



Lessons from the Field:

Chairing Change

Large-scale, comprehensive student success change work, like that entailed in the design and scaling of co-requisite remediation, brings profound shifts to institutional and academic culture. When institutions commit themselves to taking a systematic approach to removing barriers to student success, longstanding structures and norms must be scrutinized and remade. Silo-spanning, in the form of purposefully improved communication and active collaboration across academic affairs and student services, as well as working across disciplinary/departmental boundaries, becomes essential for both short-term gains and long-term success. Deeply entrenched norms of the academy, such as the assumption of absolute autonomy in curriculum and pedagogy, make the shift in mindset entailed in this work especially challenging for academic faculty. But without the expertise, commitment, and passion of a critical mass of faculty, no thoroughgoing student success effort will meet its potential.

There is growing recognition across the field that mid-level academic administrators are pivotal actors in the work of large-scale student success efforts because they are the ones who directly support or shape the day-to-day work of faculty. When it comes to ambitious student success efforts that impact teaching and learning, such as those entailed in the redesign of developmental education, the administrative aspects of the job represent only a fraction of Academic Program Chairs' responsibilities. Balancing the requirement to lead implementation of the institution's strategic priorities with the core responsibility to advocate for the interests and development of faculty and the discipline is enormously complicated work under any circumstances. And in the context of large-scale change that impacts the classroom, the balancing act becomes much more complicated.

While there is growing recognition that Academic Program Chairs are key actors, not nearly enough attention has been paid to providing them with the supports they need to play their many roles. Understanding the experiences of chairs in implementing and

sustaining transformational change is the first step in providing these critical actors with the supports and conditions they need to lead effectively from the middle.

As part of the Bridges to Success initiative, the Ohio Department of Higher Education engaged Sova Solutions to provide technical assistance to the colleges and universities engaged in improving student success by systematically linking structured degree pathways, redesigned mathematics gateway courses, and corequisite remediation. This brief captures lessons learned from a set of in-depth conversations Sova had with Dr. Ayse Sahin, the chair of the Mathematics and Statistics Department at Wright State University, an access-oriented four-year regional institution involved in ambitious work to scale co-requisite remediation in mathematics and English. The hope is that sharing these lessons can elevate the voices of institutional practitioners – faculty, staff, and administrators – who are involved in the design and implementation of large-scale student success reform work.

The short list of lessons summarized here was derived specifically from Sova’s in-depth conversations with Dr. Sahin about corequisite remediation. However, these ideas are situated in the broader context of Sova’s extensive, ongoing experience on the ground supporting institutions working to build a durable culture of co-ownership for large-scale student success efforts among faculty, staff, and administrators. It is our hope that this piece will serve as a discussion starter for campus leadership teams implicated in mathematics education reform, and that it will resonate beyond the math community and beyond the specific issue of developmental education redesign.

Other Duties as Assigned:

Six Lessons for Chairing Change

Over the course of several wide-ranging conversations and two structured in-depth interviews with Dr. Sahin, we learned about what makes it easier and harder for chairs to perform the many roles and responsibilities expected of them in the context of implementing large-scale reform. We asked about the general skills and capacities called for by the job, and we asked about the specific challenges and opportunities facing math chairs implicated in the design, implementation, and scaling of co-requisite remediation. In what follows, we summarize our top takeaways from our conversations, with each presented as a directive or recommendation. To add depth and dimension, in the following section we dive deeper into each lesson and illustrate each with extensive quotes from our conversations. In the closing section, we offer a set of core questions around each lesson to help leadership teams analyze the structures and processes they have in place to support the middle-out leadership of chairs.

Themes in Brief

1. **Own your data and use it thoughtfully to change the conversation with faculty both inside and outside the department.**

Everything begins with a clear-eyed commitment to looking at data, owning the good and the bad, and creating the space for the most constructive, collaborative conversations with faculty about the need for reform/redesign efforts. Using data to inspire action is an essential, ongoing responsibility of chairs, and digging down to understand at a deep level who your students are and how they're faring is critical. Don't be daunted by data – own it publicly and use it to help faculty have the best possible conversations about student learning.

2. **See both the big picture and how the pieces fit together, and begin by empowering a “coalition of the willing” while anticipating the needs of those who will be implicated in the work as it scales.**

The work of leading change from the middle is a balancing act. Really, it's multiple forms of balancing acts (more like spinning plates than walking a tightrope). At a high level, it is important to be able to toggle between seeing the big picture and understanding how the pieces fit together. Helping people lift their eyes to the bigger aims while ensuring that the practicalities of the work are anticipated and addressed is difficult. Similarly, it is important to balance the need to rely on a “coalition of the willing” with the need for early anticipation of the engagement and support needs of the wider group of faculty implicated in the work.

3. **Make time, and actively create spaces, to be available to faculty informally in order to understand their deeper interests, anticipate problems before they become problems, and establish credibility through transparency.**

Create multiple avenues for faculty to communicate with chairs. Chairs should have not only an “open door” policy literally and figuratively, but they should also make themselves available to faculty in a proactive way to increase the chances of learning about problems before they become problems. Creating multiple, informal, low-stakes opportunities (open lunches, weekly coffee) for faculty to interact with each other and the chair in free spaces signals to all a commitment to collaboration and communication. Visible effort to expand communication is important for counteracting the cultural bias toward autonomy and disconnection within the American academy.

- 4. Meet people where they are, whether it's inside or outside the department, by honoring their commitment to students and by focusing the conversation on goals for student learning.**

For chairs to be successful in leading change from the middle, they must find ways to establish credibility both inside and outside their departments. Making the time to sit and listen carefully, to focus the conversation on better understanding others' goals for student learning, and to ask questions that will help others feel heard and understood is essential for building the kind of credibility and trust required for long-term success of large-scale change.

- 5. Design the reward system so that faculty visibly benefit from the department's active participation/leadership in the reform work.**

As advocates for their faculty and discipline, chairs are in a unique position to help align resources and incentives in ways that inspire greater commitment on the part of faculty to the work. This includes, but is not limited to, looking for ways to compensate faculty through release time or additional resources for deep design or implementation support work. It also includes leveraging the institutional or national prestige of the innovation work being pursued to draw more attention and general resources to the department. Chairs must help deans understand the importance of practicing visible support for the work happening in departments.

- 6. Understand the full impact of the work on campus culture and develop a thick skin in helping faculty along in the process.**

Understanding the ways in which large-scale student success reform work challenges long-standing practices and deeply-held assumptions is important for helping faculty own the innovation from the bottom up while helping senior administrators understand how best to filter down the messages and imperatives of the institution's student success priorities. When each student's journey is shaped by a range of faculty and staff, it is incumbent on the practitioners to view themselves and each other as part of a common enterprise. This requires a commitment to new forms of communication, changes in work roles, and an abandonment of long-standing silos.

Themes in Detail

To add depth and dimension to the themes above, in the following section we dive deeper into the lessons, illustrating each with extensive quotes from our conversations with Dr. Sahin.

1. Own your data and use it thoughtfully to change the conversation with faculty both inside and outside the department.

In most of our conversations with Sahin, the importance of data was front and center: *The most important thing is to own your own data. At my institution, 16% of the students from the College of Liberal Arts who start in developmental math manage to finish their required math course in the first year. About 30% of them manage to finish developmental math in the first semester. Most of those don't go on to take their math in the spring, setting themselves up for more trauma and failure, right? Because they hate math. They decided they hate it, and they're not going to take advantage of the remediation until they forget. Of the ones that go in, we had a respectable pass rate, something around 70%, but overall it reduced down to 16%. I truly felt like, what could we possibly do to make it worse than that? How could we possibly not try something? When I started the conversation with faculty, I began by making sure we all knew that we were talking about 16%. [For faculty] I think they had no idea... they were also appalled by the data, and that gave us a good starting point.*

When talking about the role of data in case-making, Sahin also talked about the importance of designing pilots for maximum impact: *For our pilot we chose to first serve malingerers, the students who were seniors who never got through their DEV and so couldn't have graduated. We had a bunch of those students. And they got A's in the college credit-bearing class. Guess what? They've had solid A's in everything else in college as well. They were really struggling, they just couldn't get through the DEV. Some of our skeptics, those who thought that co-req was just going to delay the inevitable [failure of our students], have said that [the first batch of data from the pilot] is really what made them change their perspectives about the value of co-req.*

In talking about the place of the math department's service courses for other departments, Sahin again stressed the importance of owning one's data: *If something wonky is happening to your DWF grades, you should be the first one to know it and talk about it. She who reports the data gets to tell the story, so don't wait until some dean across campus is screaming at you on the phone about the fact that you created a blockage for their program. If you're getting a blockage, you be the first one to know so that you can figure out what's going on. That's a big one. There are ways of analyzing that data that are more intelligent...*

2. **See both the big picture and how the pieces fit together, and begin by empowering a “coalition of the willing” while anticipating the needs of those who will be implicated in the work as it scales.**

As we asked about the core competencies of the chair, Sahin talked a great deal about the importance of being able to “zoom out” to see the complete picture, the bigger goals of the work, and about the necessity of creating the processes for faculty that help them also see the big picture and how the pieces fit together: *I feel that they needed the scaffoldingto get their hands on a project that is not overwhelming at the outset. We are all now beginning to zoom out and think about the bigger structure. They’ve gone beyond the curricular bit and are now beginning to think about how we teach, how we collectively teach.*

When I came into the job, I knew I wouldn’t succeed if it were on me to do all the work. So I started by collecting the low-hanging fruit. I invited all to participate but focused first on involving those who stepped up because they were bored or eager to try something new. That group really owned and drove the work... but now that we’re to going scale and it’s no longer the coalition of the willing, people who weren’t involved in the original design are now going to be implicated in teaching co-req. This will bring a lot of challenges for us that we’ll have to be ready to deal with, and it will be hard.

Along the way, faculty need information and data. I’ve tried to set myself up as the person who will go off and try to find those things for them...My job is to declutter life for them, to make it easier for them to do their work... You have to be very careful to make sure that you don’t construct something that only survives while you’re chair. In the end, it has to be seamless for the faculty. In the end, they’ve got to work with it comfortably. As soon as I see a danger that it’s something cumbersome for a faculty member to do, I try to back up immediately and say, “What is it we’re trying to achieve and what would come naturally for them to be able to do that without having to take an extra step?” Too many of those [cumbersome] things, and then it just falls apart.

3. **Make time, and actively create spaces, to be available to faculty informally in order to understand their deeper interests, anticipate problems before they become problems, and establish credibility through transparency.**

When we asked what it means to be available to faculty, Sahin talked about the importance of an “open door” policy, but she also talked about the importance of the chair taking a proactive role in creating informal spaces beyond just being tacitly available. Making herself visibly and regularly available to faculty in a proactive way is one of the ways that Sahin works to increase the chances of learning about problems before they become problems. It’s not enough to create spaces for the people who want to come and talk about issues; for Sahin, it’s

also about prioritizing the importance of creating spaces for either those who are perhaps more skeptical or disengaged to become more involved. Taking the time to create multiple, informal, low-stakes opportunities (open lunches, weekly coffee) for faculty to interact with each other and the chair in free spaces can feel non-essential, but doing so signals to all a commitment to collaboration.

I like the process of sitting down with faculty and listening to their concerns to find a feasible solution together. I like playing that facilitator role for people when they come to me and I can see that clearly they're upset about something, and I can kind of help identify the range between the acceptable end result and the ideal end result, and find a path to something that lies in that range, and articulate clearly obstructions to the optimal pathway.

I feel like I just have to make sure that the conversation lines are open, and people are feeling that concerns are acknowledged while we wait for some data and learn more [about what is and isn't working]. Now that we'll be scaling, and faculty beyond the initial design group will be involved, challenges may come with having introduced students into their classroom earlier than they normally would. That brings really legitimate concerns. There are things we can do, and I'm trying to prepare myself for the fall to face that head-on in our first meeting and say, "I don't want to discount that there could be effects in your classroom, now that we're doing co-req. Let's just be purposeful about understanding what the effects are. What are the negative effects, and what can happen in the co-req to mitigate those effects?"

In addition to the formal ways in which Sahin is available to faculty, she also tries to be available in informal ways. For example, recognizing that the layout of the offices is not conducive to professional or social interaction, Sahin has lunch once a week in the under-utilized faculty lounge with a standing invitation to faculty to stop by to join for lunch and unstructured conversation. Sometimes faculty stop by with a question, others come by for unstructured conversation. Sahin's effort to create multiple avenues for faculty input is aimed at honoring the expertise of faculty while being transparent both about the requirements of the work and about the unknowns.

- 4. Meet people where they are, whether it's inside or outside the department, by honoring their commitment to students and by focusing the conversation on goals for student learning.**

In our conversations, Sahin talked a great deal about the importance of relationship building for establishing credibility both outside and inside the department. When we asked about how to build strong relationships across academic departments, she told us a story about engaging faculty from the business school in a conversation about Business Calculus, the service course

being taught by the math department for the School of Business.

I don't want to suggest that DWF rates aren't important, but if you think about it, at some level, it's a really stupid conversation, right? We could give everybody A's and then that problem would go away. What I tried to do is go to the Dean of Business and say, "What I'd really be interested in is a deeper conversation about whether or not the learning objectives of our course are meeting the needs of your students. ...If they are, if we're teaching the right course, and focusing on the right skills, and the students aren't doing well, that's different information for you than if we're teaching a completely different set of skills and the students aren't doing well..." I invited the Chair of Econ, who is now the interim dean; he gathered a collection of faculty for us and they came over.

I was very strict about the meeting. I ran it very, very rigidly. I said, "We're not discussing our Business Calculus course. That is not a point of this conversation. That course will not be brought up during this hour. Instead we're going to look at... the learning objectives and see if you all agree with the objectives. And if you do, then that's our job to go back to our course and see how well our course aligns with this. That's the exercise." I just tried to kind of zoom out again rather than, "Oh, and that person teaches it. All these people failed. That person doesn't..." I wasn't interested in that kind of muck conversation.

During the meeting we agreed we should have a retreat, and I offered to bring in a consultant, a mathematics educator who works closely with economists to facilitate a more-detailed conversation about learning objectives. During that retreat they gave us examples of the types of problems that they give students in their post-Calculus course, where they are expecting them to use calculus knowledge. I think that was a turning point for most of the faculty, because I don't think they conceived of such problems, and it suddenly became clear that really we were teaching them tap dance and here they wanted them to do swing dancing. There was absolutely very little — it would've been very, very difficult for students to be able to take what we taught them and transfer it to the kinds of problems that they wanted to solve. A course focusing on these type of skills would be equally mathematically difficult, much more conceptual than the kind of algebraic rigor that we were asking for, so it really helped us redesign what the course looks like... No longer can the conversation be about whether or not the class we're teaching is good, because that's not the point — it has to be about whether or not the class we teach is providing what students need.

5. Design the reward system so that faculty visibly benefit from the department's active participation/leadership in the reform work.

While many talk about the importance of incentives for faculty ownership and support, Sahin stressed the critical role that the chair plays in connecting up

a reward system in ways that speak to a range of faculty motivations: *For the tenure track faculty I made a big deal out of the fact that the financial support that we're getting both from the university and from the Bridges to Success grant is actually supporting our graduate program by way of paying for graduate teaching assistants (GTA)...I bring that up in casual conversation all the time, especially now when we don't know if we have a GTA budget or not, because I know that the grant will support four of them. I just keep harping on this so that people don't forget the benefits to the department of our involvement in this work. Let's pretend there are faculty members here who don't care about the 16%, who say "Yeah, whatever, they weren't going to graduate anyway, why should I care?" Those faculty would still care about their graduate program.*

In addition to directly connecting up the reward system, Sahin also talked about the critical roles her dean and the provost play in supporting her work from above. In discussing the resources for the GTAs, she noted: *This is a way that administration supported me: By allowing me to deliver benefits to the department and to say, "Look, leadership here is excited we're doing this, they're supporting us, and now look what we get to do!" They actively speak of it as a success publicly. It's not just when I'm in someone's office they say to me, 'Great job,' but they publicly recognize the work that the faculty's doing. Our dean talks about our work like it's a big, important, impactful thing, and he spoke to the other chairs so that we'll be congratulated by our colleagues in meetings or in passing. He and the provost help put the co-req work in a place of importance in the college. The provost came to our convening to address everybody in the state, and to watch our faculty's presentation on their work. I don't think they'd ever been in a room presenting their work when the provost was present, so this was a very visible example of leadership's support for the work.*

6. Understand the full impact of the work on campus culture and develop a thick skin in helping faculty along in the process.

Over our conversations with Sahin, as well as through our work conducting interviews with faculty in her department implicated in the co-req project, we observed up close what is so difficult about this work. As Sahin described the co-req work, *its impact on the department is much more profound than anything else I've ever been involved in. Most other initiatives are really self-contained. There's calculus reform: You decide you want to teach this way and the department goes through some drama around whether or not the learning objectives are correct. All of that is strictly local, pedagogical, and curricular. The co-req work is different, and it's huge. You think of it as a curricular thing; we're going to design some curriculum. But it turns out that you now have to be working closely with the registrar, the advisors, and on and on. It requires a reconfiguring of how you think about the department, and how your department functions with the rest of the university in a really profound way... I don't think you can do this work by leaving*

it just to the DEV faculty... this has to be a collegewide enterprise with the math department in a central role.

This work makes you think about success and student retention in a way that we don't typically. Because, think about it, previously, why didn't we know that only 16% of these students finished their math course or that there was a 30% pass rate in DEV? Because they weren't our classes. They weren't our students. They came, they went to university college, went to DEV, did whatever, and we didn't see them until somebody said, "Okay, they're ready for you," and sent them to us. But now with co-req they're our students, too. This is what is profound about this work, it requires that across the campus we see ourselves engaged in a common enterprise, and that we're collectively responsible for all of our students. This is a big shift for some of our faculty, and it's legitimate that they'd be asking "Why am I responsible for all this?" since they've never been asked to be responsible in this way before.

I think you have to have a thick skin [because this work requires a kind of mindset that can be difficult for many faculty to cultivate]. You have to have a conviction of what it is you're trying to do, and understand that the other stuff has to be dealt with, but recognize when it has to do with a failure of the goal versus the adjustments you need to make to deal with people or internal structure...I have a huge conviction in the end goal [and that helps me withstand some of the hits I take from the faculty who have the hardest time making the mindset shift required for this work. It can no longer be wanting to do things the way they've always been done.

Understanding the ways in which large-scale student success reform work challenges long-standing practices and deeplyheld assumptions is important for helping faculty own the innovation from the bottom up while helping senior administrators understand how best to filter down the messages and imperatives of the institution's student success priorities.

Chairing Change

Insights for Design

An important process in change leadership is to identify effective processes, learn all you can from them, and then use those experiences to design scaled processes for your organization. It's very difficult—when working deep “in the weeds” – to find the time to think about the structure and processes involved in the implementation and roll-out of large-scale redesign like co-req remediation. Each of the six principles described above can serve as the basis of process-mapping exercises aimed at identifying strengths, pain-points, opportunities for improvement, and needs with respect to the processes and structures supporting mid-level academic administrators. By way of conclusion, we provide a set of three key questions to help support action-oriented analysis of current processes and practices that impact chairs in their vital and demanding roles.

1. Own your data and use it thoughtfully to change the conversation with faculty both inside and outside the department.

- Have you mapped the process by which student success data is currently collected, analyzed, and shared across campus?
- What is the relationship between IR functions with respect to compliance, and IR functions with respect to internal campus communication and engagement? How do the processes differ for IR functions related to compliance (accreditation, Title IV) and IR functions related to internal campus communication and engagement around student success (culture of inquiry)?
- Which departments are most heavily implicated in your work and what are the current processes for sharing and communicating about data across departments?

2. See both the big picture and how the pieces fit together, and begin by empowering a “coalition of the willing” while anticipating the needs of those who will be implicated in the work as it scales.

- What is the explicit theory of change behind your work (see Kezar on implicit vs explicit theories of change) and with what assumptions are you operating?
- Have you mapped how the work roles and responsibilities will be affected by the implementation of student success initiatives, and are you clear about how grant cycles affect your work?
- Do you have the ability to conduct an ROI analysis to ensure that your approach to the design and implementation of significant reforms is built for sustainability?

3. **Be available to faculty formally and informally in order to understand their deeper interests, anticipate problems before they become problems, and establish credibility through transparency.**
 - Have you attempted to map how communication flows within your institution, and the ways in which various stakeholders come to learn about and be engaged in large-scale student success work?
 - What are the mechanisms within the department for communication about and collaborative work on large-scale reform efforts, and what's working/not working within the existing structures?
 - What kinds of free-spaces and low-stakes opportunities do faculty members in your department have to communicate with departmental leadership about their work?

4. **Meet people where they are, whether it's inside or outside the department, by honoring their commitment to students and by focusing the conversation on goals for student learning.**
 - Do you have processes and capacity to create inclusive opportunities for dialogue about the core values of faculty, staff and administrators at your institution?
 - Have you conducted a "pre-mortem" or power-mapping exercise to understand the starting point attitudes and experiences of faculty implicated in large-scale reform?
 - Do you have a process for listening to students, and for elevating their voices and experiences in the conversations among faculty?

5. **Design the reward system so that faculty visibly benefit from the department's active participation/leadership in the reform work.**
 - Have you mapped the incentives and disincentives for active participation/ownership of large-scale change among faculty in your department?
 - Are there examples among other departments of creative efforts to create incentives that speak to faculty's professional identities?
 - Are you systematically looking for and talking about ways to deliver more resources and valued supports to faculty, and are you publicly honoring and recognizing the efforts of front-line faculty and staff?

6. Understand the full impact of the work on campus culture and develop a thick skin in helping faculty along in the process.

- Has your institution committed itself to the articulation of a strategic plan that provides a unifying logic and process for organizing the full range of student success efforts?
- As you map the processes entailed in implementing your student-success efforts, are you making special effort to focus on the conditions that foster particular behaviors in order to avoid getting hung up on the personality traits of those displaying those behaviors?
- Are you able to bring empathy, compassion, and humor to your work in a way that is visible to others?