COLLECTIVE IMPACT IN ACTION
CREATING A CURRICULUM FOR INSTITUTIONAL LEADERS

The work of the Higher Ed Equity Network is driven not only by its deep commitment to addressing the unique needs of Black, Latino/a/x, and Indigenous students, but also by a shared belief in the power of collective impact. Together, the network's 30 member organizations—each of which contributes to a wide array of expertise gained working with and within colleges and universities— can spur change that moves faster and reaches farther than any one of them could achieve alone.

Compelling evidence of how the network's members collaborate to identify challenges and barriers in the field, develop innovative solutions, and then deploy those solutions to institutions can be found in the senior team curriculum created through a precursor network to the Higher Ed Equity Network.

NAMING THE NEED

As a former college president herself and leader of Achieving the Dream's network of more than 300 colleges, ATD President Karen Stout is acutely aware that a strong leader is a critical component of a successful college. Just as essential an ingredient in this recipe for success, but not as often recognized, is the existence of a highly effective senior team, one that is aligned with the president around a common purpose and vision. Stout made a keen observation about the lack of attention on senior teams at a group meeting focused on leadership.

> **"I just intuitively knew that we were not, as a reform field, talking about the senior teams,"** said Stout. **"That was my hypothesis I put out, and that then led people, across the sectors that were in the [network], to go 'yes, that's it. Exactly it. We need to go deep there. We need to learn more.'"**

SCOURING THE FIELD

With a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the group, which included the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program (Aspen), University Innovation Alliance (UIA), the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU), Achieving the Dream (ATD), and other current Higher Ed Equity Network members, set out to create a curriculum for presidents and senior teams that would support their efforts to coalesce around a student success agenda. First, a thorough scan of leadership material from 50 liberal arts colleges, regional public colleges, research universities, and community colleges was conducted, followed by interviews with a narrowed down list of 20 colleges identified as having strong senior leadership teams. **From this research, a framework for organizing the curriculum was established around core dimensions of effective senior leadership teams**—their composition, how they move toward a common purpose, and how roles within the team could be redefined to become less traditional and more transformational in nature.
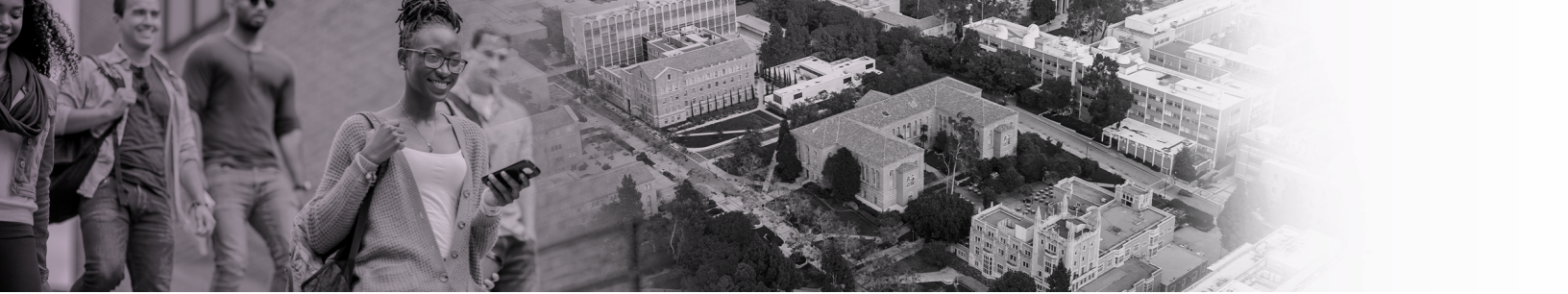
CREATING THE RESOURCE

Aspen took the lead in developing the curriculum, designing it to help presidents and their teams meet specific learning goals:

- Understand the role that the composition of the cabinet plays in advancing student success.
- Assess the composition of the current cabinet against attributes of transformational leaders and discuss how those attributes align to the needs of the institution.
- Presidents only: Consider three key roles in the cabinet for transformation and allow presidents time to reflect on the attributes of these roles in their leadership teams.
- Determine actionable next steps to build common understanding of purpose within the cabinet and throughout the institution.
- Reflect on the role of collaboration within the cabinet and determine actionable next steps to better foster collaboration within the team.
- Determine actionable next steps that the cabinet can take to improve implementation of the institution's reform work.

Source: The Aspen Institute College Excellence Program

Meanwhile, ATD, AASCU, and the Association of American Universities (AAU) field tested it with institutions. For ATD, that process involved convening presidents from 10 of its network colleges every other week for six months, making adjustments to the curriculum along the way. **Following this testing period, the culmination of 18 months of collaborative work, the curriculum was refined, finalized, and then made publicly available.** It is currently accessible as an open resource on Aspen's **website** and is being used in the organization's fellowship program and state-based engagements. Along with Aspen, ATD has embedded the curriculum in its onboarding of new network colleges. AASCU is also using the curriculum in its work with institutions.

Josh Wyner, the founder and executive director of the College Excellence Program at the Aspen Institute, says the senior team curriculum is one of their most popular curricular offerings. He points to a number of ways it has proven valuable for institutional leaders, including agenda-setting.

> **"I think that presidents, when they realize how important it is to get the senior team on board, start to realize the importance of a priority agenda in a different way than they do if they don't really think about the current state of their senior team,"** said Wyner.

MEASURING THE REACH

Since the launch of the senior team curriculum, **more than 700 institutional leaders** have experienced it, including:

- **185 Aspen Presidential Fellows**
- **450+ presidents, senior leaders, and mid-level leaders** through Aspen's state engagements, representing:
  - **13 colleges** in the SUNY system
  - **11 colleges** through the Partnership for College Completion—Illinois Equity in Attainment Initiative
  - **23 colleges** through the Ohio Leadership Academy
  - **30 colleges** through the Texas Pathways Institutes
  - **7 colleges** in the City Colleges of Chicago
- **12 presidents and their senior teams** in Achieving the Dream's network
- **18 presidents** through cohorts of the American Talent Initiative network

LEADER SPOTLIGHT: A PRESIDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

When Dr. Monte Randall assumed the presidency of the College of the Muscogee Nation in March 2021, he had already worked at the tribal college for nearly a dozen years – as an intern, a faculty member, a dean of student affairs, and a dean of academic affairs. Even with so much experience at the institution, the transition to leader was a bittersweet one for Randall, given that his predecessor had just passed away from COVID-19.

"I came into a position with a lot of my friends here, a lot of my colleagues who supported me," said Randall. "But we really didn't have a chance to even grieve our longest serving president. We just had to keep on going."

Randall was accepted to the Aspen New Presidents Fellowship in Summer 2021. The senior team curriculum was part of Randall's fellowship experience. It included conducting a survey of his senior team, which at the time was comprised of only four people.

"Is there good communication across the organization? Does everybody know the vision? Does everybody know the budget? I saw the collective responses, and I knew this going in – we don't really communicate."

While communication was identified as an area for improvement, alignment around a common purpose and support for change was strong. So strong that Randall said it was important to manage expectations.

"I just kept telling everybody 'just stay with me, we're going to get there,'" said Randall. "Change is coming, but it's not going to happen tomorrow."

That patience has now paid off. In the last year, the senior team has started to take major steps toward their shared vision. A director of enrollment management position was created, and a strategic planning process culminated in the launch of a new plan in April 2023.

Randall is grateful for how his fellowship experience with the Aspen Institute, as well as the college's partnerships with AIHEC and ATD, have benefited the institution.

"I don't know who engineered all of this. I think maybe it was all of these organizations just working together. We're kind of just surfing the wave of it. I feel like we've just been really fortunate to be a part of it."

> "I don't know who engineered all of this. I think maybe it was all of these organizations just working together, but we've been fortunate."

Dr. Monte Randall
President
College of the Muscogee Nation

A MODEL FOR IMPACT

This model for collective impact—one in which organizations jointly identify a need in the field and play to their individual strengths in addressing that need and operationalizing a solution—is one that now guides the work of the Higher Ed Equity Network.

"The power of the collective impact was having the perspectives from all these different member organizations that understood what was needed on the ground," said Lenore Rodicio, an Aspen Institute Senior Fellow and advisor to the Higher Ed Equity Network. **"They built the curriculum, figured out how to deliver it, what the facilitation would look like, and then the training for those that were going to deliver it from the different member organizations."**

Through the Higher Ed Equity Network, the potential for this collaborative process is now even greater, with the evolution of what was previously an aligned group of organizations into a formal network with a clear theory of change and an intentional commitment to racial equity in postsecondary education. While equity was an intended end goal of the the senior team curriculum project, it was not an explicit focus. Outcomes of the Higher Ed Equity Network's work – whether in the form of advocacy, policy recommendations, or practice solutions – will center on addressing the needs of Black, Latino/a/x, and Indigenous students.

The Higher Ed Equity Network works to create a more equitable higher education system with an intentional, unapologetic focus on the needs of Black, Latino/a/x, Indigenous, and other students who are harmed by persistent systemic barriers linked to their racial and ethnic identities.

To learn more about the Higher Ed Equity Network, visit **HigherEdEquityNetwork.org**.

HIGHER ED EQUITY
N E T W O R K