Community of Practice
Handbook

A practical guide for institutions to establish communities of practice to improve student experience

SEP **Student Experience PROJECT**

Acknowledgments

This toolkit is a product of the Student Experience Project.

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Participating Institutions

The university partners in this project are:

- Colorado State University
- Portland State University
- The University of New Mexico
- The University of Toledo
- University of Colorado Denver
- University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Other institutions of higher education are participating in the SEP as part of a Peer Learning Network focused on the first week of class. They are Florida International University; Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis; Morgan State University; North Carolina A&T State University; Rutgers University–Newark; University of Illinois Chicago; University of North Texas; The University of Texas at San Antonio; and West Virginia State University.

SEP Learning Partners

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Introduction

The Student Experience Project (SEP) is a network of public universities, scholars, and national organizations committed to testing, implementing, and scaling innovative practices that transform the college student experience into one where every student belong and can access the support and resources they need to succeed.

Research shows that when students experience a sense of belonging and support on campus and in the classroom, they're more likely to persist through academic challenges and earn their degrees.[1] This is particularly important for students from structurally disadvantaged or numerically underrepresented groups, who are paying particular attention to signals from the institution, their professors, and the other students about whether they, or people like them, belong on campus, and are capable of succeeding.

SEP Approach

By focusing on building community and a sense of belonging on campus, the SEP is committed to a future of higher education where all students—particularly students who face barriers entering college—feel supported to persist through academic challenges until graduation day.

As a network, the SEP translated the research on belonging and growth mindset into actions that institutions can take to create equitable learning environments. Critical to this work was developing partnerships with faculty and instructors, who have a significant impact on students' experiences of their learning environment through the tone and culture they set in their classrooms. Each campus brought instructors together with a shared goal of improving student experience, utilizing a common set of evidence-based practices in their classrooms and collecting regular student feedback on their learning experience. These **communities of practice** served a crucial purpose of providing support for instructors to learn how to successfully implement new practices and opportunities to reflect with their peers and improve their teaching practice over time. Instructors in the community of practice shared insights for adapting resources for their teaching context or discipline, and developed mechanisms for resource-sharing with peers.[2] Many participating instructors are now champions of this work in their departments and across campus, leading their own communities of practice or change efforts.

Results from the SEP demonstrate that these efforts can in fact improve students' experiences and outcomes. During the 2020-2021 academic year, improvements in

student experience predicted a greater likelihood of earning an A or B, and decreased likelihood of earning a D, F, or withdrawing from the course.

About this Handbook

Participating in a community of practice can serve as a transformative experience for faculty and allow for the development of meaningful relationships within a department and across disciplines. A community of practice creates space for instructors to share promising practices and to assist one another in developing new approaches to their work. At the six SEP cohort institutions, faculty expressed that the support and guidance from their peers in the community of practice was key to their ability to implement new practices and revise existing ones to improve student experience.

This handbook is designed for campus leaders seeking to bring together a group of instructors in a community of practice to improve student experience. The handbook outlines key steps and considerations to design, launch, and sustain a successful community of practice, based on the experiences of the six public research universities that make up the SEP cohort.

Each institution took a different approach to establishing their community of practice based on the students they serve, as well as institutional priorities and change readiness. We provide a few suggested approaches to engaging instructors, which we encourage you to adapt to best fit your campus context.

Key Research and Definitions

Throughout this handbook, you will see references to many SEP tools and resources, and we provide specific recommendations for using them within a community of practice. Here, we include some information to orient you to these foundations.

► SEP Communities of Practice all utilized the College Transition Collaborative's Classroom Practices Library. The library contains field-tested guides for faculty to implement evidence-based practices to support equity, belonging and growth throughout the term.
► SEP Communities of Practice utilized the Ascend platform to measure student experience over the course of the term.
► The SEP measured several aspects of student experience, including social belonging, institutional growth mindset, identity safety, trust and fairness, and self-efficacy. For an overview of how SEP defines and measures these constructs, please click here.
► The SEP is informed by a robust body of social psychology research. For an overview of key studies that inform the project's approach, please click here.

Building the Foundation

Setting your community of practice up for success

Understand existing equity gaps and specific opportunities to improve

Key to engaging instructors in this work is establishing foundational knowledge about student success and equity gaps at your institution, specific to the students you serve, and considering these data in appropriate national or systems-level contexts. Disaggregating campus data on retention and completion rates, or course-level measures like DFW rates in introductory courses, by student identity groups can point to areas where differences in student experiences are contributing to disparate outcomes. Sharing these data with prospective community of practice leaders and participants is a far more powerful rationale for change on your campus than relying solely on national data. SEP campuses examined disaggregated DFW rates in courses that were key to students' retention and degree completion, allowing them to communicate clearly to faculty colleagues in those courses that improvements could be made.
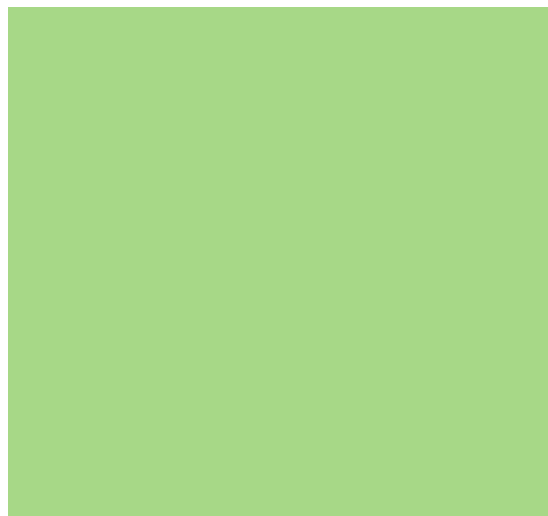
You may also gain insights into student experience by examining physical spaces, communications, or other aspects of campus life through a student's eyes, particularly considering the impact on students from structurally disadvantaged backgrounds (e.g. students experiencing financial stress, racially minoritized students). One institution was motivated to take action after noticing signs and signals in academic spaces that communicated negative stereotypes or fixed mindset about students, realizing the impact that this could have on students' engagement and performance in their courses. Other campuses engaged students through focus groups to provide insights into how the campus environment supports or hinders their educational experience.

"We went and took some pictures around campus that were pretty disturbing in terms of how students may be interpreting the learning environment … and really just having that put right in front of us made it pretty appalling that we have had not at that point been more intentional with the messaging that we were trying to surround students with"
-- Campus Administrator

Build a coalition of invested leaders

The salient factor across communities of practice that thrive is having effective leaders with demonstrated commitment to equity and positive relationships with faculty and students. Trusted and credible leaders lead by example and utilize the practices themselves in their teaching, supervision, or communications. This commitment and proximity to the work ensures that the design of the community of practice and expectations for faculty align with their needs. Ask yourself: who are respected, credible, and trusted leaders in your college or

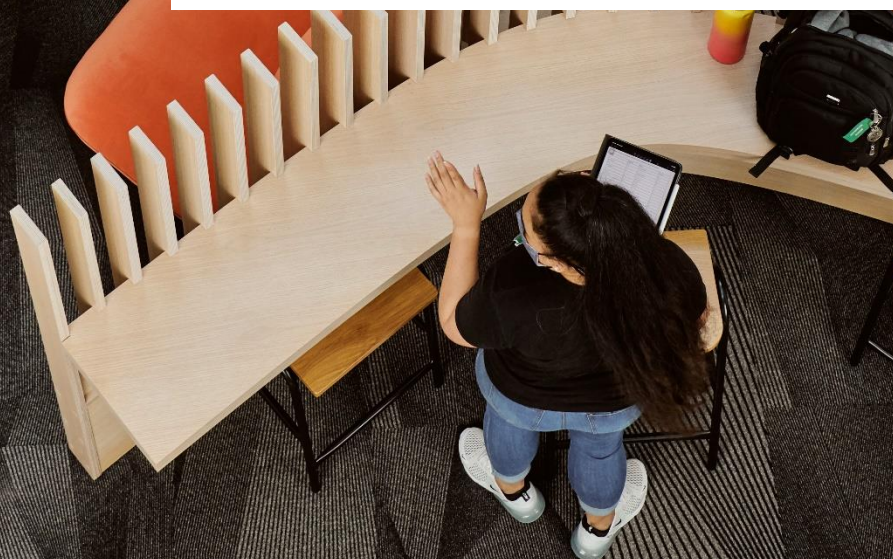*"You do get feedback from faculty that they just really appreciated having that weekly opportunity to be with a group of faculty who clearly care so much, who are struggling with the same kinds of things that they are struggling with."*
-- Campus Administrator

department who can set the stage for a vision and assist with driving the change process? Investing in the coalition building phase allows for diverse representation across skills, lived experience, and perspectives in your community of practice. Those included in this stage of the process greatly inform the design of the community of practice, therefore, it is important to think carefully and inclusively about who you engage.

Leverage complementary efforts

Engaging faculty in improving student experience is likely complementary to other efforts you already have at the campus, college, or department level. Integrating SEP practices with existing initiatives can increase buy-in from your colleagues and reduce duplication of effort. This can be done in a variety of ways, including adding discussions of practices onto existing professional development programming or into department meeting agendas, reducing the number of commitments faculty have to make. Enlisting leadership in these complementary areas to help lead your community of practice can make the work more visible on campus and ensure that participating faculty are well-supported. The University of Colorado Denver found that integrating their community of practice into the Center for Academic Success helped centralize their efforts and leadership.

Photo credit: Portland State University

Prepare to engage faculty

As with any new initiative, communicating with stakeholders early and often about expectations ensures that everyone can to succeed together. As you prepare to start engaging potential faculty participants, here are a few things to let them know about:

► **Practices:** SEP has many different practices, tools, and resources that instructors can use, but we suggest that faculty begin with a manageable set of practices, and can build from there. Most SEP Communities of Practice chose 3 – 4 practices for all instructors to do at around the same time during the term. Select a few practices that all participants will utilize in their classrooms and identify resources you'll use to ensure that instructors can be successful in their implementation. Communicating upfront about these practices will help faculty plan ahead for how they will integrate them, to learn from one another, and to be supported by the community of practice leader. Click here for a suggested list of practices, and a timeline of when instructors might utilize them throughout the term.

► **Meetings:** Identify how often you'd like your community of practice to meet. SEP campuses took a variety of approaches to organizing their communities of practice – some met weekly, others met once a month. One administrator was surprised that faculty appreciated more frequent meetings with their peers (e.g. weekly or twice/month), finding it helpful rather than burdensome. If a faculty member had to miss one, they didn't need to go too long before reconnecting with the community. Integrating discussion of SEP practices into pre-existing department meetings was a successful strategy for many campuses as well. Whatever you choose, letting faculty know about meeting dates well in advance will maximize their ability to attend and gain value from collaborating with their peers.

► **Communication**: Campuses found it helpful to identify an easily accessible place to store resources and information and establish a regular pattern of communication with participating instructors. Some SEP campuses created courses in their campus' Learning Management System to share materials and resources, while others sent weekly emails with links to resources stored in a shared OneDrive or Google Drive space. The best option for your campus is likely one that instructors are already familiar with or can easily access and one that can be regularly updated with new learnings from the group. More important than the frequency or modality of communication is being consistent, so that instructors know what to expect.

► **Rewards and recognition:** Most universities participating in the SEP provided stipends for participating faculty, which was an incentive for faculty to participate but also an acknowledgement that implementing these new practices was additional labor for faculty. Many faculty have expressed that their primary motivation for participating was not the stipend, but the opportunity to connect with other faculty and to improve student experience; nonetheless, they appreciated that the stipends signaled that the university valued the work. Compensating participants can also reduce the barrier to entry for those who may not have the capacity to volunteer their time, ensuring a more equitable process for all involved, particularly for adjunct, contingent, or other non-tenure track faculty. Beyond compensation, there are other ways to convey to faculty that this work is important and valuable. Many SEP campuses gave their participating instructors a title that could be included on their CVs and email signatures – University of Toledo had the "Equity Champions," UNC Charlotte coined the term "Faculty Avengers," and University of New Mexico used "SEP Fellows." For tenure-track faculty, participating in SEP can be an asset to tenure and promotion applications. Developing a standard letter about what SEP entails and the impact on students that can be added to tenure and promotion files is a simple and scalable way to highlight faculty's expertise in teaching and their service to the institution.

Establishing Buy-in

Developing faculty interest in your community of practice

Develop shared understanding of equity gaps and the need to better serve students

Your existing institutional data assets, both quantitative and qualitative, can help build a compelling case for the role of these practices in improving equitable experience and outcomes for their students. It is important to share disaggregated campus data with prospective instructors to develop understanding the reality of "what is" and an opportunity to build momentum for "what could be" through active participation in a community of practice. All instructors can benefit from having a deeper understanding of how students experience and navigate their course and the institution. Several SEP leaders reported that their communities of practice were the first opportunity that many faculty had to engage with these data. Instructors may also find it helpful and motivating to understand these data in appropriate national or systems-level contexts By equipping your instructors with this knowledge at the very outset of their engagement, you are building awareness and desire for their individual change journey, and emphasizing that the community of practice is an opportunity for instructors to play a crucial role in the institution's student success and equity mission.

"We had someone from the Dean's office come and present data on their classes and show the differences in DFW rates between BIPOC students and non-BIPOC students. And...some faculty had never seen the consistently higher failure rates of students of color. I think that that was an eye opener for some faculty, and that was probably fairly motivating."

– Faculty Member

Photo credit: Florida International University

## Articulate how participation will benefit faculty

Potential faculty participants will seek to understand the benefits of participating in a community of practice; the perceived benefit to students is likely clear to instructors from the nature of the work, but SEP campuses found that the communities of practice also held tremendous value for the instructors. Conveying to faculty early in the process that the community of practice will bolster their teaching with new practices and peer support helps them easily understand the value proposition of participating. With many demands on faculty members' time, articulating that participation can help *both* students and faculty may make people more likely to participate, particularly when this message comes from faculty members themselves.

Communicate that SEP practices can improve inequitable outcomes

The SEP approach is grounded in decades of social psychology research demonstrating that when learning environments are designed to promote social belonging and communicate that instructors have a growth mindset about intelligence, students are more likely to take advantage of campus resources to support their success, persist through challenges, and achieve at their full academic potential. SEP campuses often shared key points from this research base in the early stages of engaging faculty with this work, making a direct connection between equity gaps on campus and the need to address social-psychological components of students' experience to close those gaps. The fact that this approach is evidence-based helped with instructor buy-in. The CU Denver SEP team found that instructors had varying levels of knowledge about the literature on social belonging and growth mindset; discussing these concepts frequently as a group helped develop a shared understanding of how to connect theory to practice.

Frame community engagement as low lift, high gain

When building your community of practice, it is essential that you convey your approach as not about having to completely reinvent or overhaul courses, but about shifting the ways instructors communicate with students to be more supportive and more affirming of their experiences. There are a wide variety of practices that SEP recommends improving student experience in the classroom, but positive changes can occur from starting small with just a handful of practices. Demonstrating early on to faculty that this undertaking is manageable is important to gaining buy-in. UNC Charlotte and UNM identified a few core practices that they pitched to instructors as "small lift, high gains" and "low-lift strategies," - meaning that they did not take a lot of faculty effort to implement, but that they had the potential to significantly improve equity in student experience.
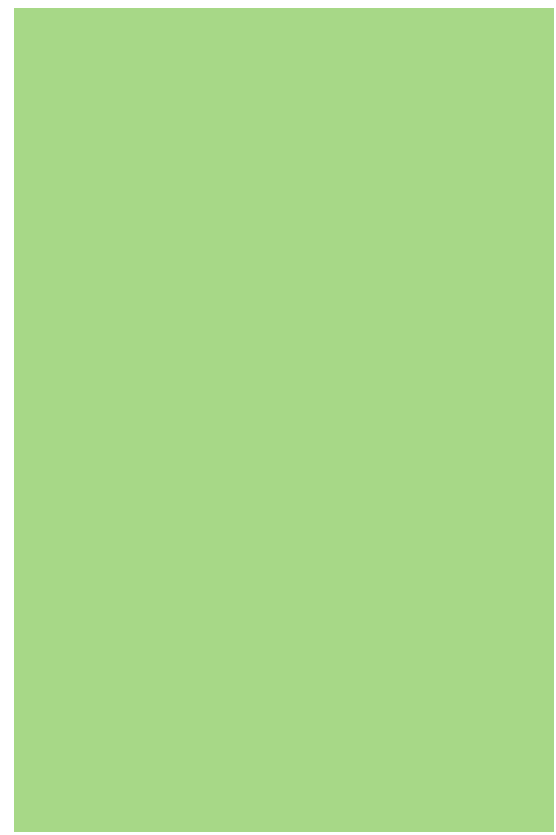
Entrust responsibilities to key team members

In any change effort, it is beneficial to identify and outline clear responsibilities for each team member involved, especially when time is limited. One single individual should not bear sole responsibility to advance the effort. Shared responsibility and leveraging people's skillsets the community of practice for greater sustainability and long-term success. For example, an invested and trusted faculty leader can assume some programmatic responsibilities, such as leading community meetings and supporting instructors in using new practices, while dedicated staff can manage communication and logistics. Forging relationships with your institutional research office will ensure you are prepared to gather data to inform progress on goals. Distributed leadership will help your community of practice thrive as it grows.

"It certainly gave greater legitimacy to the project to have someone who is actively engaged in teaching"

– Campus Administrator

Identify Possible Resistance Points

As you begin introducing the community of practice to instructors, it is normal and expected to encounter scrutiny. Faculty may be interested in participating, but hold concerns about time commitment, the credibility and benefits of the proposed approach, and unintended negative consequences on their work. Listening and identifying ways to address concerns will help you design your community of practice to be a supportive and valuable experience for instructors. In many instances, faculty with the greatest concerns became the most valuable advocates. Responding positively to feedback provides ways to improve the practice community and make it more relevant to the needs of its members.

Establsh a growth mindset culture

Just as your instructors will focus on creating a growth mindset culture for students in their classrooms, it is important to set the same culture for your community of practice. Instructors may face challenges if implementing a new practice does not go as planned, or if they see negative trends in their student experience data. By reassuring instructors that this is a normal part of the process and providing support through professional development and opportunities to reflect with their peers, participants can embrace the iterative and sometimes messy learning process of improving student experience.

"It coincided with the pandemic. So, I think that the appeal and the draw to a lot of faculty was...their awareness of the student needs was heightened and they were looking for things that would help them, especially with the remote environment." – Faculty Member

Making Change

Kicking off your community of practice

Establish foundational knowledge

All SEP practices are rooted in a robust social psychology research base. As you begin your CoP, it is important to spend time introducing instructors to this research base. This sets the tone and the framework for all the other practices. The resources in the Classroom Practices Library contain both practical tips for implementation, along with the research base informing the practice. We recommend that community leaders create opportunities to review the guides and the tips for implementation but also engage faculty with the evidence informing the practice. This provides faculty with the foundational knowledge to adapt and build on practices with fidelity to the underlying science. For example, a community could read or discuss the cited studies or watch videos from research scholars in the field. The SEP team at UNM introduced new change ideas at their monthly meetings. They then discussed the evidence behind the change ideas as a large group and broke into smaller groups to discuss how to utilize the practices in the classroom.

Convey norms and expectations for the group early and often

Establishing the structure and norms for participation in the community of practice at the onset is instrumental to success. We recommend meeting before the next academic term begins so that instructors have adequate time to prepare to use new practices in their classroom. For example, some campuses found it helpful to convene faculty in the spring, so participants have the summer to consider how they'd integrate the practices in their course, then reconvene prior to the start of the fall term to discuss the structure for implementing practices and how faculty will learn from each other as a community. We recommend giving instructors a list of meeting dates, specific points of the term to implement different practices, and suggested periods for surveying their students. By ensuring that instructors are all doing a similar set of practices at around the same point in the term, you are creating opportunities for instructors to learn from one another during meetings. Click here for a suggested timeline.
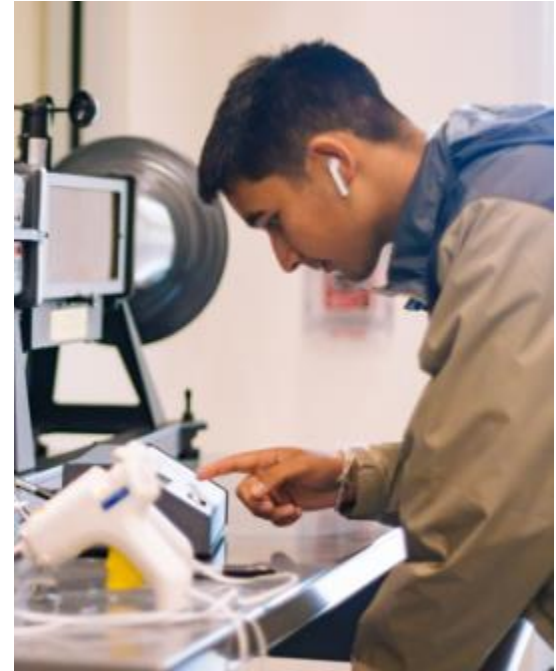
"I think the monthly SEP meetings were fantastic, particularly during that first pandemic year as faculty were in uncharted waters." – Staff Member
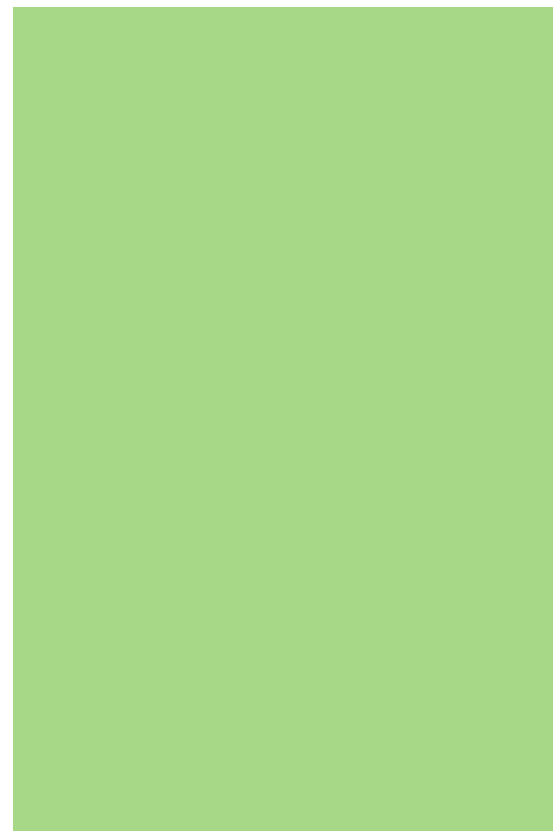
Utilize student experience data to surface bright spots

It is important to communicate to instructors that student experience data are about supporting instructors' reflection and improvement - not for the purpose of penalizing them or evaluation. If faculty fear that negative trends in student experience data will be shared with campus leadership and have repercussions on their careers, or that they will be embarrassed in front of their peers, it is understandable that they may not be willing to engage in this process. When discussing data with your community of practice, focus on identifying "bright spots" in your community data: faculty who have had steady positive student experiences and those who show substantive improvement in one or multiple dimensions of students' experiences. We recommend asking these faculty to share the ways they have successfully implemented new practices or gotten high student participation rates. This creates faculty ownership of practices, allows evolution of the practices for the campus context, and makes the data actionable. To keep the focus on these bright spots, avoid calling out individuals whose students are not reporting positive experiences, and refrain from sharing identifiable faculty data with university leadership. Click here for guidance on identifying faculty bright spots.

Dedicate time to community building

Change can be a challenging and vulnerable process, and it is important to intentionally create an environment in your community of practice where instructors are comfortable sharing their successes as well as their struggles. SEP institutions found that dedicating time to community building was essential; this included developing opportunities for faculty members to get to know one another and to discuss their approaches to SEP practices. Rather than diving right into logistics or trying out new practices, spending the first parts of your meetings creating a sense of community can ultimately create a more productive process for faculty, resulting in deeper relationships and more comfort with being honest and vulnerable about their challenges. Feeling grounded in community was important for faculty and having the opportunity to look forward to engaging with peers was a major incentive for most participants.

Photo credit: Portland State University

Provide straightforward, scaffolded, and incremental support

The Student Experience Project has provided numerous resources and tools for instructors to use. Be sure to build user-friendly avenues and pathways for instructors to take advantage of these resources. SEP campuses often utilized their regular community meetings for workshops on new practices so faculty did not have to navigate new concepts on their own. Many also found it helpful to introduce new practices incrementally throughout the term so that instructors are not overwhelmed by too much information. You should also make frequent use of your chosen communications and file sharing mechanisms to make it easy for instructors to locate resources.

As the term goes on, remind faculty about upcoming meetings and key points of time when they should be using specific practices, and encourage instructors to reach out if they need support. UNM community leads held drop-in hours for instructors who needed support understanding their student experience data. You can also encourage instructors to share resources with one another to facilitate uptake of new practices and to recognize the expertise of individuals who have developed innovative and successful ways to utilize the practices.

Model practices for faculty to facilitate uptake

We encourage COP leaders to model a growth mindset, by sharing their practice and data with faculty participants. At Colorado State University, one leader facilitated a syllabus workshop in which she highlighted examples from her previous course syllabi that conveyed a fixed mindset about students' abilities. This openness and vulnerability set the tone for other instructors to share their own syllabi and reflect on any areas where they could improve. At Portland State University, a community of practice leader showed her student experience survey report to the group, indicating how she responded to equity gaps in her classroom.
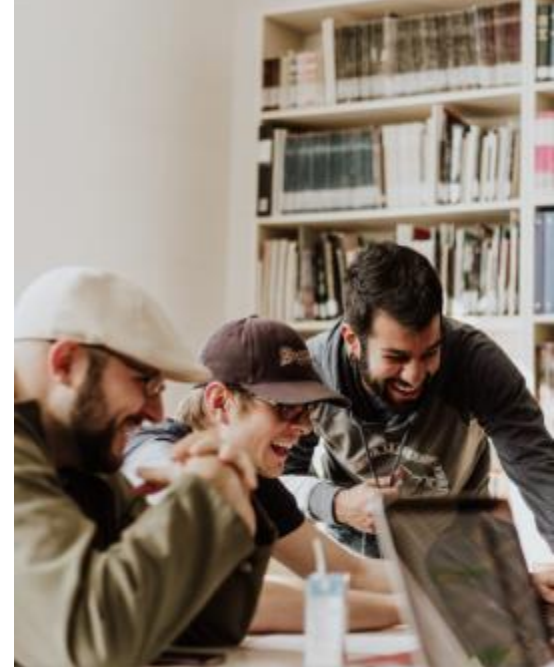
"You could start small by doing attuned syllabus, and then…how about I write a welcome letter because this worked for one person? And then how about I do an exam wrapper because that really worked with someone else. And so it really started to become much bigger… well, if they can do it, then maybe I can do it."
– Faculty Member

Maximizing Impact

Sustaining and scaling your community of practice

Embrace feedback and adaptation

Efforts to improve student experience require flexibility and nimble design on the part of both instructors and community leaders. It is helpful to regularly remind faculty that this process is iterative. Reflecting on their student experience data and using practices to address students' feedback takes time, effort, intention, and a growth mindset. Similarly, community leaders should seek feedback from instructors about what they're finding valuable and what they need more of in order to succeed. At Portland State University, instructors reported feeling overwhelmed with the mental and emotional work of meeting students' needs during the challenges of the pandemic, and leaders quickly responded by inviting a staff member from the campus' student mental health center to meet with their community. This adjustment helped faculty feel seen and supported and helped them adjust their practices in the classroom.

Support faculty as they persist through challenges

As more faculty build their expertise in this work and come to trust one another, it becomes easier for them to enact change. But implementing new practices can be challenging and even feel messy at times, and instructors may question themselves if a practice they utilized didn't go as intended. It will be important to reiterate to faculty that it is normal to experience challenges throughout the change process, and to remind faculty that they can utilize new practices or seek support from their peers or community leaders. Many campuses found it helpful to surface

trouble spots at meetings, so that other faculty could offer resources or support and problem-solve together. In other cases, downward trends in student experience data shed light on events outside the classroom that were impacting students' performance, which provided insights into other actions department or campus leaders could take to improve students' experience. Acknowledgement of the intentional effort made by each faculty member goes a long way in keeping faculty invested and engaged, particularly during moments of difficulty.

Champion participants as experts in improving student experience

Instructors who actively participate in the community of practice are committing to an important element of campus transformation. Aim to continuously identify and leverage the growing expertise of instructors in the community of practice and equip them to be champions for leading transformation work. At the University of Toledo, community leaders charged several faculty who had been early and enthusiastic participants to lead their own communities of practice and provided them with materials to facilitate meetings and equip new instructors with practices. Other faculty were supported on research projects that improve equitable student experience.

Enjoy learning as part of a community

It can be easy to get caught up in the day-to-day work of running a community of practice – be sure to take moments to see the big picture and enjoy the process of doing this work with dedicated colleagues! Think about the kinds of transformation and progress you can see as a result of doing this work as a community, rather than having instructors work alone, and consider how you can elevate the success of the community of practice to enhance other student success efforts on campus. SEP campuses supported faculty in presenting about their experiences at conferences that can further their career and scholarship, and shared community progress and aggregate data with campus leaders (e.g., deans, department chairs, and other administrators) to celebrate progress. Think about how you can also create opportunities for participants to reflect and celebrate as a community. Establishing shared gratitude and appreciation for the work can ensure that instructors continue using practices and relying on one another even when their formal participation in the community concludes.

"It's really a vehicle for changing the culture of the institution, to really focus on the student experience."

– Campus Administrator

"The community of practice was a really important and empowering tool for our faculty in just being able to persist during COVID and really difficult teaching times." – Campus Administrator

Resources

Here you will find templates and resources for designing your community of practice and communicating with faculty. We encourage you to adapt these to best fit your campus' needs.

Organizing your community of practice

► [Community of Practice Models and Timelines](#)
► [One-pager for faculty](#)

SEP research and practices

► [Classroom Practices library](#)
► [First Day Toolkit](#)

Building community

► [Community building discussion prompts and activities](#)

Measuring student experience

► [Ascend measurement platform](#)
► [Identifying Faculty Bright Spots](#)

References

[1] For an overview of this research, please visit the [SEP Practices Library References page](#).

[2] For more information on communities of practice, see: Bartell, D, S. & Boswell, C. (2019). Developing the Whole Teacher: Collaborative Engagement as Faculty Development within a First-Year Experience Program. *Journal of Faculty Development, 33*(3), 25-32. ; Lester, J. & Kezar, A. (2017). Strategies and Challenges for Distributing Leadership in Communities of Practice. *Journal of Leadership Studies, 10*(4), 17-34; Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity.* Cambridge University Press.