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SCALING STUDENT SUCCESS

## **Western Coalition Cluster Pilots Faculty Learning Community for Student Success**

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Faculty engagement in student success is critically linked to improved student outcomes, with outsized gains for low-income, minoritized, and first-generation students. The ability to connect with students and guide learning directly impacts retention, persistence, and ultimate progress toward graduation and post-graduate success. How faculty teach and interact with students can play a huge role in student perceptions that they matter and belong at the university, and that they can succeed academically.

Faculty are challenged, however, by increasingly complex student needs, persistent opportunity gaps, and the proliferation of virtual or hybrid learning environments. In short, the students and the environment are changing faster than the faculty and these growing pains require faculty to embrace new skills and competencies to support students – particularly in critical introductory courses. Pursuing an asset-based approach and focusing on how faculty can support students better will lead to measurable improvements.

One of the aims of the Western Coalition cluster is to provide faculty with actionable strategies and tools for connecting with students, identifying early warning signs, and targeting support to student needs. The cluster is focused on faculty interventions that can be clearly linked to improved student outcomes, including increasing retention and completion, and reducing equity gaps for low-income, minoritized, and first-generation students.

*This article summarizes a larger report authored by Dr. Devshikha Bose and Dr. Sarah Dalrymple with the [Center for Teaching and Learning at Boise State University](#).*

In May 2021, the Western Coalition cluster piloted a cross-institutional faculty learning community to explore how intentional course design and student-success focused instructional strategies can support student success. The learning community also sought to:

1. Build relationships among faculty interested in student success at different campuses
2. Work collaboratively to identify opportunity gaps and what causes them, explore course design strategies that can address opportunity gaps, and apply effective and inclusive communication practices.
3. Support faculty to apply what they have learned by developing a student success-oriented course action plan that can be implemented in one or more courses.

The design of the learning community was directly informed by the [Designing for Student Success Faculty Learning Community](#) at Boise State University, and the expertise of the [Office of Faculty Development and Academic Support](#) at the University of Hawai'i. The lead designers and facilitators were Dr. Devshikha Bose and Dr. Sarah Dalrymple with the Center for Teaching and Learning at Boise State University. APLU provided seed funding to support the project.

Up to four faculty were selected from each institution in the cluster, chosen by leaders at those institutions. The experience was primarily designed for faculty who teach courses that have a high impact on student retention, for example gateway courses and those that are a pre-requisite for a major. Faculty participated in eight hours of virtual instruction and discussion, spread over four days. The peer discussions focused on opportunity gaps and what causes them, as well as intentional course design and communication strategies for eliminating those gaps. Each of the four sessions was organized around a topic: 1) reframing how we view our students, 2) assignment and course expectations, 3) stereotype threat and psychological interventions, and 4) effective student outreach. Each faculty member was shown disaggregated data from one of their own courses and completed pre-readings to prepare for discussion.

At the end of the experience, faculty developed an action plan they will implement in a Fall 2021 course. The success of this implementation will be evaluated through a brief self-reflection exercise at the end of the Fall 2021 semester.

Some of the strategies faculty explored included: more transparent assignments, more flexible course policies, low-stakes assessment to help students work up to high-stakes assessment, assignments that affirm values and enhance emotional regulation, creating a learner-centered syllabus, use of inclusive language, how to give "wise feedback," and the practice of seeking out disaggregated DFW rate data for each course.

The results of the learning community were overwhelmingly positive. Participants gained critical background knowledge on inequities and factors affecting learning and retention of various student groups. They identified strategies to enhance learning and reflected on disaggregated course data to reinforce the need for purposeful course design and inclusive communication. Faculty reported that the cross-institutional peer interaction was highly valuable, as well as concrete strategies they could implement. They did wish they had more time together, and that they had the opportunity to work within discipline-specific groups to discuss implementation strategies or revise an assignment or syllabus together.

The cluster hopes to expand the impact of this pilot by asking participants to share what they learned on their campuses and beyond. A further analysis of data from the Fall 2021 implementation and self-reflections is expected in early 2022.

Further reading:

- [The subtle ways colleges discriminate against poor students, explained with a cartoon](#)
- [A syllabus is not a contract](#)
- [Carol Dweck revisits the "growth mindset"](#)
- [Small changes, large rewards: how individualized emails increase classroom performance](#)

The Western Coalition cluster includes the following institutions and state systems:

- Boise State University

- University of Alaska System
- University of Alaska Fairbanks
- University of Hawai'i System (co-lead)
- University of Montana
- University of South Dakota
- Washington State University (co-lead)