



**INSIGHTS** TO ACT ON

## **USING REFLECTION TO ADVANCE EQUITY-FOCUSED TRANSFORMATION**

**Observations from the Frontier Set  
You Can Use to Advance Equity**



The [Frontier Set](#) is a select group of high-performing, high-potential colleges, universities, state systems, and supporting organizations that are committed to eliminating race, ethnicity, and income as predictors of student success by transforming how institutions operate.

The Frontier Set uses the following definition of institutional transformation to orient its work:

**“the realignment of an institution’s structures, culture, and business model to create a student experience that results in dramatic and equitable increases in outcomes and educational value.”**

To learn more about institutional transformation, visit the Frontier Set website [here](#).

The existing conditions in higher education are not serving Black, Latinx, or Indigenous students, or students from low-income backgrounds. Education after high school has provided opportunities to millions of Americans, but race, ethnicity, and income are too often predictors of student access to and success in postsecondary education. Colleges and universities can be critical change agents for increasing postsecondary access and boosting student success. **We believe an inclusive, equitable future is possible**; the Frontier Set is helping show the way. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation invested in convening the Frontier Set to explore the why and how—the strategies and tactics—of institutional transformation. The 29 institutions and two state systems that make up the Frontier Set are



part of a growing movement to expand access and ensure persistence and completion for people who have historically been and currently are denied the benefits of higher education. Frontier Set sites spent the past several years working closely with a network of support partners and researchers to capture their respective transformation journeys, so other institutions can learn from them and accelerate their own journeys toward equitable student success outcomes.

As part of the work of the Frontier Set, support partners of the [network](#) synthesized observations from the institutions’ work, and this document’s focus on reflection is part of a limited series of themes you can factor in as you figure out how to advance equitable student success at your institution. No matter your role at your institution, these observations are relevant for you. These **Insights to Act On** are inspired by the work of Frontier Set sites, and have been compiled with the goal of providing accessible, useful content you can use to ensure that driving equitable change on campus is part of everyone’s job.



## WHAT IS REFLECTION?

Reflection, as observed in the Frontier Set, is a process in which structural and systemic problems that affect the student experience are considered and discussed, in order to solve for and mitigate or remove identified barriers, through either ad hoc or integrated strategies. Reflection can take place individually or with a group. It allows for campus stakeholders to consider how organizational culture, structures, and resources may or may not need to transform in order to improve their capacity to become more student-ready and equitable.

### The Opportunity

Most higher education institutions are designed to uphold existing systems and conditions that do not empower equitable student outcomes. Reflection is a powerful accountability practice that can change this. **Reflective practice can lead to collective and collaborative problem-solving, enabling individuals, units, and departments to: examine organizational structures and policies; dismantle barriers; implement change; track the progress of student success efforts and equitable transformation; and reinforce and hold one another accountable for shared goals and processes for transformation.**



## REFLECTION AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Reflection is an essential part of equity-focused institutional transformation, and is made possible by strategies and activities associated with continuous quality improvement (CQI). If your institution has an established CQI process, you may find that reflection enables institutional leaders to understand when, where, and how to implement and integrate student success transformations. Although CQI looks different across institutions, a set of similar principles exist with respect to reflection. These include:

- Reflection is central to all stages of continuous improvement.
- Reflection is effective when it's data-informed, routine, and inclusive of multiple stakeholders, especially students.
- Different intentions for reflection can guide various stages of CQI, from reflecting on the problem being solved to reflecting on the change process itself.

## WHAT ARE THE STEPS OF EFFECTIVE REFLECTION TO FUEL EQUITABLE TRANSFORMATION?

Reflection can take many different forms. The following framework can help the reflective process effectively fuel transformation efforts:

1. **Identify** an issue or set of problems observed in the student experience. Consider all potential structural and systemic challenges.
2. **Assess** how institutional policies and practices contribute to and/or create this issue or set of problems, using a mix of qualitative and quantitative data such as disaggregated student outcome data, stakeholder surveys, or focus groups.
3. **Narrow** these observations to a set of actions and activities that may alleviate or eliminate this issue or set of problems and improve the student experience.

## WHO CONTRIBUTES TO REFLECTION?

**Campus leaders, faculty, staff, and students at all levels can engage in individual and collective reflection.** Often informed by data and facilitated by a mid-level leader, effective reflection on student success is the result of a process that is encouraged by leadership, includes cross-functional teams and takes student voices into account to get a complete picture of the full student experience, both lived and academic.

## WHAT ARE SOME BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE REFLECTION?

**Common barriers to effective reflection on campuses include:**

- Existing reflective practices, such as accreditation or program reviews, are often performative, narrow in scope, exclusive by design, and do not consider the entire student experience.
- Effective reflection requires multiple data sources and types (a mix of quantitative and qualitative) related to the student experience, and should be framed through an equity lens. However, campus units often have limited access to comprehensive, student-level data to inform decision-making.
- There can be a lack of an inclusive and/or trusting space or culture that is conducive to honest reflection, particularly around equity.



## CONSIDERATIONS FOR TRANSFORMATIVE REFLECTION

### **No single strategy or form of reflection directly leads to equitable transformation.**

Rather, a set of considerations and conditions are important to helping campus leaders shape and frame reflective practice, which can lead to more equitable transformation efforts and student outcomes. Here are some considerations, which are not exhaustive but are observed trends synthesized from the work of Frontier Set sites.

#### 1. **Make it Student-centered**

The student experience can vary for different student groups and types. In order to reflect more equitably, start with listening and then critically thinking about the student experience from the perspective of different student groups, and how that is reflected in the institution's major practices, policies, and routines, such as the strategic plan, mission, and targets/key performance indicators.

#### 2. **Consider Power and Privilege**

In identifying which offices and individual roles are involved in the reflection process, consider how power and privilege dynamics contribute to the process itself. What are the historical elements of participation? How do positions with more authority help or hurt the participation of others in conversations related to the student experience? Reflection opportunities can enhance transparency, trust, and vulnerability.

#### 3. **Focus on Language**

Pay particular attention to what assumptions or stereotypes exist in the language used to reflect on institutional practices and policies. Does this language exclude specific groups of students? How does the institution's history and "tradition" show up in the conversations? What about this history has been harmful and/or not accounted for in the institution's present context?





# HOW TO REFLECT ON STUDENT SUCCESS AND EQUITABLE TRANSFORMATION

## Apply an Equity Mindset

- Avoid deficit-based thinking — students are not the problem. What role does the institution (individuals, offices, units, policies, procedures) play in creating barriers for students?
- Embrace a solutions orientation. Students can be the best source of direct information on how to address barriers. What role does the institution play in creating student opportunities and solutions?
- To the extent possible, examine barriers and solutions as rooted in history and tradition.

## Examine Data

- Disaggregate student outcome data and apply an intersectional lens to identify and discuss patterns and trends specific to different student groups.
- Complement quantitative student outcome data with qualitative data, to more fully understand the lived student experience as well as student experiences in potential solutions.
- Create, maintain, and use data dashboards to refer to during the reflection process.
- Embed experts from the institutional research/effectiveness office to support informed inquiry, discussion, and a solutions orientation.
- Engage other campus leaders, through channels such as faculty and staff onboarding, professional development, student advising, and the campus life/residential program.

## Align to Existing, Recurring Processes or Frameworks

- Intentionally integrate reflection from start to finish across processes for institutional transformation, leadership, and student success initiatives.
- Regularly examine student-level data and feedback during senior leadership/cabinet meetings, department meetings, strategic planning, and quality enhancement planning.
- Align student success changes and recommendations for change with the institution's strategic plan.
- Orient reflection around field-facing student success frameworks.

## Engage a Range of Perspectives

- Create cross-functional groups such as task forces, committees, or teams to focus on the student experience and student success.
- Incentivize reflection by aligning or reallocating resources to encourage reflective practice that leads to action.
- Identify opportunities to embed and capture student voices, either by direct student participation in the reflection and decision-making process or through other means, such as surveys, focus groups, or evaluations.

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Our transformational efforts are centered on equity, and teaching and learning. Both were catalyzed by a close examination of student success outcomes at DCCC. Like prior efforts, sharing of data created the momentum and urgency for action.”

DAVIDSON-DAVIE  
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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To ensure the campus has easily accessible information, the Division of Analytics and Integrated Planning has developed and distributed interactive factbooks, insight dashboards, and detailed student-level reports for use by the executive, managerial, and front-line enterprises. By opening up the data, cross-functional teams can recognize areas of excellence to support scaling of ideas through the entire university.”

UNIVERSITY OF  
CENTRAL FLORIDA

“

PSU has outlined a strategic framework for organizing and coordinating a campus-wide focus on student success, Students First. Students First is organized into four pillars or focus areas. These include Persistence, Academic Success, Affordability, and Student Experience, all supported by the strategic use of data.”

PORTLAND STATE  
UNIVERSITY

“

Key groups meet on a regular basis to disseminate information to stakeholders and thus ensure continuous engagement on university priorities... The Enrollment Management Council meets weekly to discuss ongoing strategies focused on meeting annual enrollment targets, IDP, retention strategies, etc.”

DELAWARE STATE  
UNIVERSITY

## EXAMPLE OF REFLECTION IN ACTION

A second-year transfer student is thinking about dropping out of school due to having to retake a gateway math course that they failed last semester.

Meanwhile, as part of a strategic planning cycle, the President wants to better understand why failure and withdrawal rates continue to climb, especially for transfer students in gateway math, which is impacting the university's retention rate. She poses this question to her cabinet and a mix of mid-level leaders that includes the AVP for Student Success.

The AVP for Student Success needs to make an informed recommendation to the President and cabinet related to the failure and withdrawal rates. She prioritizes a list of people to talk to, and conducts a reflection exercise with those units most familiar with gateway math. With help from Institutional Research, the AVP is planning to anchor the reflection on current course outcomes and related advising, placement, and assessment processes.

The AVP convenes a cross-departmental group of those most familiar with gateway math, to better understand what processes or policies are creating student-facing barriers that may impact failure and withdrawal rates. In addition to the collective discussion, the AVP reflects on student engagement data collected through institutional surveys. This helps everyone better understand the students' lived experience, and grounds the discussion.

As a result of these reflections, the AVP develops recommendations for the President and Provost for structural changes that need to be made in order to address student outcomes in math. The institution realigns resources to provide more student support. Now, instead of thinking about dropping out, students who struggle with gateway math meet with advisors, who refer them to support services, like tutoring. The student retention rate subsequently rises.

## PUTTING REFLECTION INTO PRACTICE

There are many tools Frontier Set sites have used to help build effective reflection into their equity-based transformation. Two tools that many have found useful are:

- **Process Mapping:** Based in CQI methodology, this approach is often used to reflect on the current state of institutional processes that impact the student experience. In reflecting on current student outcomes in relation to the associated activities, steps, and decisions around a given process, many institutions are able to reimagine future, improved processes that can support increases in student access and success.
- **Design Thinking:** Applying human-centered design allows institutions to focus on their "end users"—students. For some Frontier Set institutions, using human-centered design enables them to take an inherently more cross-disciplinary approach to designing for and with students.





## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Reflection and sharing are key pieces of transformative work, no matter where your institution is in its transformation journey. Use the questions below to guide discussions independently or with your team, to identify strategies that can help you employ reflective practices to enhance equity and accelerate transformation.

- How is my institution using reflection to drive transformative change? Are there opportunities to enhance the use of reflective practice?
- How might opportunities to reflect encourage transparency, trust, and vulnerability on campus?
- How can I frame challenges with an equity-based mindset?
- What qualitative and quantitative data are used to help inform reflection? Are there additional resources that should be utilized or developed to help inform transformative reflection?
- What processes or frameworks are already in place that would benefit from adding reflective practice?
- Who else should I be working with as I undertake my own reflective process? What data should inform this reflection?
- What additional trainings, integration, or other activities would further normalize reflective practices on campus?



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