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Leading Systemic Change:

Using the Change Leadership Toolkit for Long-Lasting Results

By Susan Elrod, Andrew Lawson, and Stephanie Salomone



Susan Elrod, Chancellor of Indiana University South Bend, is a national leader in undergraduate STEM education reform and higher education change leadership. She is coauthor of the Change Leadership Toolkit, and regularly publishes on topics at the intersection of these interests and her experiences as an administrative leader in higher education.



Andrew Lawson serves as Interim Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs at California State University, Monterey Bay. He has provided service and leadership throughout his career focused on student success, the assessment of student learning, the value of a liberal education, and the creation of degree programs that align regional needs with student opportunity.



Stephanie Salomone serves as Associate Dean for Faculty in the Shiley School of Engineering and as Professor of Mathematics at the University of Portland (UP). She was the Principal Investigator in the National Science Foundation (NSF) Improving Undergraduate STEM Education (IUSE) project, Redesigning Educa-

tion for Learning Through Evidence and Collaborative Teaching, and has also led an NSF Noyce Track 1 project at UP and two NSF-funded Noyce conference and professional development projects, the Western Regional Noyce Alliance and the Western Regional Noyce Network grants. She serves as a Board of Directors member for Saturday Academy and as the Chair of the Executive Leadership Team for the Portland Metro STEM Partnership. Through this and other work, she connects stakeholders in the P-20 STEM ecosystem with a focus on educator professional development and systems change.

In Short

- Many leaders, especially those new to leadership, may not have the experience or knowledge of systemic change leadership to ensure effective change processes.
- The Change Leadership Toolkit describes an ecosystem model of systemic change leadership that contains three main interacting components: leadership context, levers, and leader moves.
- The toolkit includes actionable resources for setting goals and assembling a team as well as six worksheets that campus leaders can use to discover critical contextual factors, identify important levers they can “pull” to amplify change efforts, and outline steps for putting a set of strategic change leader moves in place.
- Insights are provided by two change leaders who offer real world examples of how they have put the toolkit leader moves and levers into action for change on their campuses.

INTRODUCTION

The challenges facing higher education in this moment are multifaceted: many were lurking pre-COVID and many that have emerged and have been exacerbated in the midst of the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic drove down enrollments at many institutions and, coupled with a strong economy, influenced high-school students not to take a traditional approach to attending college after graduation, leaving many colleges struggling to keep their doors open. Pressures such as the economic landscape with unemployment rates at historically high levels paired with the cost of higher education are making those considering a college degree question the return on investment of attending college or entering the workforce. And the demographic shifts in college-going populations is an ever-present reality, especially for regional public universities and small colleges, many already operating on a thin budget margin.

The pandemic also catapulted many institutions into offering more online programs as students voted with their feet to enroll in programs that gave them flexibility for their lives and jobs. Increased calls for racial justice have amplified universities' efforts to address diversity, equity, and inclusion across the board. Then, there are personal choices so many employees are making to resign, choose part-time work, or relocate their families to more desirable living situations, creating high levels of vacancies, demands for hybrid work environments, and a more employee-driven workplace. Students are experiencing more mental health issues, faculty and staff burnout is high and administrative

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leadership turnover is also an issue as so many presidents stayed through the pandemic but are now retiring or resigning. The pandemic generation of high-school students also fell behind because of the lack of learning they may have experienced in the e-learning environment. There is no question that we are all weary, but we must forge ahead as higher education's purpose in our democracy is even more important now than ever.

Several models for implementing change have been developed over the years [see for example, Kotter's eight-step model (1996) and Elrod and Kezar's model for systemic change in STEM (2016)]. However, these models typically outline general steps for leaders to achieve (e.g., form a vision, create a sense of urgency). What has been missing is a set of resources that helps leaders understand how they might effectively enact these steps. As an administrator serving most recently as a provost and a chancellor at two different public comprehensive universities in the Midwest, I was frustrated by the lack of tools available to me to lead and plan change, not just see some of the component parts. It was easy to see the general steps, which made sense at a high level, but *how* was I supposed to create a vision, develop a strategy, overcome barriers and bring people together in ways that would achieve our goals? How do all these steps fit together in very different settings and contexts among leaders of different types? Processes differ so much based on context, so how can leaders utilize context and think strategically about the actions they can take to operationalize these very general steps in a particular change initiative?

During my tenure as a provost, my institution set out to develop a strategic enrollment management plan, which I knew would require change at many levels and across many units. Then, as a chancellor of a small regional public university, I recognized that we needed broad engagement of everyone on campus to recover from the pandemic. In both cases, I adopted a shared leadership approach, which involves faculty, staff, students, and other stakeholders in a more collaborative and horizontal manner to tackle difficult problems and leverage the collective wisdom that led to solutions (Holcombe et al., 2021).

While this method was helpful in gaining momentum on major initiatives, I felt that a more strategic, context-based and action-oriented

approach to plan and lead change was needed to engage and empower a broad set of leaders to create deep, meaningful, and long-lasting change. In talking with leader colleagues around the United States, I sensed that there was a need to define what leaders actually did to be successful, provide practical resources to help leaders analyze the contexts that are influencing their change agenda, identify levers within their change system that might amplify change efforts, and support their development of a strategic approach for leading change that could be sustained over the long timeframes of most systemic change initiatives.

These experiences, in combination with the long-standing work I have been doing at the national level on reforming undergraduate STEM education, led me and my colleague, Adrianna Kezar, to take an expert informed and tested approach to develop an ecosystem model of systemic change leadership and a corresponding guidebook for leaders at all levels, from student to president, and of all types, from informal to formal, to apply the model at their institutions. Given my background in STEM, we wrote and received a grant from the National Science Foundation to hold a workshop with 40 change leaders in STEM disciplines who represented different levels of leadership (from department chair to president) at a variety of institutional types across the country and who were working on various types of systemic change. We asked them to map out how they, as leaders, implemented a change process on their campuses. Working with these leaders, we used theory and research to develop ideas that were refined and tested by the group of experts iteratively over time.

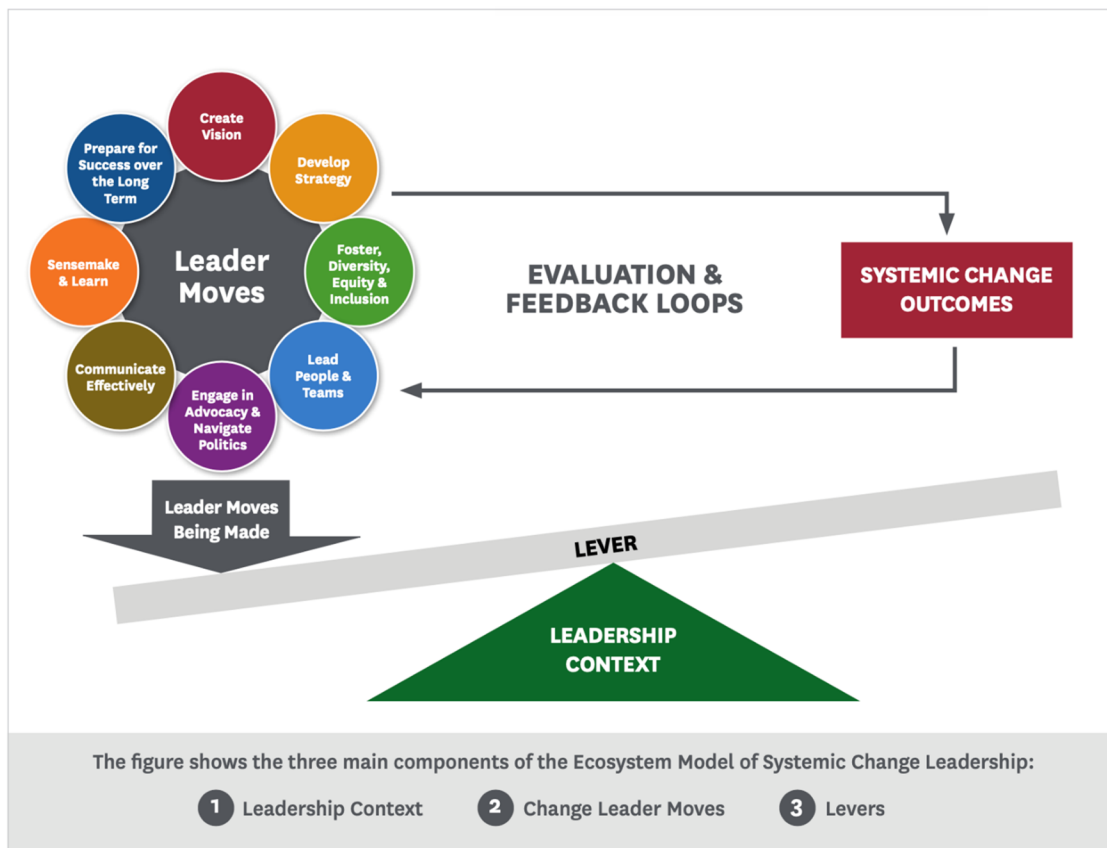
From their experiences, we utilized the expertise of other higher education scholars to glean a set of what we call change leader “moves”—actions that effective change leaders make and an associated model for systemic change leadership. Those moves and the model were vetted with an additional set of higher education leaders comprising faculty leaders, program directors, project coordinators, department chairs, deans, associate deans, provosts, associate provosts, and campus presidents, again representing various institutional types and change goals. Ultimately, more than 150 leaders were included in the development of the model, representing 37 different institutions that ranged from large research universities to public comprehensive

and from minority-serving universities to private colleges, as well as nearly a dozen higher education associations or large-scale national systemic change projects. Institutions involved were located in 26 states as well as Canada (see the Change Leadership Toolkit publication for a listing of all the institutions and organizations involved). Along the way, we worked with graduate students and postdoctoral scholars to identify additional resources and tools that leaders would need to put the model and the moves into practice. The result is a Change Leadership Toolkit (CLT; Elrod et al., 2023). The CLT and its associated resources are available at <https://pullias.usc.edu/project/the-change-leadership-toolkit-for-advancing-systemic-change>. This article serves as an introduction to the toolkit to raise awareness among leaders about how it can help them navigate the complexities of leading successful systemic change efforts. To provide evidence related to its implementation, I interviewed two leaders whose change projects are featured as case studies. Andrew Lawson is currently serving as interim provost and vice president for academic affairs at California State University, Monterey Bay (CSUMB), and the interview below was conducted while he was serving as dean of science. Stephanie Salomone is associate dean for faculty at the University of Portland.

THE CLT

The CLT begins with a description of the ecosystem model (Figure 1), which has three main component parts that interact to create systemic change: (a) leadership context, (b) change leader moves (or the actions leaders take to foster change effectively), and (c) levers for change. The model is grounded in the leadership context, represented by the triangle in the bottom of the graphic. Leadership context may include many factors, including institutional type, leadership structure and governance, institutional culture and politics, and external influences, all of which influence the systemic change process. The change leader moves, depicted in the multicolored circles on the left, are the collection of actions leaders engaging in systemic change might make. These moves can be made individually or in clusters, as well as in combination with one or more levers. Levers can be thought of as opportunities to leverage and amplify moves to achieve the overall change goals. We define 11

FIGURE 1. THE ECOSYSTEM MODEL OF SYSTEMIC CHANGE LEADERSHIP



categories of possible levers, from campus culture, strategic plan, mission, and vision to governance structures, policies, funding streams, reward systems, and communication structures. Systemic change takes time, and the model shows this cycle occurring iteratively over time (see arrows), with its interacting components being carried out by multiple different types of leaders working in concert. The arrows also represent the evaluation and feedback loops happening as the campus moves toward achievement of systemic change outcomes, resulting in adaptation, adjustments, and redirection of moves as progress is made. The model also aims to show that the change process is not static but rather a dynamic set of actions informed by contextual factors that can either be barriers or serve as opportunities to leverage.

The CLT begins with a guidebook that provides a roadmap for leaders to work through the three component parts of the model in a stepwise fashion to define their goals and scope of change, build a team, and then develop a change leadership plan that will help them better achieve and sustain their goals and outcomes. It is critical that leaders using the CLT start with a clear

sense of their change initiative's goals and desired outcomes. Once leaders have defined their goals and scope of change, the CLT walks them through a series of steps designed as scaffolded worksheets that help them define the elements of the ecosystem model that are relevant in their change initiative.

The worksheets start by having leaders define key contextual factors and identify critical levers for change in steps 1 and 2. Then, in step 3, leaders are asked to inventory any change leader moves they might have already made. By reflecting on this inventory, leaders are prepared in step 4 to prioritize a set of change leader moves they might make next, based on contextual factors and levers they have identified. In step 5, leaders build a change leadership plan that includes who, what, how, and when each move will be made, as well as how successful execution will be measured. Because change takes time, the CLT closes with a worksheet in step 6 that leaders can use to assess their progress and make necessary changes to their plan every three to six months.

For readers to see how the CLT works, we developed a series of case studies, available on the CLT

“Change project goals focused on changing university curricular requirements, changing teaching modalities or pedagogical approaches, creating new methods and policies for teaching evaluations of faculty, promoting the retention of women and diverse faculty, and the like.

website: <https://pullias.usc.edu/clt-case-studies/>. These case studies provide insights from different kinds of leaders working on projects with varying goals at a variety of institutional types. Leaders featured in the case studies ranged from faculty leaders and directors to deans and provosts. Institutional types included research universities, comprehensive universities, liberal arts colleges, minority-serving institutions, and community colleges. Change project goals focused on changing university curricular requirements, changing teaching modalities or pedagogical approaches, creating new methods and policies for teaching evaluations of faculty, promoting the retention of women and diverse faculty, and the like. Each case study outlines the change project goals and describes the leader moves made, as well as describing the important contexts operating in the change environment and the lever or levers used. Change leader moves are described in several categories for each case study so readers can see not only which moves were made but how the moves were sequenced in time and intersected with one another in the rollout of the implementation plan. The website also offers an online resource library with additional articles, books, and tools that change leaders may find useful.

To provide readers with concrete evidence for how the change leader moves and levers of the CLT model can be put into action, I interviewed two leaders whose change projects are featured as case studies.

Elrod: *A key component of the Ecosystem Model of Systemic Change is the leader moves. What is one change leader move you made to lead change?*

Salomone: The goal of *Redesigning Education for Learning Through Evidence and Collaborative Teaching* (REFLECT) was to increase the use of evidence-based teaching methods in STEM courses at our institution and improve equity outcomes for students in these courses. The REFLECT framework was designed for faculty incentive structures that are based more on teaching success rather than research output. It provides an alternative form of assessing teaching through peer observation, feedback, and reflection. One of my challenges as a change leader was to create a vision (*CLT Move Category: Create Vision, Expectations, and Pacing*) for this work, as faculty were positioned in several disciplines and in three divisions of the university. To do this, I and other leaders started by helping faculty understand the rationale behind the proposed interventions. We built relationships with administrators, letting them know of our plans and rationale for change. We asked faculty to consider how they might use pedagogical change to improve student learning and to improve their own joy in teaching. We cocreated a Vision for Teaching and Learning at the university. We considered previous change efforts and aligned our efforts to the existing institutional strategic plan, the university mission, and our affiliation with the Congregation of the Holy Cross. For example, the university's strategic

plan emphasized both enhancement of interdisciplinary efforts and support for collaboration across disciplines, which was foundational to the REFLECT project. Institutional affiliation with the Congregation of the Holy Cross means that we are a faculty dedicated to the education *of the whole person*, as espoused by Blessed Basil Moreau, founder of the order. The project leadership team leveraged faculty dedication to holistic education with a focus on ways of knowing the world to advance the adoption of evidence-based practices in STEM teaching.

Lawson: The change project I led was in response to Executive Order 1110 in the CSU System, which among other things eliminated the use of stand-alone developmental education prerequisites for math and writing courses (i.e., remedial courses) and called for alternative instructional models to support students in credit-bearing courses. Prior to the executive order, students at CSUMB who were determined to be underprepared in math would be placed into one or a series of two remedial courses before they could take their required university-level math course. These requirements prevented students from being enrolled in 30 units of college credit-bearing coursework in their first year, which extended their time to graduation beyond 4 years. In addition, the policy exacerbated equity gaps as 59 percent of African American students and 47 percent of Latino students across the system were informed that they were not prepared for college coursework after being admitted. One of the critical leader moves I made in this project was in building a team to carry out our work (*CLT Move Category: Leading People and Teams*). To help campuses develop their plans, the system held a 2-day student success summit in Los Angeles. I worked with the mathematics department chair to select a team of faculty leaders to attend the summit that represented well-respected tenure track and lecturer faculty with experience teaching introductory mathematics courses and who already used evidence-based teaching approaches. The opportunity to spend several days away from campus with the team provided not only ample time to discuss how we might meet the challenge but also the opportunity for me to demonstrate my commitment to the project and build trust with the

faculty. Understandably, some faculty had reservations about the endeavor, worrying that less prepared students would not be able to succeed in college-level courses without the remedial courses. It was important for me to communicate that failure was OK in the process and that this would be an iterative approach where we could learn from our mistakes.

Elrod: *Another important component of the model is using levers to amplify your change efforts. What was one lever you used to amplify progress in meeting your change goals?*

Salomone: We leveraged funding streams and revenue sources both at the outset and again during the implementation of the project (*CLT Lever Category: Funding Streams and Sources*). We received a National Science Foundation grant, which was indeed a major lever that allowed us to provide funding for faculty and staff necessary to implement the project. We incentivized change work through faculty stipends and recognized this as a change to the extant model of expecting faculty to “do more with less,” a model that has been exacerbated by the postpandemic low enrollment. During the project, we received internal funding for iPads for our participants who wanted to try an untethered lecture capture, a project that was going on elsewhere on campus.

Lawson: Our campus Founding Vision Statement was the primary lever used to make the change happen (*CLT Lever Category: Campus Mission*). Our faculty and staff strongly identify with this statement, which states that “the campus will be distinctive in serving the diverse people of California, especially the working class and historically undereducated and low-income populations,” and “will develop a culture of innovation...and will utilize new and varied pedagogical and instructional approaches.” I tied the goals of this project back to this statement and was explicit that this change project would better support our minoritized and low-income communities and help us close our achievement gaps. Leading with this message allowed me to frame the change as a moral imperative with which people on campus identified. Similarly, I was able to connect the project to the culture of innovation. The department received a \$3 M Governor’s Innovation Award, which reflected the pride faculty felt in being well-versed in the literature around evidence-based approaches.

Elrod: What advice would you have for change leaders in using the resources in the *Change Leadership Toolkit* to create more effective and sustainable change?

Salomone: It is important to remember that change is tremendously slow and hard to create. Understanding your context, and the impact of that context on the pace of change, is a major part of being a change agent, as is exhibiting patience in the face of the unhurried, and perhaps unhurriable, pace of change. I think it's also incredibly important to create and sustain a team of change agents who inspire you, and with whom you really want to work. I credit the success of the REFLECT project to the leadership team. We represented different disciplines, came from different stages in our careers, with different strengths and interests all in the area of improving teaching in STEM, creating systems of support for this teaching improvement through formative assessment, and for centering "The Why" in our decision making. Together we are a powerful force for change, and working on and leading this project has been an absolute honor.

Lawson: The CLT provides an opportunity for leaders to slow down and systematically work through the elements involved in a change initiative. It allows the opportunity to reflect on the types of moves that can be made and select those that best fit the situation. I would also emphasize the importance of paying close attention to context (*CLT Leadership Context Worksheet*). This may seem obvious, but the local culture, norms, politics,

personalities, and externalities (in my case the CSU Executive Order) tremendously influence the moves that may be most effective and can drive which levers might best affect change.

CONCLUSION

The CLT was developed to provide a framework and set of actionable resources that change leaders of all types on a variety of different campuses can use to help them plan and implement more effective systemic change. The Ecosystem Model of Systemic Change Leadership provides that framing, defining key contextual factors, possible levers to use, and categories of "moves" leaders can make in effecting systemic change. Six worksheets provide a scaffolded set of steps leaders can take to help them define their context, choose one or more levers, and create plans for themselves and their change leadership teams to lead change. Examples of how leaders have put the CLT framework and resources into action are shown in case studies and highlighted in the brief interviews featured in this article. Their entire CLT case study provides additional information on the moves they made, levers they used, and contextual factors that were important to their projects.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s). □

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