Change Leadership Toolkit

Case Studies:
Dallas College

An Addendum to the

Change Leadership Toolkit:
A Guide for Advancing Systemic Change
in Higher Education

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CHANGE LEADERSHIP TOOLKIT
CASE STUDY OVERVIEW

These Case Studies accompany the Change Leadership Toolkit and demonstrate what it looks like in action to use Leader Moves to promote systemic institutional change. Each case highlights a few key Leader Moves and includes an overview of each institution, the leader at the forefront of the change process, and a description of the Leadership Context and Levers used to achieve the change goal. Collectively, these Case Studies showcase the combinations of Leader Moves and Levers that leaders can use to drive change across different types of institutions. It is important to note that given the lengthy time period for changes and keeping the document brief, these are just examples of Moves, Levers and context elements and are not fully inclusive of the leaders' change processes.

In any systemic change project, there are a variety of conditions that may influence the Moves leaders choose to make, the Levers they may use, and the ultimate change that is made. As a result, for these Case Studies, we chose to represent leaders in different roles, institutions with varying characteristics, and various types of change projects in order to reflect this diversity and showcase how the Toolkit is useful in a variety of situations. Visit our Change Leadership Toolkit Case Studies web page to see other examples, **https://pullias.usc.edu/clt-case-studies/**.

DALLAS COLLEGE

Transforming Advising at a Multi-Campus Community College

About the Institution

Dallas College, formerly the Dallas County Community College District, consists of seven campuses in the Dallas/Fort Worth area and educates over 120,000 students annually. Dallas College awards two- and four-year degrees and certificates in more than 100 programs and aims to serve the community through education and workforce development. The diverse student populations mirrors the community, with nearly half of students identifying as Latino/Hispanic, nearly 20% as Black, just under 10% as Asian, and almost 17% as White. Students are also diverse in terms of age, income level, and veteran status.

CASE STUDY HIGHLIGHTS

- **Leader Role(s) and Agency:** Karen Stills, Senior Associate Vice Chancellor for Student Success
- **Goals of Change:** Transform advising across the seven campuses of Dallas College to a wraparound support approach called Success Coaching in order to help students persist, attain degrees, and/or ultimately transfer to four-year institutions.

- **Level/Scope of Change:** College-wide

- **Institutional Type:** Community College

- **Moves Highlighted:**
  - Create Vision, Expectations and Pacing (V)
  - Develop Strategy and Resources (S)
  - Lead People and Teams (T)
  - Engage in Advocacy and Navigate Politics (P)
  - Communicate Effectively
  - Sensemake and Learn (SL)

- **Levers:**

  - **Lever Category 5:** External partnerships & organizations

  - **Lever Category 7:** Funding streams and sources

Setting the Stage: About the Project

Karen Stills, Senior Associate Vice Chancellor for Student Success at Dallas College (DC), led an effort to transform advising for the students at this community college beginning in 2020. In the midst of a merger and reorganization effort, where seven campuses of the Dallas Community College District were consolidated into a single multi-campus institution (Dallas College), Karen had the opportunity to completely rethink advising structures and systems in ways that would improve outcomes for DC's 100,000+ students. Prior to the merger, the seven campuses all had different approaches to advising students. There were only 130 advisors across all campuses and the resulting caseload ratios were as high as 1,200 students to one advisor. The high caseloads meant students saw a different advisor each time, making it difficult to monitor progress and influencing the campuses' low retention rates. Using the district merger as a lever for change, Karen and her team shifted away from a traditional advising model and adopted a new approach called Success Coaching, which provided wraparound support services for students. Under this new approach, advisors or "coaches" would stay with students for their entire journey at Dallas College, regardless of major, program or campus location. Within this new model, coaches would provide their services outside of the traditional 9-to-5 on-campus office hours in order to meet the needs of the diverse students Dallas College serves. Teams of coaches would work virtually and in the evenings to advise students who needed support outside of the traditional workday.

Karen and her team in the new Division of Student Success nearly doubled the number of advisors (from 130 to 240) and decreased caseloads to around 350:1. They also leveraged the reorganization to increase starting salaries from $43,000 to $65,000 in order to attract the most talented and dedicated coaches. Karen worked with her team to develop an entirely new training and professional development model for the Success Coaches to help them better support students in their educational journeys.

While this systemic change project is still in fairly early stages, early indicators suggest that the new approach is working. In the fall of 2020, only about 2,843 students were using advising services in comparison to 7,000 during fall of 2022. In the first semester after the program was established, 54% of the College's 100,000 students visited a Success Coach, and students who visited a Success Coach one time in their fall semester had 17% higher retention rates than those who did not make such visits. Students who made two or more visits had a 34% higher retention rate. These outcomes were constant regardless of student type, gender or racial/ethnic identity. This Case Study describes the process Karen and her team took to implement the Success Coaching program and highlights some of the Leader Moves they made to enact these changes.

Change Leader Moves

Overview of Leader Moves

Karen used a variety of Leader Moves to help advance her systemic change project. She began with clarifying her vision of what a new advising program would look like at Dallas College. The district merger provided a way to align the Success Coaching program to broader system-wide goals (V1, V2). A central strategy to making this vision a reality was the procurement of resources to raise the salary level to attract the best candidates, hire new Success Coaches, and develop a new training program for the Coaches (S1, S2, S6). In order to obtain these resources, Karen skillfully navigated internal politics, drawing upon her long-standing tenure and established relationships as part of the Dallas Community College District community for more than 20 years (P1, P2, P3, P5, P6). Karen worked with the leaders in her division to recruit, hire and train the new team of Success Coaches (T1, T3, T7, T9). After new staff were hired and the Success Coaching program began, Karen was intentional in how she communicated progress and updates to different constituencies on campus, especially student leaders, faculty and the Board of Trustees (C1, C2, C4, C5). She made sure to utilize key data points on who was using Success Coaching outcome metrics that helped her showcase the program's impact to those key stakeholders and make adjustments as needed (SL1, SL6, SL8).

Create Vision, Expectations and Pacing (V) — Focus on V1, V2

Karen was responsible for overseeing the design and implementation of student support services at the new Dallas College as the seven Dallas Community Colleges merged into one institution. Central to that charge was the need to develop a vision for what advising would look like in this new institutional context and align this new approach to advising with the broader vision of the merger ("one college, multiple campuses") (V1). Additionally, Karen and her team used the new Dallas College's Learner Care Model for Student Success as a foundational vision of care and student-centeredness to guide the development of the vision for advising (V1, V2). The Learner Care Model for Student Success centered around the idea of creating a culture of care for students, where students

and their needs were at the center of all decision-making. Ultimately, given her understanding of promising practices in advising through research, practice, and her membership with the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) and other national student affairs professional organizations, Karen developed a vision for advising at Dallas College that she called Success Coaching (V1).

Success Coaching was premised on the idea that students need not just technical support with registration but more holistic coaching on how to succeed in college, as well as consistent relationships with the people who are offering that support. Programs offering this type of holistic support have been advanced by national organizations such as NACADA, Achieving the Dream, Excelencia in Education, and the Aspen Institute, and Karen connected her vision for Success Coaching with their recommendations (V2). Not only would Success Coaches be responsible for helping students navigate registration and enrollment, as advisors had done before, but also for supporting students in making longer-term plans for their educational journeys and connecting them to the services necessary to succeed. Karen and her team worked on articulating this vision that Success Coaching was a significant shift in how Dallas College delivered services in a way that centered students, created consistency across the seven campuses, and streamlined complicated processes that might hinder student success (V2). Ultimately, execution of this vision would require a transformation of existing structures and processes, which is described in more detail in the next section.

Develop Strategy and Resources (S) — Focus on S1, S2, S6

In order to implement the Success Coaching program across all seven campuses, Karen and her team developed a strategy that consisted of the vision and goal alignment shared above, as well as reallocation of resources and changes in reporting structures. They determined that the strategy required a complete redesign of advising structures, new hiring and training protocols, and a significantly larger number of advisors in order to reduce caseloads. To make the new structure possible, Karen had to reallocate resources toward an increase in salaries to attract the best talent for these roles (S1, S2). As noted above, part of the Success Coaching model included a reduced caseload so that advisors could give more personalized attention to students. Because the merger presented an opportunity to revamp roles and responsibilities across the College, Karen was to rewrite duties and responsibilities and secure the funds needed from senior leadership to hire a larger group of Success Coaches — 240 compared to the 130 advisors that had previously been employed across the Dallas Community College District (S2). Almost doubling the advisors shrank caseloads ratios from as high as 1:1,200 to 1:350, which is in line with the promising practices of professional organizations such as NACADA. The fact that Karen was developing the Success Coaching program in the midst of the broader reorganization of Dallas College meant that there was more strategic funding available to support organizational transformations like the one she was leading (S6).

Engage in Advocacy and Navigate Politics (P) — Focus on P1, P2, P3, P5, P6

Karen often met with senior leaders including the Vice Chancellor for Student Success, Chancellor, and Board of Trustees, to share out key data and research on why Success Coaching at DC was not just needed but fundamental to students' success. With over 20 years of experience at DC, Karen had developed the political acumen that helped her understand how to successfully advocate for the resources she needed to make the Success Coaching program a reality. By connecting her pitch with research on effective caseloads in advising, benchmarking on salaries, and data on how similar

models at other campuses had led to increased persistence and retention rates, Karen was able to make the case for change to board members and other senior leaders (P1, P6). Karen also noted that her political skills were important in terms of managing the expectations of senior leaders in navigating the change project timeline (P3). Developing position descriptions, hiring and training over 200 new Success Coaches was not something that could happen in a single semester, so Karen had to balance that reality with the demands of senior leaders to make change happen faster (P1). Her consistent messaging about the vision and plan for change — as well as her frequent connections to how this plan would improve student outcomes and increase workforce preparedness — helped her gain buy-in from senior leaders and convinced them to fund Success Coaching at Dallas College (P2, P5). In addition to getting support from senior leaders, Karen knew that she needed to address some skeptics of the project in order to make the Success Coaching model a reality. Some faculty were concerned about the amount of resources being expended on the new model as well as the time it was taking to make change. Karen met regularly with key faculty members and attended faculty meetings to ensure that faculty understood the rationale behind the changes, the resources it required, and the timeline for the project (P5).

Leading People and Teams — Focus on T1, T3, T7, T9

Karen built strong teams that helped create and implement the Success Coaching program. She worked with a core group of deans and associate deans within her new division who operationalized the vision and strategy, while she worked with senior leaders across the College to build support and momentum (T1, T3). Karen took a hands-on approach working alongside her team to recruit, interview and hire all 240 Success Coaches. Advisors who had been at one of the Dallas Community College District campuses were considered for the new Success Coach positions but had to reapply and interview along with new candidates in order to ensure that they were committed to the new vision of the program. The increased salary for the new Success Coach positions helped incentivize applications, along with the flexibility offered by positions that would work virtually and during evening hours (T7). In addition to recruiting and hiring the new Success Coaches, Karen and her leadership team had to develop a curriculum for onboarding and train the new staff members, as she described here:

> "So when you hire [new staff], you have to train them. There's a culture shift, and we're building. No one gave me a playbook to say, "Okay, this is the learner care model. Here's the different modules.' We're creating this as we go. We're pulling from other resources, best practices, and...leveraging the professional development staff. We created onboarding materials to get everyone acculturated to this [new] service model that we have...the technology tools that you have to learn to do this work, and the ultimate kind of experience that we want students to have."

Karen was able to leverage a dedicated professional development office within her division to help create onboarding materials and facilitate training (T9). Her ability to generate excitement, engage various stakeholders and leverage incentives to mobilize a high-functioning team was instrumental to implementing Success Coaching at DC (T3, T7).

Communicate Effectively — Focus on C1, C2, C4, C5

Communication was particularly important for this project given that efforts spanned the seven campuses of the new Dallas College. Karen had to communicate frequently with different key constituencies and stakeholders across the campuses about the Success Coaching model — what it was, how it was different from existing advising models, the research and rationale behind it, and the benefits it would bring to Dallas College (C1, C2). Through regular meetings with senior leaders and with faculty, Karen was able to clearly articulate these messages to these important stakeholders. She also tailored her messaging to fit the goals and priorities of each audience. For example, senior leaders were most concerned about overall student success rates and were convinced by language that connected the program to economic and business outcomes, while faculty were more interested in details of how the Success Coaching model would better support students in their classes (C4). Karen also ensured that she regularly updated these key constituencies on the project's progress and acknowledged and addressed stakeholders' concerns. Faculty raised concerns after a semester that they were not seeing immediate results despite significant levels of investment in this program. As Karen described:

> *"Right off the bat, let me just tell you, I got a lot of boos and jeers, particularly from faculty, who knew that we had reinvested in this area but weren't seeing the results immediately. So it takes the self-assurance of a leader to stay the course and to communicate really clearly. 'I know this is a lot of change. I understand that this is a large area, but if we commit to following through on what we say, we will see results by way of student retention, completion, outcomes and the like."*

Listening to these concerns, Karen realized that she needed to be clearer and more transparent with faculty in particular about the rationale behind the changes, expected outcomes and the expected timeline for change (C2). After these conversations, she made sure to communicate this information clearly to faculty through ongoing meetings and conversations (C5). Karen's ability to develop a cohesive message around Success Coaching and communicate key information to varying audiences at every level was fundamental in achieving her desired systemic change outcomes.

Sensemake and Learn — Focus on SL1, SL6, SL8

Throughout this Case Study, we have alluded to ways that Karen used research and data on effective advising practices to help leaders understand the need for a new approach to advising at Dallas College. In this way, Karen employed Sensemake and Learning Moves at the beginning of the project to help stakeholders understand the need for the Success Coaching model as well as throughout the implementation process to communicate challenges and successes. Knowing that leaders, faculty and staff were used to a different model of advising than the one she was proposing, Karen's careful use of research and data helped legitimize her plans and overcome resistance from others on campus (SL1). As the program got
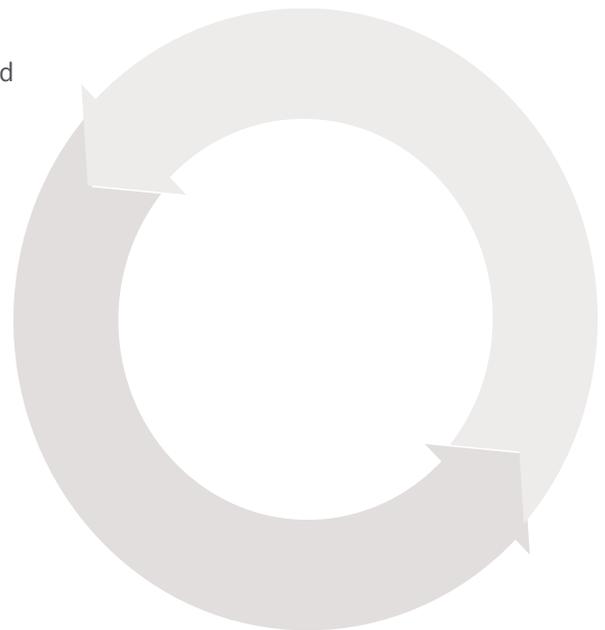
off the ground and implementation began, Karen and her team collected data on student visits to Success Coaches and were able to connect those visits with increases in persistence and retention (SL8). After a few semesters of collecting data, Karen presented these findings to the Board of Trustees:

> *"I brought students to the board meeting and success coaches, and they gave their narrative about the experience and how it has made a difference in their journeys, and it just was a really proud moment for me. This is three years of work where you [may] have people not 100% buying into what you're trying to do, but the people that were the decision-makers — I had their ear….You really have to believe in what you're trying to do, use data to help try to drive what you're trying to achieve, and be willing to course correct along the way."*

Karen's presentation to the Board and especially the data that she shared — both qualitative and quantitative — fostered continuous dialogue around the Success Coaching program and its early successes (SL6, SL8). Karen has been reviewing these results both with her team and with other campus stakeholders in order to celebrate their successes and motivate them to continue their work. She has also continuously emphasized that a change of this scale takes time. Regardless of the promising early data, she knows that this work is a "marathon not a sprint."

Focus On: Leadership Context

Leadership Context involves the set of internal and external influences that shape a leader's change landscape, influence the Moves made, and provide opportunities or challenges to consider when developing a change strategy. One of the most significant aspects of Leadership Context in this case was changes to **leadership and governance** at Dallas College, specifically, the merger of the seven Dallas Community College District campuses into the single multi-campus institution Dallas College. This merger influenced nearly all the Moves that Karen made for this project. Karen was able to make Moves in the Vision (V) and Strategy and Resources (S) categories that aligned the Success Coaching initiative with the overall vision and strategy for the merger/reorganization. For example, the vision for the merger had a lot to do with the Chancellor's goals of improving student outcomes and ultimately eradicating poverty in the Dallas/Fort Worth area. Karen connected the vision for the Success Coaching model with these goals, highlighting examples of how similar wraparound support models at other campuses had improved student success and led to better economic outcomes. Additionally, the fact that previously disparate institutions were coming together meant that **culture** was another major aspect of Leadership Context that Karen had to navigate. Each campus had a distinct culture and way of operating that did not necessarily align with the vision that Karen had for the Success Coaching model at the new Dallas College. In order

Leadership Context
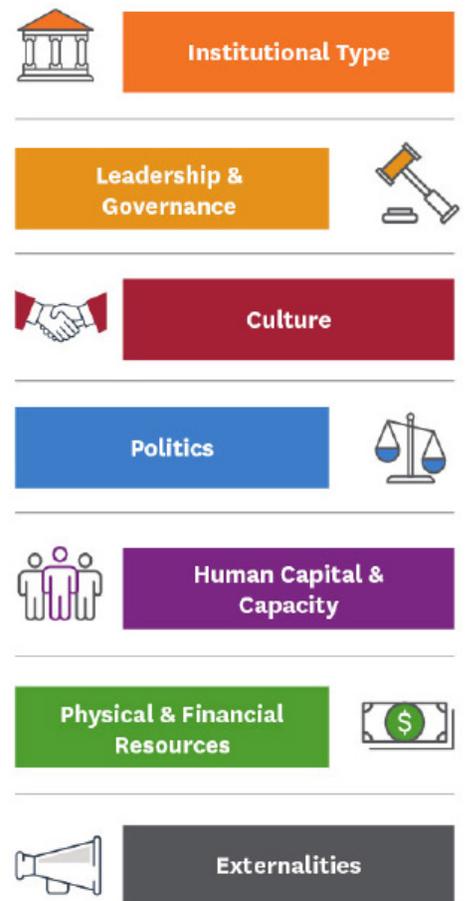
to navigate these different cultures and build buy-in among the faculty and staff across the College, Karen made Moves in the Navigating Politics (P) category, such as meeting with faculty at the different campuses to hear their feedback and holding town hall meetings to communicate progress.
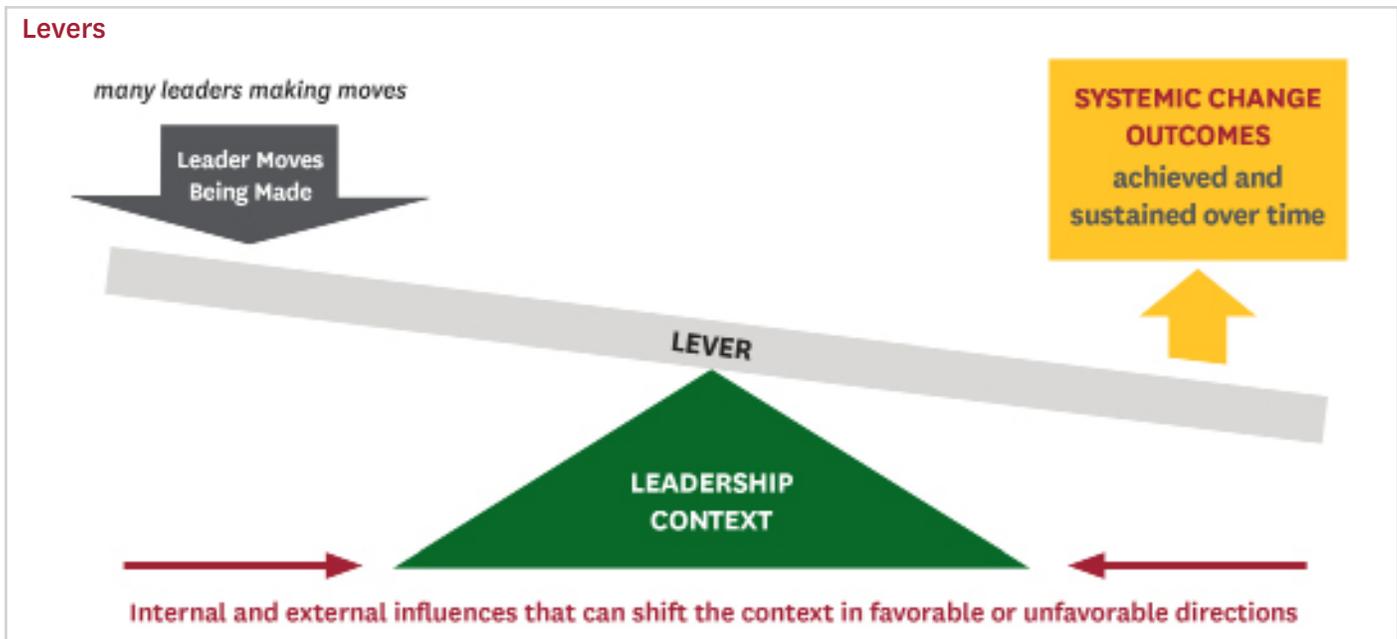
Levers

Focus On: Levers

When leaders engage in systemic change efforts, they are faced with many opportunities to amplify change. In the Toolkit, these opportunities are referred to as Levers. A Change Lever is an opportunity that can be leveraged or that can be "pulled upon" or manipulated to advance or accelerate the desired change. In this section, we describe the most prominent examples of Change Levers from Karen's project.

- **Lever Category 5: External partnerships and organizations, including regional, community, state, national, or international:** Karen leveraged Dallas College's affiliation with several national organizations to convince senior leaders and the Board of the efficacy of the Success Coaching model. Similar wraparound support advising models had been recommended by organizations such as NACADA, Achieving the Dream, Excelencia in Education, and the Aspen Institute. Karen used reports and documents from these organizations to ground her design for the Success Coaching model and connected back to these national organizations' recommendations in her presentations to colleagues and leaders.

- **Lever Category 7: Funding streams and sources:** Karen was able to leverage funding streams and sources in two different ways. First, she was able to take advantage of strategic funds available for the reorganization to support expanding the number of advisors at Dallas College and to raise their salaries. Second, Karen was able to point to changes to state higher education funding models that included performance- or outcome-based funding rather than funding based on student headcount to advocate for the new advising model. Her rationale (supported by evidence of success at other campuses) was that investing in the Success Coaching model would lead to higher rates of student persistence and transfer and ultimately more funding from the state under the new performance-based funding model.

Key Takeaways

In this case, Karen was able to transform advising at Dallas College within the larger context of the College's merger/reorganization. She identified an opportunity to leverage changes that were already happening at the College to amplify her efforts. Karen was able to expand the pool of advisors and raise salaries while also completely overhauling the hiring, onboarding/training and operations of advising through this new Success Coaching model. Her connection of the Success Coaching project with the larger vision and goals of the reorganization helped Karen gain buy-in from key stakeholders as well as additional financial support. While this change is still relatively new, Karen and her team are able to point to meaningful increases in student persistence rates as early indicators of the success of this systemic change project.

Reflections to Help You Ignite Change

This case study provides an example of how Karen used the Moves outlined in the Change Leadership Toolkit to enact systemic change at her institution. We offer the following questions to get you thinking more deeply about Leadership Context, Leader Moves, and Levers:

- ✔ How did Leadership Context shape Leader Moves in this case?
- ✔ How did this case study help you to better understand Levers and how they can help motivate or amplify change?
- ✔ What stands out for you in terms of significant Leader Moves that were made?
- ✔ What influence did the leader role and/or agency have on the project?
- ✔ What did you learn that you can apply to your campus change initiative? How you might use the Toolkit to advance change leadership on your campus?