

Equity in Program Transformation Part 1

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Thank you for inviting me to join you for this conference. I would like to talk just a little bit about a model that we developed in a project with 11 institutions, all trying to do STEM reform. The model isn't specific to math, necessarily, and it is focused at the institutional level as the participating teams were working on projects that went beyond a course, a program, or a department. In general, if you are trying to affect something beyond a course, program, or department, there are impacts on and involvement of other departments or divisions at your university, such as Students Affairs, or policies like promotion in tenure standards that must articulate department standards but also meet university expectations. At the time we initiated the project, people were struggling with how to get something more systemic or institutional launched and sustained.

I started this project with my colleague, Adrianna Kezar, about five or six years ago, and we enlisted 11 universities in California, in public and private, research, comprehensive, and liberal arts institutions. We asked them to embark on an institutional change project on their campuses and then we worked with them through that project. In the end, in a very kind of grassroots way, we looked back and asked, "What would have been helpful to you?" And that's essentially where the model in Figure 1 came from.

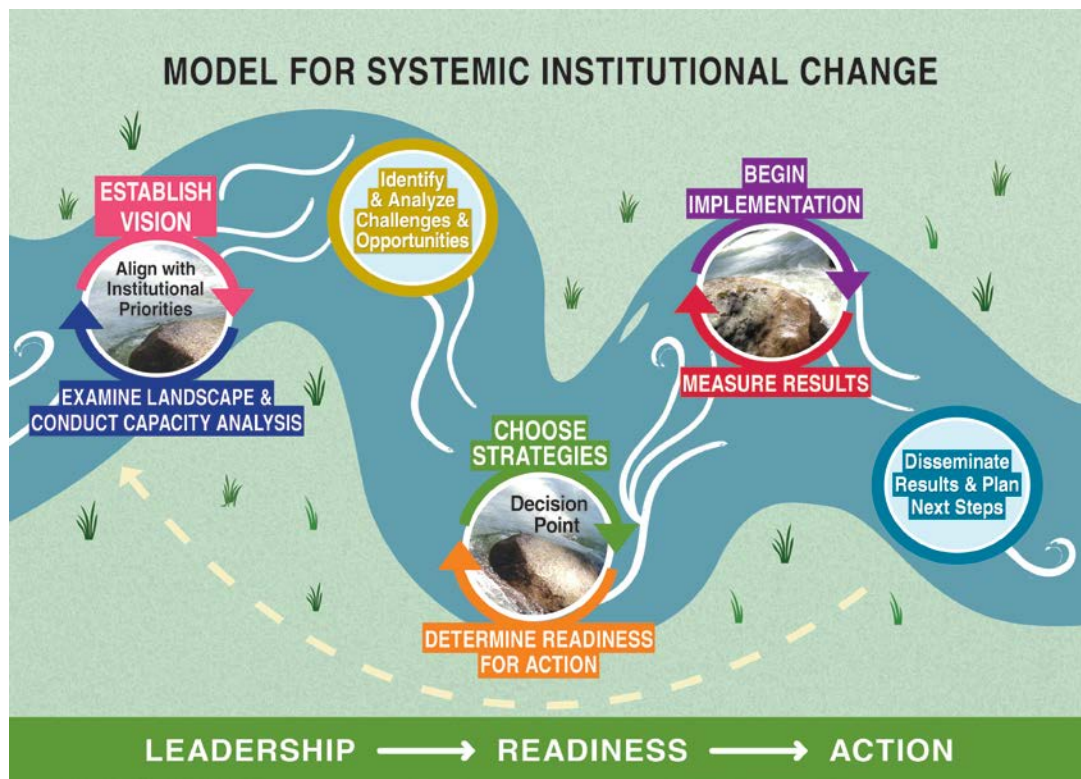


Figure 1. Systemic Institutional Change Model. (Elrod & Kezar, 2016)

We call it the Systemic Institutional Change Model and use a river analogy to represent it (we also refer to it as the River Model). The reason we choose a river to represent this model is because change is not linear, it's not simple, you can run into rapids, there might be rocks in the river, which are shown in three places in the image. Where you see the arrows going around them is where you might eddy out or eddy around and spend some time. These are places where our project teams spent time, going around and around until they figured it out. Also, if you are rafting or kayaking down a river, you could get out, take your raft or kayak and get out at any point. When you reach the end, you can get out and hike back to the beginning and raft down over again. You can also enter at any point. So, we thought the river was a nice analogy. But optimally, you really should start at the far-left side of this model, upstream. It is generally easier to navigate a river by going with the current!

I know all of you are immersed in various kinds of projects, and you probably already know that it's important to start with a vision, which is the first step in the model, but also, it's not just your individual vision, but it is your shared vision with the others in your project. It is important that you have taken the time with your colleagues and whomever it is that you are working with to articulate a shared vision in a common language to which everyone agrees and understands. How many of you feel like you have a shared vision with your colleagues? It turns out, not only is this the most important place to start, but it is the most difficult place to start because your idea about what should be accomplished is probably very different from your colleagues'. But if you are ever going to get it together and get something done, you have to get on the same page. I recommend that you spend the time to articulate it in writing. Write it down, share your words with one another, and come up with that vision. And then you can develop specific goals, strategies, and tactics from there.

It is also important to think about how connected, or not, that vision is to institutional, strategic goals, priorities, or plans. All of you are at colleges or universities; how many of you have read your university's strategic plan? This is especially important if you are going to enlist the support of your president, your provost, or dean. As a provost, my main priorities are those that are attached to a goal in our university's strategic plan because those goals are, in large part, what I am held accountable for. So, if you come to me for funding requests, I'm going to ask, "How does this fit into the strategic plan?" Then you have to convince me with a solid rationale and plan. The next step of creating a vision has to do with understanding your current data landscape to frame the context for the problem you are trying to solve. What do you know about the students you are trying to impact? How many of you feel like you have a good handle on the data that is related to the goals you're trying to accomplish in your project? It could be course pass or failure rates, student progression, student retention, graduation rates. There could be all kinds of other data that might be relevant, like data from placement tests and other placement systems or the PRAXIS performance assessment for teachers.

In thinking about data, also think about disaggregating the data by different ethnic groups, gender, and other demographic elements. How many of you are disaggregating data by Pell eligibility? Here is a story about using Pell eligibility as a data element. Many institutions are focusing a lot on underrepresented minority student retention and graduation so are disaggregating their data by those types of categories. By adding a variable, like Pell eligibility, you may come to understand the student populations you are serving in new ways. For example, you may find that socioeconomic status is a more important issue to be addressing. By looking at data in different ways, you gain a clearer understanding of the issues, and this can only help you in creating strategies that will help you address those specific issues.

The vision and data landscape phase is critical because it will inform what kinds of strategies and approaches you should invest the time in planning and implementing. Everybody's time, money, and other resources are precious. So, when you're thinking about what you're doing, not only should it be informed by your vision and what you are trying to accomplish, but it should be informed by what you know about the students that you are trying to impact. It should take into account your local context, institutional mission, and priorities. What a

neighboring institution, or one across the country, is doing may or may not be the strategy or intervention that is relevant for your student body, your faculty expertise, your institutional mission, your community partners, etc. Local context matters here.

While it is important to learn from others, it is just as important to uncover how what you learn is relevant to your students and their needs and is a match to your faculty expertise, interests, and passions. When I was at Fresno State, we had a focus on retention and the gaps in underrepresented student success. I was Dean of the College of Science and Mathematics at that time. We were looking across all of our STEM programs and the programs that other California State University institutions were putting in place, like summer boot camps where students start early and typically spend a month or more. Our students in the Central Valley of California needed their summers to work so they could afford tuition, rent, and books. So, while we thought a summer boot camp was a really good idea, we had to modify it to fit our local context by implementing something much shorter before the year started. We then spread out other aspects of the summer bridge experience into the academic year. We liked that idea, and we thought it would work, but we modified it to fit our situation, our context, our students, and our mission. Here is an example from the University of Wisconsin system: The Board of Regents passed a requirement that all of the universities would use a common cutoff score for the math placement test. We have 11 or so comprehensive universities, plus two-year colleges, and Milwaukee and Madison are the research universities. While this was a Board decision, an important part of implementation was that they allowed each campus to develop their own plan as to which type of course the students below the cutoff scores would be placed into. That gave our math department an opportunity to then respond in context by enhancing already developed co-requisite courses as well as developing a new quantitative reasoning pathway for non-STEM majors.

You have handouts on the tables from the publication where the model is described in more detail. These handouts can be used to determine where you might be in this model right now in your project and how well you are prepared to fully execute your plans. You can download the publication as a PDF or you can order it as a book by visiting the site at the Association of American Colleges and Universities:

<https://secure.aacu.org/imis/ItemDetail?iProductCode=PKALSTSS>. One of the tools in the book (and provided on your tables) is what we call a Readiness Survey. As you are reflecting on your project, you might look through there, and I'm hoping that it helps you think about how ready you are to enact the various stages of the River Model of Systemic Institutional Change. It was meant to prompt you to think about the various aspects of an institutional change strategy that are important for you to consider. Some of the items are things that people may not think readily about, so we hope that it helps you identify some new areas you need to explore.

I will close with the following thought: In all of this, leadership is critical. You are all here because you are leading; you are participating in various projects. There are people on campuses like provosts, deans, or department chairs who are what we might call positional leaders. They have a position, a title, that identifies them as a leader with specific responsibilities. Those individuals, I believe, have a responsibility as well as an opportunity to support and enable your work, so they should not stand by passively, but they should be engaged with you in your work. They are an important partner. Another kind of leader is people without a title like dean or chair, but who might be project managers, program directors, or members of the faculty or staff. These kinds of leaders might be referred to as informal leaders, who also have a responsibility and an opportunity to be involved in significant change efforts on campus. When these two kinds of leaders work together to achieve common goals, that is when campuses realize the most success. One way to think about how to bring different kinds of leaders together is through a model of shared leadership. Shared leadership involves engaging more people in leadership roles, interchangeable leader and follower roles, consideration of multiple perspectives, assignment of leadership not necessarily based on position or title, and collaboration and interaction across departments and units. For solving complex problems, this kind of model may help you take a new and perhaps more successful approach. It's

not one person, it's not even a small group, but it takes a village of people of all kinds and types in your institution working together to make a big difference.

Reference

Elrod, S., & Kezar, A. (2016.) *Increasing student success in STEM: A guide to systemic institutional change*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges & Universities.