Successful Transitions to College (STC) in Spokane, Washington:

Inquiry-Based Professional Learning to Improve Student Transitions

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Mobilizing partnerships across sectors, institutions, and disciplines for sustained collaboration and learning is a specialty of **edBridge Partners**. With expert facilitation and project management, combined with deep content knowledge, edBridge turns plans and objectives into actions and results. When educators in the Spokane, Washington region received a grant to support an action learning project to improve students' preparation for and transition to college, the grantees looked to edBridge Partners to manage the initiative and ensure it succeeded.

THE CHARGE:

Facilitate an action learning network for faculty to develop and test new approaches to support students, particularly those who are low-income, in making successful transitions from high school to college.

THE APPROACH:

Combine expert project management with deep content knowledge to create and sustain momentum of an inquiry-based, practitioner-driven, cross-sector and cross-discipline professional learning experience.

THE ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

Fostered a long-term action learning network that produced new relationships and new knowledge that are contributing to improved classroom practices. Participants identified weaknesses in student learning and designed protocols to strengthen students' preparation for college.

Created a dynamic website that contains all the project's results and resources, including the faculty-developed teaching tools as well as the materials used to guide the project, such as meeting agendas, presentations, and templates for group work.

The Charge

Educators in the Spokane, Washington area see the value in working together across the secondary and postsecondary sectors. Seventy percent of Spokane area high school graduates who matriculate to college enroll in one of the two community colleges or the state university. Hence, the success of those students largely depends on good preparation in high school that is aligned with the expectations of the colleges. But the transition from high school to college remains a persistent problem in Spokane, as it does in the rest of the country, and cross-sector, collaborative work to address the problem is not regularly supported or funded.

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In 2014, grant-maker College Spark awarded approximately $150,000 to Eastern Washington University to support the three-year *Successful Transitions to College* (STC) project. Also participating were the Community Colleges of Spokane (Spokane Community College and Spokane Falls Community College) and seven area school districts. The project would develop and implement a self-directed professional development program for K-12, community college, and university faculty in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics, with the aim of improving education practice in support of students' college readiness. The grantees wished to explore, as a university lead partner said, "What is it that our students are struggling with, and what do we do as teachers to effect change?"

In sum, the initiative's goals were to:

» Create the conditions and strategies for successful ongoing collaboration and professional learning among high school and college educators
» Identify gaps in learning and skills common to students at all institutions
» Develop and test new approaches to support the region's students, particularly those who are low-income, in making successful transitions from high school to college
» Identify successful strategies for increasing students' academic motivation, knowledge, and skills
» Build a public repository of the resources created from the project.

Given the ambitious goals, and the fact that the participants would take on these efforts in addition to their existing professional work, the project leads recognized that "There needs to be one entity that unites everyone and drives what we are doing…who has the big picture in mind." This was the key role for edBridge Partners, demonstrating the value that the firm brings to such efforts – working collaboratively with organizations and institutions to achieve their desired results.

The Approach

Many promising ideas wither because they lack the conditions necessary for success. In education reform initiatives, content experts may not have the project management skills to carry the work forward, yet the effectiveness of professional facilitators may be limited by their lack of subject-matter knowledge. The edBridge team specializes in bringing all the critical elements that enable their clients to do their best work and achieve their goals – elements that can be flexibly applied to different change efforts.

A multi-year group effort such as *Successful Transitions to College* requires strong engagement of the participants, generation of data to inform improvement efforts, and shared responsibility and accountability. There must be clear expectations of all, along with a process that drives follow-through. To promote lasting engagement, the initiative was designed to be inquiry-based, with the participants identifying their own challenges and discovering their own solutions. Importantly, the practitioner-driven inquiry was strongly supported by the edBridge staff, who informed and bolstered the efforts via useful resources and adept project management.

ENGAGEMENT THROUGH AN INQUIRY-BASED PROCESS

Through their many years of experience working with K-12 and higher education, the edBridge team understands that successful professional learning is engaging and collaborative, and develops positive relationships among the participants as they seek to improve teaching and learning. Yet, collaborative work can be challenging and time-consuming, even more so when the participants come from different institutions and disciplines. The approximately 50 STC participants – mostly faculty, but including a few administrators – came from the university, the community colleges, and the high schools and districts, and represented both English Language Arts and math.

The typical professional development is often a one-time exchange of information, rather than a process of changing practice. As a participating college faculty member said, "In the English world, the joke is, how many papers can be graded during professional development?" But in this case, "People came knowing that they were the drivers of this." The inquiry-based process of the STC would go beyond convening and conversation to planning and implementing courses of action.

What did it look like? Faculty participants were assigned to small groups that had cross-sector and mixed geographic representation. They gathered on Saturdays nine times over three years, and put in substantial effort between the meetings. Administrators observed, and noted where they could provide support. A kick-off meeting established clearly defined objectives and set the expectations and tone for the following convenings. Relevant literature was provided by edBridge to help the participants start their work from a shared lens and context.

A community college faculty member commented: "There was a lot of energy and enthusiasm for the conversations that were happening. In the first year having math and English and all the sectors represented there were a lot of fascinating discussions about what they had in common – their students and the problems of practice that groups would work on. There were more similarities than not in math and English – critical thinking, perseverance. It was really good for people who hadn't been in cross-sector work before."

Between the first and second meetings, small group members visited one other's classrooms, using an observation protocol to help faculty focus and reflect on what they were seeing (see link below, in Resources section). These visits helped them understand their different contexts, and, as one participant said, they "created a lot of respect" for one another. Observing teaching across the sectors also helped the educators have a greater sensitivity to students' experiences of the transition – where they must move from, and towards.

At subsequent meetings, the groups worked on identifying areas of education practice to target for improvement, based on the visits and their review and discussions of first-year undergraduate performance expectations. Beginning in the second year, participants settled on new approaches to test in their classrooms, and collected data on the results. Institutional researchers from the colleges and universities were asked to join some of the meetings in order to provide guidance on data collection and interpretation, to strengthen the educators' research skills.

The educators summarized their findings in within-discipline and across-discipline subgroups, as well as with the entire group. They shared, they received feedback, they planned for further tests; there were multiple cycles of testing and revision. Questions that were asked and addressed included:

» What are the differences between college-ready reading and college-level reading?
» How can one more effectively help students to summarize text and identify purpose?
» How can a math classroom be structured to promote independent learning and perseverance?

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By all accounts, this collaborative inquiry process was an effective model for professional learning. As a community college faculty lead shared, "The inquiry-based model, trusting the teacher in the room, was new to some of them. The professional development that's usually offered to teachers is a one-off workshop or much more directive… I have definitely grown in recognizing that achieving something that will stick and last beyond a particular project has to be something that's owned by the participants." And, in a post-project survey, most participants said that the *Successful Transitions to College* action learning network was far better or better than other professional development they had experienced.

DRIVING MOMENTUM THROUGH EXPERT PROJECT MANAGEMENT AND FACILITATION

As noted above, capable project management and facilitation are among the conditions necessary to support long-term professional learning. Well-meaning and potentially impactful change efforts often do not achieve their intended goals because of a lack of momentum. As a university lead emphasized, "The people who choose to be involved in these projects tend to be involved in lots of things and have too many things on their lists. 'I can't do all of it; what am I not going to do today?'"

This speaks to the need in such initiatives for an entity whose job is the initiative – edBridge Partners. The intentional design of the STC project recognized the importance of educator-driven inquiry and analysis. Yet the professionals at edBridge also knew that the hard-working faculty participants needed structure and support for their important work. edBridge provided those supportive conditions – effective and efficient planning and management; facilitation using written guides and templates; informing the process via relevant academic literature; and providing other experts as needed, such as the institutional research professionals.

Creating the right balance of process and self-direction is challenging. A too-prescriptive process could reproduce the usual, criticized type of professional development. But, too much self-direction could lead to a lack of focus and frequent tangents. As a K-12 leader said, "The process is critical. I can't say enough about that. I'll never be a part of something that feels wishy-washy or undefined. We don't need to sit in a room and talk something to death. We need intentional steps in an intentional process."

With edBridge's guidance, the leadership team established a fitting balance. Participants were supported in their small working groups with action protocols. Meetings were carefully structured to help the educators learn from and with one another, and to move them to the next steps. edBridge kept everyone on-task, so that

the work was productive. "edBridge could keep us moving a certain direction kindly but firmly while allowing the actual answers and output to come from the teachers themselves. This is a really good model," said one practitioner.

Participants spoke enthusiastically about edBridge being key to the success of the initiative. One individual made the point that having project management be the responsibility of an outside organization such as edBridge likely aided the process since edBridge staff were not part of any reporting lines in the education institutions. "I really don't think we could have done it without that kind of guidance," a participant said.

And, participants knew they were accountable for making progress – their inquiry project results would be compiled into a toolkit and posted on the public *Successful Transitions to College* website.

ACCOUNTABILITY THROUGH CLEAR EXPECTATIONS FOR PARTICIPATION AND TOOL DEVELOPMENT

In addition to participant ownership, and a balanced process via edBridge's encouraging yet firm facilitation, accountability was also part of the project's design. Consistent involvement is essential to a productive professional learning network, so expectations of the practitioners were clearly specified from the very beginning of the initiative to the anticipated toolkit deliverables almost three years later.

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Letters of commitment detailed the schedule of meetings as well as the time that would be required outside of the meetings. In signing, the faculty members agreed to be held responsible for full participation as well as for producing a tool that could be used by others in the field to improve their own practice. Attendance at meetings was tracked, and yearly stipends were awarded to committed participants. In the third year, the leadership team introduced the role of the Cohort Lead, who had additional responsibility (and a slightly higher stipend) for facilitating the final execution of each group's toolkit item. These individuals were chosen by their own groups, not designated by the leadership team.

At all the meetings over the three years, roles and responsibilities and timelines were reviewed. During the very first gathering, the project leadership led a discussion of expected behaviors and activities, drawing from Michael J. Palmisano's 2013 book *Taking Inquiry to Scale: An Alternative to Traditional Approaches to Education Reform*. The participants would: investigate shared problems or questions of practice; learn with and from colleagues; seek expertise and perspectives of others beyond the inquiry group; use evidence and data; act, reflect, and refine practice; and share and connect learning. Such collaborative work presumes that participants will reliably fulfill their roles and responsibilities; as one said, "I like the way this project made me accountable to my group members."

The Accomplishments

The initiative's aims were achieved – the project team created a supportive, cross-sector action learning network through which faculty collaboratively identified problems of practice and tested new classroom strategies. Working within a well-designed process for productive professional learning, small groups developed and tried new methods for increasing students' motivation, knowledge, and skills, collecting data and reflecting on what was learned. The focus was the transition from high school to college for the students they serve locally. Yet, importantly, the solutions and tools produced through the inquiry-based process would be available to educators beyond their region through a public website.

The participating faculty members created new knowledge. What was learned? Surprisingly or not, the English and math participants identified similar problems of practice across their content areas:

» Independent learning – students rely too much on their teachers
» Critical reading and writing skills – these skills are lacking and need to be more intentionally addressed
» Critical thinking and problem-solving skills – these are also weak and need to be specifically addressed

Nine groups tested new approaches to these challenges, and the resulting tools are now posted on the initiative's comprehensive website, created by edBridge partners.

For example, one project titled Creating a Math Classroom Environment that Promotes Independent Learning and Perseverance addressed the problem of students not being independent learners. The project aimed to help students welcome challenges and work through them together or independently; take ownership of their own learning; view the teacher as a facilitator and not an answer book; and believe that they are capable of solving any problem if they stick with it. As the result of their inquiry process, the faculty members assembled a toolkit that includes articles used to help students think about mindset, a rubric intended to grade students' processes more than their answers, and other classroom tasks and assignments. They conclude that, "Together these tools provide a framework for creating a new classroom culture."

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In addition to new knowledge, new relationships were formed. These relationships were foundational to the process and to the accomplishments. Many participants said

that the cross-sector collaboration was the most valuable and enriching aspect of the initiative. One faculty member said, "It was great to collaborate with everyone who had a stake in the game, and to see that everyone genuinely cared about student success and had high expectations of students." The cross-disciplinary aspect was also viewed positively, with one participant calling it "enlightening" and saying that it helped "to understand that all teachers have similar issues."

Importantly, many participants also shared that the relationships will last beyond the project, or they hoped that they would. To help improve the chances of continued cross-sector professional learning in the region, the project leaders intentionally included administrators in the initiative. Administrator involvement and support was meant to help strengthen and solidify the new ties across the sectors, as well as to give the effort higher visibility.

Finally, the participants emphasized the initiative's positive effects on themselves as professionals. The project's design honored the expertise and efforts of the faculty; they, in return, felt that they were involved in something meaningful. It is significant that the initiative concluded with optimism – optimism for the participants' efficacy as educators, and for the future success of their students. "It gave me new hope and purpose."

RESOURCES

Successful Transitions to College Website home page:
https://sites.ewu.edu/successfultransitions/

Successful Transitions to College Webpage with project leadership and management resources, including all meeting agendas, classroom observation guidelines, presentation templates, and other tools:
https://sites.ewu.edu/successfultransitions/project-leadership/project-leadership-resources/

Successful Transitions to College Toolkits:

English
• The Impact Rhetorical Reading has on Effective Integration of Source Material
• Helping Students to Summarize Text and Distinguish Purpose
• Mindset and Metacognition
• A Focusing Tool: Helping Students Read More Objectively
• Cross-Sector Understanding of the Difference Between College-Ready Reading and College-Level Reading

Math
• Helping Math Students Think Critically About What They Read
• Transferring Knowledge from Pre-Calculus to Calculus
• Observing a Culture of Student Independence: The Cosi Protocol
• Creating a Math Classroom Environment that Promotes Independent Learning and Perseverance

Leadership Team
• Creating a Regional Network: Organizing a Cross-Sector Faculty-Led Professional Inquiry Network

Final Report of the College Board's *Affinity Network*, a one-year cross-sector professional learning effort that laid a foundation for the STC: http://media.collegeboard.com/digitalServices/pdf/advocacy/policy-center-affinity-network-final-report-july2013.pdf

Palmisano, Michael J. 2013. *Taking Inquiry to Scale: An Alternative to Traditional Approaches to Education Reform*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

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