turbulent environment, some struggled and flourished at different times and in different ways to continue to achieve, sustain, or scale their goals or interventions. Looking broadly at the challenges that often prevent community college leaders from making transformational change, we think it is incredibly important to understand and potentially create capacity to address these strengths and weaknesses from the perspective of resiliency (Powell, Hatch, Fians, Shinert, & Richie, 2016).

- **Understanding the role of peer networks and the "critical friend" to support implementation.** This project was based in part on a desire to create a network of colleges supporting one another and sharing discoveries to accelerate the advancement of all involved. For various reasons, fewer robust opportunities for interaction occurred in the first half of the project year, with a more prominent role than predicted for OCCRL staff to play the "critical friend" (Swaffield & MacBeath, 2005; Kember et al., 1997) offering insights, research, and making direct connections between colleges to deepen or accelerate success. Despite this unexpected outcome, all team leaders cited the importance of the networks and/or OCCRL staff coaching as a much stronger support for success than expected by project leadership.

This brief, intended to highlight a few emergent insights useful to college leaders seeking to implement transformational changes in turbulent postsecondary environments, comes just six months into this first project year. It is an important milestone as project teams continue to advance their implementation and evaluation, but in every way, this work is still unfolding, as are the lessons to be learned about both the interventions (e.g., a new approach to integrated developmental education) and the strategies for implementation. Future briefs and five campus case studies will advance, critique, and detail the insights presented here related to strategies that appear to be supportive to successful implementation of these critical improvements for equitable student success. We look forward to sharing the culminating outcomes of this work in the hopes that the evolving model and campus interventions will be one step closer in their design to produce the experiences and supports our students need and deserve.

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About the Authors

Edmund Graham III, M.Ed., is a Ph.D. student in Education Policy, Organization and Leadership with a specialization in Higher Education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and currently works as a Graduate Research Assistant for OCCRL.

Heather McCambly, M.A., is the Project Director for the Pathways to Results initiative at the Office of Community College Research and Leadership. Her research has centered on the equity implications of performance-based budgeting and funding systems, intersectional identity and student success, and equity-centered change on the community college campus.

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