Leadership

Adoption and Adaptation

Evidence

Storytelling

Networks

Dissemination

Technology

Spread and Endurance

Transformative Change Initiative Overview

The Transformative Change Initiative (TCI) is dedicated to assisting community colleges to scale-up innovations that improve student outcomes and program, organization, and system performance.

Guiding Principle for Adoption and Adaptation: Scaling of transformative change will occur when adoption and adaptation honor and influence the cultures of the settings involved.

Community colleges are in the spotlight as the institution of higher education charged with revitalizing the nation's economy. Expanding on the access-to-college agenda that has been at the heart of community colleges historically, community colleges are tasked with a comprehensive reform agenda with initiatives that compete for shrinking dollars. The federal investment in community colleges, notably the recent unprecedented infusion of nearly 2 billion dollars to community colleges to expand training programs for unemployed and underemployed workers, demands that colleges change and adopt new practices and policies that serve all students better and yield improved completion rates, especially for groups that have not succeeded in the past.

Colleges are charged with shortening the cycle of adoption, changing the innovation in ways that allow it to work in the new institution, and developing methods and metrics that demonstrate all students are achieving improved outcomes. Along with the demand for change is the increasing requirement of evidence of effectiveness. Responding to that pressure, colleges adopt practices from other institutions, sometimes with limited available evidence as to their impact.

> There is no single recipe for adaptation as it, by definition, requires different ingredients based on the needs of the adopting organization.

The classic idea for scaling innovation calls for replication, meaning implementation consistent with the original innovation. Whereas this simple idea is attractive – follow the recipe, fix the problem – increasingly, scholars and practitioners question whether replication is either feasible or effective in complex settings. Community colleges having multiple missions, varied settings, different funding streams, comprehensive curricula, and diverse learners, more than qualify as complex organizations (Bragg, 2014).

Another aspect of adoption comes from the field of anthropology. Heinrich (2001) suggests that the successful adoption of an innovation depends on the adopters' level of bias toward the innovation itself and toward the entities currently implementing the innovation. Heinrich explains that social networks, their members and collective influence, can positively or negatively impact adoption. For colleges attempting to scale an innovation to another setting, careful attention should be paid to who is tasked with the job and the methods they employ in doing so. For organizations considering adopting an innovation, Heinrich advises they assess readiness for adoption and determine the approach and processes that are most appropriate for the specific culture.

Once an innovation is targeted for adoption, practitioners need to turn their attention to how the innovation should be adapted to fit the local context. There is no single recipe for adaptation as it, by definition, requires different ingredients based on the needs of the adopting organization. Most researchers argue some components of an innovation need to remain intact throughout the process of adaptation to maintain fidelity to the original goal. Bradach (2003) argues that, within a broad range of acceptable processes and practices, "minimum critical specification" – referring to the fewest elements necessary to produce the desired impact – is needed to successfully adapt an innovation. Identifying the critical

components of an innovation and understanding how these components are being implemented provide valuable insights into how well an innovation will scale. Schorr (2012) reinforces this point saying that when implementing complex programs that are "place-based, [and] evolving" . . . we should focus "on spreading the identified components of effective interventions" versus attempting to replicate entire programs, "because even proven models are seldom so strong that the program will be successful regardless of the circumstances in which it is replicated" (n.p.).

Century (2007) also recommends identifying critical components, both implicit and explicit, that must be present to demonstrate fidelity, while allowing for adaptation. Dees, Anderson, and Wei-Skillern (2004) discuss that when social entrepreneurs try to scale innovations that are general, with limited definition and detail regarding how to implement them, more local autonomy and variation (adaptation) are needed in the new location.

Drawing lessons from the non-profit sector, Harris (2010) suggests a different focus that is relevant to community colleges, given the diversity of local contexts. Harris recommends paying attention to an innovation's desired impact, versus its components, which allows greater levels of adaptability to occur. This process should be supported with robust data collection and enhanced by a collaborative environment devoted to continuous improvement. Adaptation according to this perspective depends on the ability of staff to adapt the innovation to students, the organization's culture and policies, and other features that make it unique. Bickerstaff and colleagues (2012) support the importance of diagnosising students' needs and challenges as a major factor to consider at the onset of scaling.

Dede (2006) concurs that adapting innovations to the local context involves closing gaps between the innovation's demands and the organization's capacity, using a framework for "evaluating the fit" (p.11). Evaluating the fit includes examining capacity, policies, management, and organizational culture. Keeping the framework in mind, specific strategies and conditions that contribute to successful scaling and adaptation within a new context include

- multiple types of professional development;
- linkages between the innovation and larger systemic reforms;
- stable leadership, user ownership, and community support;
- formal and informal assessment of student outcomes; and
- continuous inquiry with access to necessary data.

We understand all too well that a lack of understanding of local culture and context, combined with over-simplified ideas about how innovations spread, lead to disappointing results (Schorr, 2012). Analyses of innovations that have been successfully scaled reveal that a better approach involves practitioners who recognize how the local context influences implementation; use data to understand what is working and what is not; and repeat the pattern of adopting and adapting over time. Kotter (1996) and others' ideas provide a clear and commonsense approach that can accelerate the cycle of adoption, adaptation, measuring, learning, and improvement that is demanded of today's community colleges: Establish a sense of urgency for change, communicate the vision for change, and integrate change into the local cultural context. All three are important to organizational adoption and adaptation of innovations to improve programs, policies, and practices so that inequities that limit student potential can be addressed and result in the achievement of all students' educational goals.

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