

INSIGHTS

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Improving a Path to Equity: Engaging Student Voices

In 2009, the Illinois Community College Board and the University of Illinois' Office of Community College Research and Leadership (OCCRL) partnered to create an equity-focused continuous improvement process called Pathways to Results (PTR). After six years, PTR has been implemented in 46 of the 48 community colleges in Illinois, with over 80 projects completed or in process to improve career pathways and programs of study. PTR has also been extended to other community colleges in the United States that are recipients of Trade Adjustment Act Community College and Career Training Act (TAACCCT) grants.

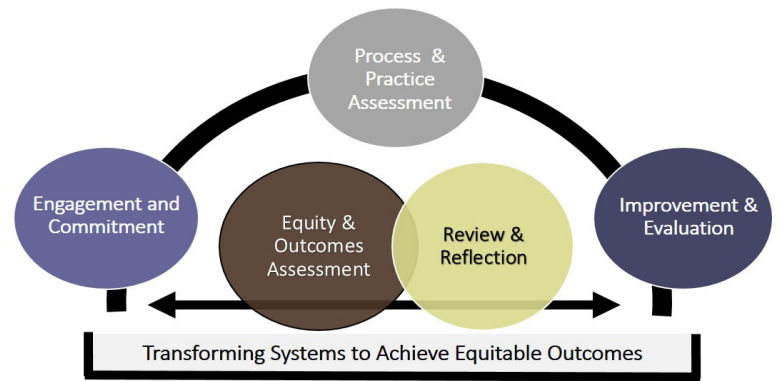


Figure 1: The PTR Process

PTR has five sub-processes, shown above. OCCRL has found that Equity & Outcomes and Review & Reflection take a central role in successful PTR projects and are constantly revisited as teams enter into Engagement and Commitment, Process & Practice Assessment, and Improvement & Evaluation. For more information, see occrll.illinois.edu/projects/pathways/phases/.

The Problem in Context

As the college completion agenda and efforts to increase diversity on college campuses have become embedded in the language and culture of higher education, many practitioners have found the results frustratingly slow. In the literature, some scholars have pointed to poorly conceived methodologies for change that include implementing interventions ill-suited to core problems, inattentive and inequitable structures, or weak implementation of promising practices, among other concerns (Bensimon & Harris, 2007; Kezar, Glenn, Lester, & Nakamoto, 2008).

Transformation is dependent upon changes occurring across an institution and within individual practice, teaching, advising, and other day-to-day interactions. Most practitioners are serving to the best of their capacity based on deeply held beliefs and personal experiences, so it isn't often clear what to do differently. Unless the change process is connected to practitioners' work and experiences (Kezar, 2013), it is unlikely to be implemented. So, it is not enough to know that Latino students, for example, are not completing college at the same rate as non-Latinos. Practitioners must work through and understand the student data and institutional processes that create this equity gap in order to determine what to do differently to improve results. This brief summarizes the benefits of PTR's use of data to facilitate practitioner-driven, equitable change in the community college context, as well as the emerging role of student participation in improving and scaling the PTR model.

Addressing Equity: The PTR Model

Integrating participatory action research (Argyris, 1993; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000) with developmental evaluation (Patton, 2010), PTR's theory of action focuses on equity and outcomes assessment rooted in analysis of quantitative data. Practitioner teams identify equity gaps by analyzing student-level outcomes data disaggregated by race, gender, low-income status, and other characteristics that matter to college success. The teams then use these results to test new processes that may boost sub-group success. Key to PTR is the utilization of equity-mindedness that pertains to racial and ethnic prejudices that underpin current practice (Dowd & Bensimon, 2014).

Using Data as a Change Catalyst in PTR

PTR team leaders overwhelmingly report and praise the central role of working with student outcomes data in driving the PTR process (McCambly & Graham, 2015). The high learning curve associated with accessing data and managing

the Outcomes & Equity Assessment¹ process in PTR is frustrating for new teams, but persistence with implementation of this critical process is identified consistently as critical to a successful PTR project. The creation of capacity among a broad base of practitioners engaging in PTR is a transformative feature of executing a PTR project (McCambly & Graham, 2015). This capacity building extends beyond Institutional Researchers, who are often invaluable to the team's effort, to include program faculty, student affairs staff, and other partners (K-12, universities, workforce, etc.). Engaging with data not only drives team conversations to focus on interventions that could better fit and solve gaps in student outcomes, but also builds the teams' political capital within institutions to garner necessary support for implementation or further exploration of promising practices. In other words, evidence-based change hinges on the ability of the PTR teams to draw conclusions from student data, a skillset that is often largely under-developed in many team members prior to engaging with PTR.

Deepening Student-Focused Interventions

Despite these positive signs of capacity building across PTR sites, OCCRL has observed that some team members often enter into the PTR process with the assumption that addressing inputs (i.e. through marketing or recruitment) will solve their student outcomes problems, and they are confused and sometimes stymied when this assumption does not line up with the quantitative data (McCambly & Graham, 2015). For some, this assumption is hard to shake without careful intervention. Experience with multiple PTR projects and with strong PTR coaching has given some team leaders the chance to see and understand the importance of facilitating deep conversations about what it takes to improve student retention, completion, and employment outcomes. They have learned that multiple forms of evidence are useful to understanding equity gaps. Student focus groups and survey data can inform the team in valuable ways because students who are encouraged to voice concerns and provide insights into their educational experiences can challenge initial assumptions about marketing and recruitment being the best solution.

PTR's reliance on practitioners' engagement with quantitative student-level data is a common feature of many data-driven improvement initiatives in higher education, including Achieving the Dream, Inc. and the Center for Urban Education's Equity Scorecard; however, as OCCRL has sought to scale the PTR model, it has become obvious that engagement with quantitative data in itself may not catalyze change. Without qualitative data to give a face and voice to the numbers, practitioners' perceptions may not change.

Applying What We've Learned: Expanding the Use of Data and Engaging Student Voices

Using the concept of double-loop learning (Argyris, 1993), OCCRL is examining PTR's reliance on quantitative data to create a scalable improvement model. As OCCRL observes some teams opting to generate new data through gathering student voices, we propose that the scalability of PTR is enhanced by embedding student engagement within the theory of action. A theory we intend to explore and test in the next iterations of the initiative. Taking lessons from Mertens' (2012) work with transformative evaluation and Patton's (2010) developmental evaluation, OCCRL is recommending PTR teams use mixed-methods evaluation to challenge practitioners' assumptions, to bring equity gaps and process flaws to life, and to inspire culturally responsive work that is scalable. This change is most notable in the newly revised PTR Process and Practice Assessment module (McCambly, Rodriguez, & Bragg, 2015).

This module begins with the identification of major functional processes (e.g., academic planning, marketing, recruitment, enrollment, instruction, student support services, career development, and job placement) that support the movement of students along a pathway. The resulting steps lead to a detailed understanding of how students experience the pathway and a list of potential factors that contribute to problems that interfere with their progression. This culminates in direct engagement with students to provide a deeper understanding of the issues significant to student success and to inform teams on how to go about resolving problems on the pathway. Involving students in organizational change not only better informs program improvement, but also provides students with a chance to engage with meaningful educational issues and bring their own critical-thinking and problem-solving skills to bear to address the problem. Those contributing factors are further analyzed to determine other underlying root causes. Process and Practice Assessment puts a particular emphasis on using the student perspective to help expand, challenge, or validate the teams' hypotheses.

1 See Taylor, J., Castro, E., Swanson, J., Harmon, T., Kristovich, S., Jones, A., & Kudaligama, V. (2015) Outcomes and equity assessment. (Rev. ed.). Champaign, IL: Office of Community College Research and Leadership, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Retrieved from: <http://occrll.illinois.edu/files/Projects/ptr/Modules/PTR%20Module%202.pdf>

As part of this assessment process, teams are provided with a Student Focus Group Toolkit to help design and plan their focus groups. The team may learn more about their own assumptions about root causes during these focus groups. For example, a team analyzing a program with low enrollment may expect that a lack of awareness is the root problem. Systematically gathering student voices can confirm or offer alternative explanations. Finally, after conducting focus groups, the team highlights major findings by sorting student responses into reoccurring themes or categories using a Student Response Analysis Worksheet to analyze and record the findings. This tool asks teams to systematically dissect the qualitative data gathered during student focus groups (or other means such as interviews or surveys) and critically examine whether students' responses confirm or challenge assumptions related to the root cause and the recommended improvement to functional processes and practices.

By engaging students intentionally as informants and experts in their educational experience, teams seeking to address problems or gaps in the student pathway are able to generate transformative conversations about assumptions and institutional experiences from a student perspective. The effect of these conversations may decrease the degree of external coaching necessary to the process, thus improving the scalability of the process itself. When done well, including student voices in the body of collected data also shows promise for supporting stronger alignment between the root cause of outcomes inequities and the selected educational improvement. Using this mixed-methods approach, OCCRL hopes to strengthen the scalability and sustainability of PTR as a model for equity-based continuous improvement.

Pathways to Results Resources

- An overview of the PTR model and all process resources, modules, and data templates are available at: occrll.illinois.edu/projects/pathways/phases.
- The *Process and Practice Assessment* module featured in this brief is available at: occrll.illinois.edu/files/Projects/ptr/Modules/PTR%20Module%203.pdf and the accompanying *Student Focus Group Toolkit* is available at: occrll.illinois.edu/files/Projects/ptr/focusgrouptoolkit.pdf.
- A series of briefs on issues of equity and student success linked to the PTR project are available at: occrll.illinois.edu/projects/pathways/resources-for-ptr-teams/.
- A list of annual PTR workshops and webinars, including the statewide Scaling Up PTR Conference can be found at: occrll.illinois.edu/projects/pathways/ptr-events/

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