



INSIDE STORY

How Community Colleges Can Use
INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS
to Advance Transformational Change

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START HERE. START NOW.

Who at your college knows the inside story? Who helps write it? The answers to these questions set the tone for addressing challenges, attaining goals, and doing the work that helps you better serve your students.

Effective internal communications is an investment that helps with every improvement effort, and it is essential for implementing transformational change. Yet many colleges, along with organizations and businesses, overlook this critical tool. They are not alone. Variants of the proverb “The cobbler’s children have no shoes” appear in multiple cultures and languages. It seems that we, collectively, have a rich history of neglecting those closest to us.

At community colleges, internal communications often is the cobbler’s barefoot children. For colleges that are not fully focused on internal communications, making sure everyone has shoes can seem overwhelming. Like all things worth doing, it requires a sustained commitment over time. It also offers both immediate and long-term benefits. When used to full advantage, internal communications helps colleges better execute everything they do. It is an often-untapped asset that hides in plain sight.

Communicating with those who work and learn at the college — developing the inside story together — is a critical part of advancing the college’s mission. Internal communications is the key to identifying good ideas and making them happen. It is a tool for involving people and inspiring action. And it is an essential part of transformational change efforts.

The following pages describe 10 keys to effective internal communications, along with examples from community colleges across the country and best practices. A companion piece, *[Inside Story Tools](#)*, offers a series of exercises that will help your college begin using the ideas presented here.

For maximum benefit, we recommend assembling a team to work through the *[Inside Story Tools](#)* together. The team should include people with a variety of roles at the college, including individuals responsible for internal communications and members of the internal audiences you most need to reach, such as full-time and part-time faculty and staff members.

“Internal communications is the foundation of our success. The plans we’ve developed and implemented have no impact if people don’t understand them and understand their role in them.”

— *Russell Lowery-Hart*
President
Amarillo College



WHAT IS INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS? WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Internal communications includes all efforts to engage internal audiences. In most cases, a community college's internal audiences are full-time and part-time faculty, full-time and part-time staff, administrators, and students. Some colleges may also add trustees or other stakeholders to this list.

Strong internal communications is an integral part of large-scale change efforts. Yet many colleges don't effectively engage internal audiences — faculty, staff, and students — early enough or often enough in these efforts. As a result, they miss opportunities to mobilize the individuals who can initiate and sustain genuine improvement. They don't hear the input, ideas, and concerns of most of their stakeholders. And often, the people who don't have a seat at the table are those who have been marginalized in the past.

Colleges that are successfully implementing large-scale change are intentional about engaging their internal audiences. Leaders at these colleges recognize that institution-wide change — which typically requires culture change — cannot happen without effective internal communications. In fact, many of these college leaders believe that these connected aspects of improvement are inseparable. This overlap is evident in some examples in this guide.

In addition to creating the conditions for transformational change, consistent, effective internal communications serves an institution well over time. Developing the right structure and processes — and helping all stakeholders become accustomed to using them — is an investment. Once the foundation is set, it supports every effort the college undertakes.

"Collaboration and communication have become part of our culture. It's not just committees or workshops or events, but really how we breathe as an institution," says Courtney Davis, assistant director for public relations, Prince George's Community College.¹

Internal Communications and Transformational Change

Transformational change involves large-scale, college-wide efforts to refocus a college's work and accomplish goals, such as improving the student experience, completion rates, or equity.

The history of transformational change work at community colleges includes Achieving the Dream, Completion by Design and the Loss/Momentum Framework, guided pathways, and the Frontier Set. Work related to these initiatives continues at many colleges, as do efforts related to scaling corequisite education, conducting serious conversations about equity, and addressing other issues.

Throughout this guide, college leaders explain how they use internal communications to engage stakeholders in transformational change efforts, redefine their institutional culture, and take other bold actions that make these transformational change efforts successful.

Large-scale change will always be hard, but it can become more comfortable, and internal communications is a key part of making that shift. "Sometimes you have to go slow to go fast. But it's easier to turn the jets on when you've already built a culture of change, which requires good internal communications. You have to build that muscle," says Gretchen Schmidt, senior fellow at the National Center for Inquiry and Improvement (NCII).

"We are used to big projects," says Adam Murka, vice president for external affairs and chief of staff to the president at **Sinclair College**. "We moved from semester conversion to two big levy campaigns, and then we had 13 tornadoes hit the Dayton area. So when COVID hit, it was another major institutional effort, and we knew how to approach it."

¹ To learn more about Prince George's Community College's approach to collaboration, see the Voices of Pathways film "Many Minds Working Together," available at <https://www.pathwaysresources.org/voices-of-pathways/>



BE AUTHENTIC

Internal communications advice often includes recommendations (or mandates) to *be transparent* and *build trust*. These are ongoing processes rather than end states to achieve, and they both begin with being authentic.

Thus, strong communicators keep these thoughts in mind:

- ✔ **Trust is something you must earn every day.** Every communications action has the potential to either earn or erode trust.
- ✔ **People need to be heard.** Listening — and then acting on what you hear — is the first step of earning trust. (You do not have to agree with what you hear, but you should respond to it. See Keys #5, #6, and #9.)
- ✔ **Be thoroughly honest.** Sometimes you may not be able to share information you have (because of timing, privacy, or other issues). Be candid about that reality and scrupulously honest about everything you communicate. If you have to communicate during a time of uncertainty — as all colleges had to do at the outset of the pandemic — assure audiences that you are sharing what you know and tell them what your decisions are based on.
- ✔ **Do not hide problems.** When possible, present problems with context and with a plan for addressing them. “I’ve seen presidents hide information because they think that bad things will happen if the faculty knows the true budget situation. Our president says, ‘Show the faculty our books and what we’re projecting for the next five years because they need to be part of our solution,’” says Kathleen Cleary, interim provost and senior vice president at **Sinclair College**. “And because he does that, I feel empowered to be really transparent about what’s going well and what keeps me up at night.”
- ✔ **Address rumors.** When people do not hear from you, they will fill in the blanks themselves. Stop the flow of rumors by assuring faculty and staff that when the time comes to make decisions, they will be in the room — and then make sure that happens. You also can invite people to ask you about rumors so you can address them, rather than letting them fester.
- ✔ **Be yourself.** Audiences won’t believe you if you appear to be acting a part.



TEN KEYS TO EFFECTIVE INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

KEY #1

Define What Success Looks Like

Effective internal communications at community colleges includes at least eight components, and the recommendations and examples in this guide touch on all of them.

Each of a college's communications actions may not address every one of these elements. However, colleges should make sure that all eight elements are part of their overall internal communications strategy.

Focusing on these elements of internal communications, along with always being authentic, can help you earn trust, engage audiences, and inspire action. At the same time, these eight components are not exhaustive. Some colleges may expand this list with additional factors that are important to their institution's culture or mission.

ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

To be effective — to help advance transformational change — an internal communications action should:

- 1. Support one or more goals.** There should be a clear reason for taking the action.
- 2. Engage audiences and inspire them to act.** The action should focus on what the college wants audiences to do with the information it shares.
- 3. Facilitate a conversation.** It should be part of a larger strategy and include a mechanism to gather feedback. It should use feedback loops so audiences know what happens next.
- 4. Go beyond the usual suspects.** It should draw in people who aren't typically involved so the college has the expertise of more people and makes sure all voices are heard. Pay close attention to groups that have been marginalized (nationally, regionally, and at your institution) in the past.
- 5. Use a variety of channels.** It should not rely solely on email. It should have content that is tailored to different channels and reach each audience through channels they already use.
- 6. Be organized, relevant, and timely and help audiences set priorities.** It should help audiences manage the flow of news and content they receive every day.

“Internal communications is the institutional skeleton. It has to engage the entire body so everyone feels connected.”

— *Michael Baston*
President
Rockland Community College



7. **Go beyond full-time employees.** It should engage part-time faculty and staff as much as their full-time colleagues.
8. **Include the student voice.** Students may not be the primary actors in change management, but their educational experiences matter most, and their voices should be elevated as part of these conversations.

Use Tool #1 from *Inside Story Tools* to assess your college's current internal communications and identify areas for improvement.



COMMUNICATIONS BEST PRACTICE

USE THE BEST MESSENGER

Using the best messenger makes it more likely that your message will inspire audiences to act. You might choose a particular messenger to reflect your audience's views, to show them a different perspective, or to provide credibility. For example:

- ✓ During times of crisis, such as the pandemic, speaking with a single voice — having someone in a position of authority provide

updates and explain processes — builds trust and minimizes confusion.

- ✓ Peer-to-peer communications can motivate participation and allay fears about change.
- ✓ Students can erode resistance to change by communicating what they value in their educational experience and in your college.



KEY #2

Use Internal Communications to Advance Institutional Goals

When you communicate with internal stakeholders about transformational change, what do you want to accomplish? Every college's answer to this question should begin in the same way: Our internal communications should help advance our college's mission and specific strategic goals so more students succeed at our college.

Internal communications does not drive the train. It acts in the service of institutional goals. Of course, your college should have an explicit internal communications plan. But each element of this plan — every communications goal, strategy, and action — should be tied to a specific college goal. Communications goals also should focus on actions, not awareness. (See page 7 to learn more.)

Conversely, strong communications cannot save the day if the college's goals and strategy are not clear. "When we have problems with awareness or understanding, it could be that there wasn't a deliberate internal communications plan. But just as often, the root problem is not having an underlying *what we are actually doing* plan that informs the communications plan," explains Tony Tagliavia, chief marketing officer at **Milwaukee Area Technical College**.

"Once you know what is actually happening, you can build the communications to support the work," he adds.

Colleges also should allow time for building internal communications to support their change efforts. "It's going to take time, and you have to be committed to doing things right for a while before you see changes," says Michelle Cantu-Wilson, director of teaching and learning initiatives and special projects at **San Jacinto College**.

"Internal communication is the key to keeping things on track and aligned with the bigger goal and vision."

— Amit Singh
President
Edmonds College



Use Tool #2 from [*Inside Story Tools*](#) to connect your institution's goals to your communications goals and strategies.



SET GOALS THAT FOCUS ON ACTIONS, NOT AWARENESS

Too often, colleges and other organizations set communications goals that focus on making audiences aware of a particular project or need. But making audiences aware of information does not change anything unless those audiences act on what they've learned. For example, colleges do not promote registration deadlines simply to make students aware of them. Their goal is to inspire students to register for classes. It does

not matter if 100 percent of students are aware of the deadline if students don't then register.

As you set your internal communications goals, always focus on the actions you want your audience to take. The most useful communications goals are specific, action oriented, and measurable. See the examples below.

Example of communications goal	Is it specific?	Is it action oriented?	Is it measurable?
Make faculty members aware of professional development opportunities.	X	X	X
Make faculty members aware of professional development related to new opportunities to advise students.	✓	X	X
Encourage faculty members to participate in new opportunities to advise students, beginning with attending the related professional development.	✓	✓	X
Inspire five new faculty members in each department to participate in new opportunities to advise students, beginning with attending the related professional development.	✓	✓	✓



KEY #3

Start With Why

“Explaining why decisions are being made is really important,” says Andy Dorsey, president, **Front Range Community College**. “Setting a purpose and a vision gives people a sense of comfort that there is a direction, that the college is moving purposefully, not randomly.”

Institution-wide change often requires changing the college’s culture. Whatever that shift is — becoming more student-centered or more data-centered, for example — this type of change begins with defining the college’s values and making sure these values are deeply ingrained at all levels of the college. When colleges lay this groundwork, they create the conditions for people to collaborate effectively and do their best work.

About 20 years ago, **Valencia College** chose to organize around learning rather than enrollment. “We asked what our college would be like — and how our students would perform — if we made learning the center of everything,” says Sandy Shugart, the college’s now-retired president.

Internal communications was essential for this transformational change. Valencia’s faculty and staff had to reframe most of their work. “People come to the conversation thinking they have a common vocabulary and common framework, but they usually don’t,” Shugart adds. So he started having frequent Campus Conversations, using data and discussion to surface the big ideas around which Valencia would organize its work — and to create a shared purpose and culture.

“If you can get deep agreement around the big ideas, they become the Why for all of the little ideas,” Shugart explains. “And if you have deep agreement around the Why, you can tolerate a lot of different opinions, experimentation and failure, and learning from success without derailing the work.”

Today, the college continues to use “Valencia’s Big Ideas” as the framework for its strategic planning and internal communications. (The Big Ideas include “Start right.” and “College is what the students experience, period.”)

Colleges communicate, instill, and reinforce their values in ways large and small. For example:

 **As part of gatherings.** “I highlight the student voice whenever I can. Our students are the Why, and they explain it better than we do,” says Russell Lowery-Hart, president of **Amarillo College**. “For example, a student at an all-employee gathering described how she was afraid to get out of her car when she arrived on campus because she didn’t know where to go. Someone saw her and walked her to where she needed to be. Hearing her tell that story reinforced the Why and made it so strong.” (For more examples, see “Listen to Students,” page 25.)

“If you are in agreement about the big ideas, the question changes from ‘Are you with me or against me?’ to ‘Does this new idea fulfill what we’ve already agreed to? Does it align with our goals?’”

— *Sandy Shugart*
Retired President
Valencia College



During the hiring process. “At San Jac, from the time you are hired, you get a little card that explains our value system,” says Crystal Tewes, education professor, at **San Jacinto College**. “And actually, when you have an interview, you better know about the value system, because they’re going to ask you. They’re going to specifically say, ‘On our website, these are our values. Can you give me an example of how you work within this value system?’”

As part of trainings. Front Range College used 100 backpacks to engage faculty at an in-service gathering of more than 700 people. When participants arrived, 100 random people were given a backpack, and at a certain point in the training, everyone with a backpack was asked to go to the front of the room. “We had looked at outcomes for 100 students, and inside each backpack was a note that provided a scenario for one of those students,” explains Jean Runyon, a Front Range campus vice president. “Everyone opened their backpacks. If the card said, ‘You graduated,’ they left. We heard about different scenarios, and at the end of the process, we saw all of the individuals who represented students who had stopped out or dropped out. We didn’t know what happened to them. And that helped to create that compelling Why, why we should pursue transformational change.”

During times of change. When values are deeply ingrained, they provide context for change. When **San Jacinto College** was initially discussing guided pathways, some faculty members were resistant even though there was deep agreement about the importance of student success. “Sometimes attitudes are in place because people don’t understand the issues,” says Laurel Williamson, the college’s deputy chancellor and president. “One of the wake-up calls for our faculty was learning that financial aid is not infinite. They had this idea that a student on financial aid just got this aid for the rest of their life. I said, ‘If they take 90 hours here, they’ve exhausted their financial aid, and they’re never going to get their bachelor’s degree because they don’t have any more money.’ And they reacted with, ‘Oh my god.’”

As part of day-to-day work. At **Sinclair College**, whenever a team launches a new project or initiative, they start with a set of principles. The college’s COVID-19 crisis management effort has 11 [guiding principles](https://www.sinclair.edu/services/conduct-safety/public-safety/coronavirus/guiding-principles/).² “We’ll start many of our meetings with revisiting our principles,” says Steve Johnson, the college’s president. “The principles provide the framework for our work so we can always remember what we are doing and why. We also return to them to make sure we did what we planned to do.”

Use Tool #3 from *Inside Story Tools* to create a plan for your college’s Why, beginning with an assessment of whether your college needs to better define — or better engage audiences with — its Why.



² <https://www.sinclair.edu/services/conduct-safety/public-safety/coronavirus/guiding-principles/>



LEAD FROM THE TOP

While effective internal communications depends on including stakeholders in the decision-making process, the priorities and tone of the institution come from the top. Strong leaders communicate the college's values, its commitment to various issues, and its focus on building the relationships essential for success.

- ✔ “We always talk about how our students need relationships, but your employees do, too,” says Cara Crowley, vice president of strategic initiatives at **Amarillo College**. “We know you can’t stand behind a podium and teach anymore. You also can’t be a president standing behind a podium to lead anymore.”
- ✔ **Milwaukee Area Technical College** has a quarterly leadership meeting, and in that meeting, Vicki Martin, the college’s president, typically highlights the institution’s current priorities. “Since we started implementing guided pathways, there hasn’t been a major event or quarterly meeting when she hasn’t talked about pathways,” says Tony Tagliavia, the college’s chief marketing officer. “Having the president talk about it all the time reinforces the idea that this is not going away.”³
- ✔ “Dr. Faulkner [president of **Volunteer State Community College** until August 2021] has a balanced leadership style,” explains Tim Amyx, the college’s director of admissions and college registrar. “He is not afraid to be personally involved in something, but he doesn’t feel the need to be constantly involved. And he doesn’t come in and say, ‘This is the way it is.’ He says, ‘I’ve been thinking about this. What do y’all think?’ At the same time, he’s perfectly fine making a decision and standing by it.”
- ✔ “The leadership team has to be on the same page and communicating consistently for the message to stick,” says Andy Dorsey, president, **Front Range Community College**.
- ✔ “Dr. Williamson [**San Jacinto College’s** deputy chancellor and president] spoke at a session that was introducing our Equity Chats. She spoke from the heart, and that really set the stage. It was one of the key things at the beginning,” says Rebecca Goosen, the college’s associate vice chancellor for student success transitions. (See page 33 for more about San Jacinto’s Equity Chats.)

³ To learn more about how Milwaukee Area Technical College implemented guided pathways, see the Voices of Pathways film “Are We Student Ready?” available at <https://www.pathwaysresources.org/voices-of-pathways/>



KEY #4

Create a Structure

At many colleges, internal communications can be like a game of telephone, with the message continuously changing as it moves from person to person. Colleges with coherent internal communications have clear, established structures for sharing information with internal stakeholders.

A CLEAR FLOW FOR CONTENT

When colleges don't have a clear communications structure, stakeholders get overwhelmed with content, can't tell what is most important, and often stop paying attention to everything.

For example, in early 2018, the communications team at **Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC)** found that a lot of critical information was sent in one-off emails. The volume of emails was significant and uneven. "There might have been six important messages in one day and then nothing for a week and a half," recalls Tony Tagliavia, the college's chief marketing officer.

To address this issue, his team developed a cadence — a standard flow of information — for email communications. With the cadence, they could be intentional about the volume and timing of internal communications. Other colleges use a similar approach and call it a communications cascade. MATC's cadence has four critical components:

-  **Consistent communications.** The communications team sends a weekly email, the *Week Ahead*, every Monday at 10:30 a.m. The team also manages a submission system so departments can add information to the *Week Ahead*. And from time to time, the college also sends separate emails from the Office of the President. Employees across the college know that these are the primary vehicles for sharing critical news.
-  **Well-prepared team leaders.** The college shares critical information with leaders first and makes sure they are equipped to answer questions from their team members. "We want to make sure managers weren't put in a position of saying, 'Well, I'm seeing this for the first time, just like you,' when they get questions about information in the all-employee email," Tagliavia explains.
-  **Advance notice to those most affected.** "We don't want someone at the college to say to a colleague, 'Wow, I saw those big changes in your area,' just because that person read their email first," says Tagliavia. So when there are changes, such as a new position, the people affected most hear about it first, then all leaders hear about it, and then it is announced to all employees. This cadence was critical when MATC was restructuring and developing guided pathways, and it continues to be helpful today.
-  **Targeted information in standalone messages.** The college continues to use standalone emails for certain types of information, such as alerts from the public safety department. They also have targeted lists for people working on specific initiatives or people with particular interests. For example, if there is news related to parking on campus, only people who drive to work receive a detailed email. For everyone else, a mention in the *Week Ahead*, along with a link for more information, suffices.

"Being consistent across departments and across our five campuses is the only way to avoid the game of telephone, where everything gets distorted."

— *Laurel Williamson*
Deputy Chancellor and
President, San Jacinto College



GOING BEYOND EMAIL

Of course, email is just one channel for communications. Colleges need a range of vehicles to engage audiences and to get feedback (see Keys #5 and #6 to learn more). And specifically, colleges must create opportunities for their presidents and other leaders to speak directly to faculty, staff, and students — and for all of these stakeholders to hear from one another. These types of interactions are essential for advancing transformational change.

Many colleges hold events that bring all employees together, such as College Hours, town hall meetings, and fireside chats. They also create opportunities for smaller gatherings, often billed as “Coffee and Conversation” or “Pizza with the President” (for students). Colleges should aim to have a combination of large and small events, along with formal and informal events. All of these vehicles give faculty and staff access to top leadership.

Although some colleges may use social media to communicate with students more than with faculty and staff, learn how your faculty and staff are most comfortable communicating. If they are using social media or one of the ever-growing array of communications platforms, tap into those. Also consider creating short videos (30 seconds to a minute) that can be sent through existing channels.

Rockland Community College found the right vehicles for its internal communications during the pandemic. Once the college started using Zoom, the communications team realized it could essentially serve as their broadcasting system. The college began producing shows with music and other features to make them more engaging and professional. The shows include:

- 🗨️ “Our Voices,” which highlights student, faculty, or staff voices to talk about a topical issue. (See “Elevating Voices to Change Perspectives,” page 18.)
- 🗨️ “Coffee and Conversations,” during which the college’s president, Michael Baston, interviews one person, or a small group of people, at the college about an important topic. They have an in-depth look at a key issue in real time.
- 🗨️ “Book Talk,” which focuses on a book, including a discussion with the author.
- 🗨️ “Teaching Inclusively & Equitably,” which looks at classroom practices related to equity.

In addition, the college has:

- 🗨️ The Street Team, a team of students who are hired to be an internal marketing team and work with the college’s communications team. They are a key part of the college’s social media presence, which is targeted to students more than faculty and staff. The Street Team also creates videos, conducts student surveys, and pushes out information in ways that interest students.
- 🗨️ Cascading communications, through which vice presidents or area division leaders communicate information to their employees, which is similar to MATC’s cadence.
- 🗨️ *The Buzz*, an employee e-newsletter that is produced a few times a year and highlights topics, events, and news important to the college’s employees.

Use Tool #4 from [*Inside Story Tools*](#) to assess your college’s current internal communications and plan next steps for developing an internal communications structure or improving/expanding the one you have.



In 2013, Valencia College revamped its internal communications with a comprehensive system that has become an indispensable tool throughout the institution.

A Coherent Structure

Almost every element of the college’s comprehensive internal communications structure has a name that is connected to oranges. (Valencia is a type of orange.)

All internal communications live on “The Grove.” This site is accessible to all audiences, and it is the repository for all content. Then the college sends audience-specific newsletters that provide short blurbs and invite people to click through to the full articles on The Grove.

For example, every Tuesday, every employee — every person who receives a paycheck — receives *The Juice*, which has news and updates. *Supervisor Segments* is a monthly newsletter designed to help supervisors do their jobs more effectively. And each regional leader has their own newsletter (*Campus Concentrates*) where they feature news unique to their location.

One regular publication — *Faculty Insight* — while not orange themed, is the vehicle for faculty governance communications, faculty development opportunities, classroom management tips, and information related to pedagogy.

“It’s all housed in The Grove so everyone can see everything. But each person gets the most pertinent information for them delivered right to their email,” explains Amy Bosley, Valencia’s vice president of organizational development and human resources.

The Human Factor and Feedback

Every item the communications team produces has a person’s name attached to it so it’s clear that humans are behind the information. In addition, two-way communication is built into every article with opportunities for comments and a link to share them on social media.

“It’s about creating space for dialogue and conversation,” Bosley says. “The primary author of the article gets copied on all the comments, and they are expected to respond within half a day.”

The team also uses what they call a “cascade of communications” for critical information. “We get it to the supervisors first and say, ‘Chat with your team. It’s going to come out tomorrow, but we want you to have a heads up this is coming,’” Bosley explains. “Through this process, we are building trust among the supervisor and the employee, and we’re building credibility for the institutional messages.”

The Hot Doughnuts

These structures are well established now, but when they were launched, most people were not reading the communications. The newsletters had 20 percent open rates. The college solved this problem by making The Grove and its newsletters the only place to find critical information — the place with content that people would wait in line to get. In the words of now-retired Valencia President Sandy Shugart, “Those publications had to have the hot doughnuts.”

Making this change required a strong commitment from senior leadership. “The senior team agreed to use this channel and nothing else to communicate important college information, and it took a couple of years to see that deep change,” Bosley explains.

“Twice a year, we presented the readership statistics for the college and for individual divisions — statistics that were not good — to our senior leadership team,” Bosley adds. “It took sharing this unsuccessful data to help build the commitment from the leaders. They had to help make reading this content an expectation for their teams.”

Now it is common to hear people say, “I read that in The Grove,” or, “That was in *The Juice* last week.” But getting to this point took time and a commitment from leadership to use the channels exclusively.

“The communication load on all of us is just so intense,” Bosley adds. “But having a strong system of internal communications — and an expectation for being informed — helps us improve organizational learning and consistency. We have much less rumor and speculation.” Bosley still presents readership statistics to senior leadership at least once a year.

KEY #5

Learn to Love Feedback

Communications for transformational change focuses on inspiring audiences to act. And audiences rarely act just because they receive an email or read a newsletter blurb. Audiences act when they are invested in an outcome, and audiences must be engaged to become invested.

Colleges that excel at engaging audiences focus less on pushing information out and more on listening. While you may have ideas about what you want audiences to do, you'll have better results if you understand and incorporate their perspectives. It's also important to include the full range of faculty and staff — full-time and part-time, but also across all areas of the institution, such as the business office, the physical plant, food service, and the bookstore.

Asking for and using feedback is the first step to better engaging your audiences. (Subsequent Keys address other essential aspects of engagement.) To improve your college's approach to feedback, provide access to your president and senior leaders, create feedback loops, and evaluate your internal communications.

PROVIDE ACCESS TO THE PRESIDENT AND SENIOR LEADERS

At colleges that are successful with transformational change, presidents invite everyone on campus to be open and honest with them. Unfortunately, this is not the case at every institution. "Some presidents may as well have a neon sign emblazoned on their forehead that says, 'No bad news welcome here,'" says Kay McClenney, senior advisor to the president & CEO, American Association of Community Colleges.

College presidents who understand the value of feedback make faculty, staff, and students know that their input is welcome.

- 🗨️ "We are creating a President's Advisory Council that includes one representative from every department on campus," says George Pimentel, president of **Jackson State Community College**. "At least once a month, we will have breakfast together, and there will be no agenda. They can say everything, from asking why the water faucet in room X is broken to telling me they want to know why I took a particular action."
- 🗨️ "Dr. Hellyer [chancellor of **San Jacinto College**] emailed all 1,400 employees and said, 'We are an antiracist college. If you have had experiences with racism in the community or on our college campuses, please email me back and let me know.' And people did," says Michelle Cantu-Wilson, director of teaching and learning initiatives and special projects. (See page 33 to learn more about San Jacinto's Equity Chats.)

"Don't worry about communicating through speech. Communicate by listening and use what you hear."

— Kathleen Cleary
Senior Vice President and
Interim Provost, Sinclair College



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- 🗨️ Amit Singh, president of **Edmonds College**, set up a dedicated email address for sending suggestions directly to him. “Creating avenues for people to communicate with him directly has helped communication on our campus tremendously,” says Marisa Pierce, the college’s director of marketing and public information.
 - 🗨️ When **Milwaukee Area Technical College** was introducing guided pathways, the college’s president, Vicki Martin, held listening sessions at every campus, where she was joined by the guided pathways steering committee. “We always brought it back to, ‘We will listen to what you are saying and incorporate it into what we are doing,’” recalls Christine Manion, vice president, institutional effectiveness. “We brought that feedback to every steering committee meeting, and we kept track of what we heard so we could make sure we were addressing it. And then we would get back to the people who provided the input.”
 - 🗨️ Russell Lowery-Hart, president of **Amarillo College**, gives his cell phone number to every employee and every student. “I get a surprising amount of texts from both students and employees,” he says. “Often it’s real-time feedback while I’m in a town hall. Once someone texted, ‘I didn’t understand what you just said, and there probably are others who also are confused. Please go back and explain it.’ So I did.” (Lowery-Hart does turn his phone off after 7:00 p.m.)

CREATE FEEDBACK LOOPS

“People need to have evidence that you aren’t just taking their feedback, printing it out, and putting it in a folder,” says Sadie Newsome, media director, **Amarillo College**. “They need to know it is a true call for response. So there has to be follow up.”

In addition, “Feedback has to be built into the water, into the system,” says Gretchen Schmidt, senior fellow at the National Center for Inquiry and Improvement (NCII). “For feedback to be meaningful, it has to close the loop by showing progress, decisions, and impacts.”

A feedback loop is a continuous communication process. For example, a college can:

- 🗨️ Ask for input from faculty, staff, and students.
- 🗨️ Gather and organize the input.
- 🗨️ Follow up by sharing what they heard and explaining how they will act on it.
- 🗨️ As the issue moves forward, ask for input again. Often, it is helpful to recap the previous round of input and response when you ask for new feedback.

Colleges can use this process for everything from department meetings to convenings, focus groups, and surveys. The key is to get in the habit of asking for feedback and following up on what you hear.

For example, Amit Singh, president of **Edmonds College**, established systems to ensure that important feedback does not fall through the cracks. At meetings of the President’s Leadership Team, for example, it’s common to put a 15-minute placeholder in the agenda for a future meeting so the team can revisit a topic. That approach also gets used for larger meetings and for reminders to follow up with people who are not in the room.

“When people bring concerns to leadership, we always follow up,” explains Danielle Carnes, vice president of innovation and strategic initiatives at Edmonds. “Too often, people get busy and move on to the next thing, and they forget to go back and close the loop for the people who originally gave them input. Dr. Singh will not let something fall off the radar until it is completed.”

It’s important to note that establishing feedback loops does not mean implementing every idea that is suggested. The key is to close the loop so people know their concerns were heard and you have a plan for addressing them. Your solution may be a version of what they suggested or something completely different. Your next step may be to wrap it into a separate planning process. Or you may have to explain that the issue cannot change in the immediate term.

“There is a culture here that when you give us feedback, we are going to use it,” says Kathleen Cleary, senior vice president and interim provost, **Sinclair College**. “Sometimes the answer is, ‘We heard what you said, and we looked into it, and right now there is nothing more we can do about it because of X.’ And people say, ‘Okay, at least you heard me and explained what you are doing.’”

The best way to ensure this level of follow-up is to plan for it:

- 🗨️ Make someone responsible for tracking key issues.
- 🗨️ Allow time at meetings to follow up on earlier conversations and outstanding issues.
- 🗨️ Set email or calendar reminders so if an issue is not resolved by a certain date, there will be a reminder to return to it.
- 🗨️ Whenever you set up a system to gather input, include a plan to go back to those who provide input. It often is most effective to use the same vehicle for soliciting input and circling back. For example, if you invite people to respond to a survey through a campus-wide publication or at a particular meeting, use the same publication or venue to describe what you heard and how you are acting on the information.

EVALUATE YOUR INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

There is one certain way to discover if your internal communications efforts are effective: Ask the people you are trying to reach. For example, tracking readership of internal publications gives detailed information about whether communications vehicles are getting traction and which types of articles are most read. Some colleges get more detailed information through surveys and audits. Internal communications also can be evaluated as part of a campus climate survey.

For example, **Edmonds College** conducted an internal communications audit and a survey of faculty and staff. One finding was that everyone was overwhelmed with all of the communications they were getting, and the college needed to help people prioritize information.

“Our college has grown a lot, and we now have 14,000 students and close to 1,400 employees,” Carnes says. “We’re way too big to be operating as if we were a small college where everybody can email the entire campus, and anybody can reply all to the entire campus.”

Edmonds uses Google for its email, so the internal communications team began setting up Google Groups. They also realized that just setting up groups was not enough; they needed to develop communications parameters to keep the information flowing without overwhelming recipients. The team developed email best practices that address a range of issues, including how to make a message useful; who is authorized to send mail to various audiences; and opt-in/out capabilities and frequencies for each campus communication. The team created a similar best-practices document for social media.

Use Tool #5 from [*Inside Story Tools*](#) to assess how well your college is listening to internal audiences and plan next steps related to gathering and responding to feedback.

ROCKLAND COMMUNITY COLLEGE | Elevating Voices to Change Perspectives



When Rockland Community College wanted to dive deeply into equity issues, the team activated various elements of its communications structure (described on page 12) — and grounded it all in listening to students.

“We started with an Our Voices town hall with Black students, past and present,” recalls Michael Baston, the college’s president. “We asked them to talk about what Black Lives Matter means to them. We hosted it on Facebook Live for 90 minutes so anyone could watch it and hear our students’ voices.” Baston moderated the discussion, showing his commitment to the issue, but he did not offer any opinions.

“What I got back from the faculty and staff was beautiful,” Baston continues. “Faculty members said things like, ‘I didn’t realize that my English class offerings and assignments are not as diverse as they could be,’ and ‘I didn’t realize that in our drama programs, we never really focused on diversifying the plays we present on campus.’”

As a next step, the college hosted a Teaching Inclusively and Equitably session so faculty could hear from their peers about how they are addressing equity issues in their classrooms.

“Then we did an Our Voices with employee voices so Black faculty and staff could share their experiences, both at the college and in life,” Baston adds. “So now everyone is hearing from colleagues and having conversations that we don’t typically have.”

The college then hosted Our Voices events with a variety of voices — including Latinx and LGBTQ+ students and employees — to elevate perspectives on other issues. The college continues to use this platform to make it clear that everyone has a voice.



KEY #6

Stop Seeking Buy-In; Start Involving People in Decision-Making

When leaders seek buy-in, they are looking for ways to get agreement on decisions they have already made. When leaders involve stakeholders in decision-making, they bring others into the planning process.

“Communications has to be bottom up as well as top down,” says Charles Cook, provost and executive vice chancellor for academic affairs at **Austin Community College District** until his retirement in August 2021.⁴ When college leaders use this approach, they hear new ideas, learn about potential problems, and allow others to develop ownership for the changes the institution is making.

“As the president, you have a vision, and then you invite people to be part of it,” says Amit Singh, president, **Edmonds College**. “You don’t have all of the answers, but you have the bigger goal in mind.”

Bringing stakeholders into decision-making is the communications part of transformational change. “We’re not saying, ‘Here are the answers from on high.’ We are saying, ‘You have to do the work so you should get some say in how the work is done,’” says Michael Baston, president of **Rockland Community College**. “It’s my responsibility to say what work we should do, but you should tell me if it can be accomplished in the way I envision it, or if there a different way that would be more appropriate.”

Baston notes that approaching change in this way led to unexpected and very positive outcomes. “People came up with new ideas, and they agreed to things I never would have thought they would do,” he says. “They got us further than I ever thought we could go because we gave them the power to be creative.”

As part of a restructuring, Rockland went from 30 department chairs to 15 or 20 program directors. Based on suggestions from faculty, in the new structure, the program directors have differentiated release time. Instead of having a standard for all departments, release time is based on each program’s needs.

“I have never met a college president leading guided pathways reform who did not, significantly into the process, look up and say, ‘We haven’t done nearly a good enough job engaging people broadly in this effort.’”

— *Kay McClenney*
Senior Advisor to the President
& CEO, American Association
of Community Colleges



⁴ To learn how Austin Community College involved faculty in developing math pathways, see the Voices of Pathways film “Getting Along With Math,” available at <https://www.pathwaysresources.org/voices-of-pathways/>

“We reallocated money by tackling our release time system, and we used those funds to get advisors for the students,” Baston explains. “I would never have come up with that. Faculty’s release time reapportionment recommendations enabled us to shift the savings to advisement. And the advisors we hired were not even in academic affairs. They were in student affairs to support the academic mission.”

CREATING NEW OPPORTUNITIES

Often, colleges introduce new events or activities to engage faculty in decision-making. Many colleges have hosted book groups, held lunchtime conversations, and used all-faculty gatherings in creative ways. Below are examples of other opportunities colleges have created for interaction and collaboration.

Amarillo College offers two examples:

- 🗨️ Twice a year, the college holds General Assembly, a day-long retreat that includes every employee (faculty and staff). They look at data, listen to students speak, and engage in an innovation challenge. “General Assembly connects people across campuses, divisions, and types of work,” says Russell Lowery-Hart, the college’s president. “The relationships that come out of it drive other work on campus. And it flattens the hierarchy because it shows that everyone can be involved in innovation.”
- 🗨️ Lowery-Hart also created the President’s Leadership Institute (PLI), which provides training on higher education leadership, budgets, and problem solving. The PLI is primarily for middle managers, and no one at the dean level or above is invited. In addition to faculty members and staff members with student-facing roles, past participants have included a custodian and the person in charge of the mail room.

Each year, the roughly 30 participants meet once a month, learn about higher education, and work together to solve a problem Lowey-Hart provides. The process creates a cohort of people who do not typically work together, and it creates ambassadors for the president’s vision of success. To date, about 150 of the college’s 600 full-time employees, as well as some part-time employees, have been part of the PLI. “It’s created this web of people across the college that truly understand the mechanisms behind higher ed,” says Cara Crowley, Amarillo’s vice president of strategic initiatives.

Many other colleges have developed innovative ways to foster collaboration:

- 🗨️ At **San Jacinto College**, most courses are structured to meet Monday through Thursday, a scheduling approach that makes it easier for students to juggle school and work. The schedule also creates time and space for in-depth professional development and/or collaborative work, and employees are required to be available on Fridays for these sessions. The college uses these days — called “Framework Fridays” because they are used to frame all of the college’s top priorities — to address issues related to strategic goals, hold work group meetings, and address issues that arose during the week. The time was especially valuable at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 🗨️ **Valencia College** convenes high-bandwidth meetings. “Prior to COVID, when we had big decisions to make, we would bring together 160 or 170 people in a gym on one of our campuses,” explains Sandy Shugart, the college’s now-retired president. “Everyone would meet in small groups of seven with facilitators. And we’d spend the morning alternating between small groups, large group, small groups, large group until we had clarity about the decision we’re making. And when we had clarity, the meeting would be over. There would be hundreds of handprints on those decisions.”

 **Rockland Community College** makes sure that decision-making teams include people who have obligations based on contracts or elected office. That way, they can be certain that decisions will not violate the contracts, bylaws, or constitutions of discrete units. “When we did guided pathways, the co-chairs were the president of the faculty senate and the vice president of the staff union,” says Michael Baston, the college’s president. “I didn’t have issues with the union because the co-chairs were the ones helping to gather the input of the people they represent. We set up the process so it would be successful.”

Use Tool #6 from *Inside Story Tools* to identify new ways your college can commit to engaging faculty and staff.

It is worth noting that college leaders who excel at engaging faculty and staff often have adopted a management or change management system, such as Design Thinking, ADKAR, John Kotter’s Eight Steps, or Franklin Covey’s 4DX. This approach likely is beneficial because whatever system a college uses, it gives everyone a framework to act collectively and intentionally — to set goals, advance thinking, and effect change. And once a college adopts such a structure, its teams tend to use it for everything.



COMMUNICATIONS BEST PRACTICE

BE INTENTIONAL

For engagement efforts and other outreach, colleges must make the most of every hour and every dollar devoted to internal communications. And that means planning carefully and being intentional about every action they take — or decide not to take.

For example, too often, colleges default to “what we’ve always done” rather than assessing whether their previous actions led to the results they wanted. This default position for internal communications is problematic in and of itself. It is made worse by the fact that colleges, like most organizations, are much more likely to start new activities than to stop existing ones.

“It is not in the culture of most colleges to stick with problems over time,” notes Rob Johnstone, founder and president, National Center for Inquiry and Improvement (NCII). “There is wisdom in focusing on a smaller set of problems and then moving to the next set of problems.” In the same way, it can make sense for colleges to narrow their internal communications focus and aim for truly solving a handful of challenges rather than trying to address dozens of problems at once.

Other examples of being intentional about internal communications include the following.

- ✓ Whenever **Front Range Community College** starts a major project, it drafts a project charter that identifies the key stakeholders,

the scope, and the time frame. The charter includes a communications section that defines who should be engaged in the work as well as an equity section.

- ✓ At **Edmonds College**, leadership meetings include time to discuss the decisions that were made and the essential points that should be shared with key audiences. Taking the time for those conversations ensures that everyone is on the same page and messaging will be consistent. “We want to make sure we are all aligned when we make a decision,” says the college’s president, Amit Singh. “Some people may not agree, but in the end that doesn’t matter. Once we decide on the message, that is the message.”
- ✓ During the pandemic, **Rockland Community College** decided to focus on three big areas: the health and safety of students and employees, learning continuity, and the fiscal stability of the institution. “Our agenda is limited,” explains Michael Baston, the college’s president. “We don’t have 20 conversations. Everything we talk about fits into one of the three buckets.”

Instead of defaulting to familiar communications activities, assess whether these previous actions led to the results you wanted. (See page 17 for examples of evaluating internal communications.)

MILWAUKEE AREA TECHNICAL COLLEGE | Bringing New People to a Redesigned Table



Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC) spent months laying the groundwork that inspired faculty and staff to participate in implementing guided pathways. As a result of the college's go-slow-to-go-fast approach, more than 150 people volunteered to be on six pathways committees.

"We had to search our directory for the names of some people who volunteered," recalls Christine Manion, MATC's vice president, institutional effectiveness. MATC's pathways team also included familiar names in unexpected roles. The college's director of public safety chaired one of the pathways committees.

Manion credits this success with the college's integration of change management and communications. MATC President Vicki Martin introduced guided pathways as a means of transformational change and consistently made it clear that pathways was a top priority for the college. Then, to engage faculty and staff, the college:

- 🗨️ Widely shared data that illustrated the need for change. "Eleven out of 100" was our rallying cry," Manion says. "We used the three-year graduation rate among all students who applied because even if they ended up attending another college, at one point, they were interested in us, and we didn't even get them through our front door."
- 🗨️ Hosted book groups on all four campuses to read and discuss *Redesigning America's Community Colleges*. (The book, by Thomas R. Bailey, Shanna Smith Jagers, and Davis Jenkins, explains and makes a powerful case for guided pathways.)
- 🗨️ Created a board game that put players in the positions that MATC students face. A player might move forward five spaces because the college provided emergency aid when they lost their job — or they might end up dropping out for a semester because their car broke down.
- 🗨️ Hosted conversations in which faculty and staff explained how it would feel to face the challenges their students face.
- 🗨️ Held listening sessions facilitated by Dr. Martin with guided pathways steering committee members fielding the questions.

COMMUNICATING ABOUT REORGANIZATION

As part of its pathways work, MATC conducted a reorganization that affected all aspects of the college, and internal communications was critical for presenting this change and addressing concerns about it. "We had five schools, but we re-orged them into eight pathways, and everything moved to a student-centric model," Manion explains. "And when that happened, jobs went away, and people had to reapply for different jobs."

Faculty and staff were told, "The bus is moving. We want you to have a seat on the bus, but your old seat might be gone. So if you want to join us, you'll have to take a different seat."

Manion continues, "It was tough. We were dissolving departments and merging departments." She believes this reorganization was central to the guided pathways work, as was Dr. Martin's transparency and resolve. "Dr. Martin would say, 'We have some of the best people in the business working very hard. And our student success rates don't show that, which means our system must be the part that is broken.'"

Another key element was embracing people who were not initially enthusiastic about the work. "When people argued loudly and said, 'Well, this is why it's not going to work,' we often put them on a committee. That gave us a chance to address concerns or prepare ourselves for pushback," Manion says.

"But we largely focused on people who said, 'I see what you want to do, but I don't know if we can do this,'" Manion explains. "If they could see the vision, we thought we could give them the tools and the excitement. We knew that was the group that could bring us along."

KEY #7

Be Both Personal and Impersonal

Sharing data should be part of every internal communications effort. Data is essential for understanding the college's current context and setting goals for the future. Data also is impersonal. Accurate data simply provides facts.

While colleges must harness the power of data, numbers alone cannot tell the entire story. Internal communication also must put faces to the facts and drive action through connections. Thus internal communications is most effective when it merges the personal (stories and connections) and impersonal (data and facts).

STORYTELLING SETS THE STAGE FOR DATA

Many other Keys in this guide focus various aspects of building connections. The *personal* aspect of this Key, therefore, focuses on storytelling. In the past, colleges might have had a few anecdotes on hand for various audiences. Storytelling is a more intentional way of approaching this practice.

Stories are powerful tools for conveying information and making it memorable. Stories make an impact because they:

- 🗨️ Put a human face on facts, inspiring empathy and helping people connect with new ideas.
- 🗨️ Make abstract concepts more concrete and provide real-world examples of ideas in action.
- 🗨️ Tap into people's emotions. Experiencing an emotion — any emotion, including joy, sadness, anger, fear, concern, etc. — when learning content makes the information more memorable.

"Storytelling is powerful. It changes mindsets," says Tony Tagliavia, chief marketing officer for **Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC)**. For example, shortly after MATC introduced corequisite education, the college invited a student to speak at an all-faculty meeting about her experience.

"The student explained that she had taken the ACCUPLACER four times, and all four times, MATC told her that she wasn't ready for college," he recalls. "But with the corequisite model, she got the support she needed, and she got a B+ in the class we had been telling her she wasn't ready to take."

The college also gave faculty members detailed research about the positive outcomes from corequisite education. This combination of data and students' actual experiences — the personal and the impersonal — helped faculty members understand the value of corequisite education.

"Data is data. It's not good. It's not bad. It just is."

— Ann Buchele, Vice President of Academic and Student Affairs
Linn-Benton Community College



Linn-Benton Community College has invested a great deal in expanding its use of data,⁵ and the college also uses stories to inspire change. When college leadership tells stories to its internal audiences, they celebrate failures as well as successes. “We want everyone at LB to be comfortable trying something, experimenting, doing an intervention, and having it blow up,” says Ann Buchele, the college’s vice president of academic and student affairs. “People can try without being judged.”

DATA POINTS THE WAY TO ACTION

“When I came to the institution in 2001, we had some pretty scary data,” says Dan Phelan, president, **Jackson College**. “About 14 percent of students who came to our college paid good tuition money and got zero credit hours for the investment they made.”

For a long time, the college had no system in place to address these students’ needs because the focus was almost completely on access. “I called my first 10 years of service the ‘righting of the ship decade,’ the time of really embracing the horror of what the data were saying,” Phelan says.

But now, more than 20 years later, the college focuses its work around “Total Commitment to Student Success” and uses specific numbers to keep everyone focused on their shared goals. “Now the numbers that everyone knows are 90, 80, 70,” Phelan continues. “These are our stretch goals: 90 percent persistence from fall to spring, 80 percent persistence from fall to fall, and 70 percent of students earning a degree or other credential of market value, or transferring to a baccalaureate-granting institution.”

As colleges use data to advance their agenda, they should focus on using data to improve and allay concerns about using data punitively. For example, twice a year, **San Jacinto College** creates a custom report for each faculty member — for both full-time and part-time faculty — that shows the success of students in their courses. For each faculty member, the report provides a five-year trend of success data for each section or class they taught. It includes a comparison to the average success rate for all faculty teaching the same class at their campus, on other San Jacinto campuses, and college-wide. In 2021, the college added an equity focus so the reports now have data that is disaggregated by gender, race and ethnicity, Pell status, first-generation status, and enrollment status (full-time and part-time).

George González, the college’s director of institutional research & data science, worked closely with the faculty senate to design data portfolios that would be most useful to faculty and that they would welcome using. He also conducted training sessions to help department chairs and faculty understand how to interpret the data and use it for their day-to-day teaching.

González explains, “The department chair receives all of the data portfolios, so they might say, ‘Hey, Fred Smith, in College Algebra, your success rates are in the 60s, but Mary Taylor has success rates in the 80s. Let’s pair you two up and start a dialogue. How are your pedagogical approaches different? What are some ideas that Mary may suggest to Fred?’”

Use Tool #7A from *[Inside Story Tools](#)* to find new ways your college can commit to listening to students.

Tool #7B from *[Inside Story Tools](#)* provides an activity your college can use to help stakeholders practice crafting powerful stories.

⁵ To learn more about Linn-Benton and its use of data, see the Voices of Pathways film “Changing the Data Culture,” available at <https://www.pathwaysresources.org/voices-of-pathways/>



LISTEN TO STUDENTS

While this guide focuses on internal communications for faculty and staff, these communications are most effective when they include students' voices. Because colleges are engaging in transformational change to improve the student experience, it only makes sense to go to the source.

Colleges engage students in a variety of ways, such as hosting Pizza with the President sessions, holding campus-wide events featuring students, and inviting students to tell their stories at faculty events. Below are examples of colleges that have used students' voices to effect change.

San Jacinto College changed its course lineup because of student feedback. The college had a genetics course that was popular because of TV shows like *CSI*. "One day, a student told the dean helping her with her schedule, 'I want to take genetics. I love *CSI*, and that's what I want to do,'" recalls Laurel Williamson, the college's deputy chancellor and president.

"The dean told her that the genetics course doesn't transfer, and the student said, 'Well, okay, but it counts toward the degree here, right?' The dean had to tell her that the course didn't count toward the degree, and it didn't transfer. And the student asked, 'Then why are you offering it?'" San Jacinto ended up taking the course out of the inventory.

At **Sinclair College**, students' voices helped the college find the will to complete its program maps. As part of mapping all 200 of its programs (a key step in creating guided pathways), faculty worked with advisors to decide which elective would be ideal for students in their majors.

"Students could still pick any elective we offered, but we had advisors say, 'This is what your faculty think is best for you because it's going to help you in your upper level courses,' and most students then picked that elective," explains Kathleen Cleary, the college's senior vice president and interim provost.

Initially, faculty were resistant to this idea; in some cases it shrunk their disciplines because students were taking fewer classes that didn't count toward their degrees. "That was good for students, but not so great for faculty who loved teaching niche courses," Cleary says. "But we are here for the students."

Cleary realized that she had to convince faculty that the maps were good for students and that the faculty would be taken care of. Many people warmed to the plan once they understood that if more students moved from their first year to their second year, then upper level classes would have higher enrollment. They could be teaching two sections of upper level classes and fewer sections of the general education course.

As the teams gradually added maps for more and more programs, some faculty were still resistant. Student voices got the final holdouts on board. Cleary explains: "Students were telling faculty, 'My friend is a psychology major, and she has this map that shows exactly which courses her faculty has recommended for her. I'd really like that. Are you going to do one of those for us?'"

Cleary continues, "The faculty couldn't say no to the students. It's not that they were hateful or didn't like students. Many of them were engaged faculty who were passionate about their disciplines and their students' success. They just thought the maps were a really bad idea. So it was the students who brought along the remaining group of resistant faculty. And within about a year and a half, we had all 200 programs mapped."

Rockland Community College includes students on its marketing staff. The college's Street Team is made up of student workers who are hired to be an internal marketing team. The Street Team is responsible for a lot of the college's social media presence. They also create videos, conduct student surveys, and push out information in ways that interest students.

(continued on page 26)

LISTEN TO STUDENTS

(continued from page 25)

“These students are doing guerrilla marketing, being ambassadors for the college, and they have become an alumni network as well,” says Jessica Stallone, the college’s director of communications. “They are bringing new ideas to the table and challenging us to do creative things on social media and in print and digital publications.”

The college attributes its 400 percent growth on social media to the Street Team, and the Street Team helps them get valuable feedback from other students. “It’s amazing having students become part of the business end of the college,” Stallone adds. “They go out with their iPads and take surveys with students, and we trained them to do focus groups. Other students are very open with them so we get really good, honest feedback.”

At **Amarillo College**, the college’s social workers and food pantry are located in the main building in the center of campus. “When we put it there, faculty were horrified because they thought we were going to embarrass students, but students have told me they like having it there. It’s convenient. They can get what they need and then pick up their library book or whatever else they need to do,” says Cara Crowley, vice president of strategic initiatives.

“We have to value the student voice over our own voice because we put shame in our voice, and there’s no shame in their voice,” Crowley continues. “And we’ve done a lot of training around issues of poverty and equity to address this issue. If you’re going to set up care for someone, you really need to see them.”



Make It Personal: The Art of Crafting a Powerful Story

Telling stories helps people better understand and remember information. To craft stories that have an impact, focus on three key elements, three supporting tools, and one important reminder.

Three Key Elements

Effective stories include characters, change, and a takeaway message.

- ✔ **Characters** put a face on your story. For a brief story, focus on one character. Other people can be involved in the story, but you'll have a greater impact if you center on one person's experience.
- ✔ **Change** is at the heart of every interesting story. It might be problem/solution or a conflict that gets resolved. It might be an experience that leads to an epiphany. But there must be a situation that evolves.
- ✔ The **takeaway message** is what you want audiences to learn and remember from the story. Avoid phrases like "This story shows that" The story itself should lead audiences to your conclusion.

Three Supporting Tools

Powerful stories include some or all of these: details, emotions, surprise.

- ✔ **Details.** The first maxim of storytelling is *show, don't tell*. Details about the setting, the character's back story, or other context provide texture and help audiences envision the story unfolding.
- ✔ **Emotions.** Experiencing an emotion — any emotion, including joy, sadness, anger, fear, concern, etc. — when learning content makes the information more memorable.

- ✔ **A creative twist or surprise.** Not every story takes an unexpected turn, but those that do are memorable.

One Important Reminder

Students' experiences are the source of many powerful stories, and it is important for colleges to present them. But always be aware that each person owns their own story, and ideally, each person tells their own story. To make sure you tell students' stories respectfully, consider these factors:

- ✔ **Permission.** Make sure a student is comfortable with having you share their story.
- ✔ **Inclusion.** Ask the subject to be part of crafting the narrative, and make sure the narrative reflects reality.
- ✔ **Appropriateness.** Many students have traveled challenging paths, but no one wants to be the subject of pity. Consider the emotions your story evokes, and avoid making an individual student a poster child for a particular point.
- ✔ **Agency.** Whenever possible, have individuals tell their own stories.

KEY #8

Think Broadly Because Everything Communicates

Most people are familiar with a range of conventional internal communications vehicles. These include print and electronic vehicles, such as email, newsletters, websites, videos, and social media, as well as verbal communications, such as presentations, convenings, meetings, and informal conversations.

But these familiar vehicles are just the most overt ways your college engages your internal audiences. In fact, everything a college does — along with everything it does not do — communicates. From big-picture decisions like governance structure to details like the language(s) of an institution's signage, colleges send messages with their actions.

Colleges that excel at internal communications use every lever at their disposal to drive improvement. By thinking of every action through the lens of what it communicates, they find new ways to involve faculty and staff and motivate them to design changes that serve students' interests.

Consider these examples of colleges' less conventional communications strategies.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Helen Brewer, vice president of enrollment management and student affairs at **Rockland Community College**, makes time to connect with employees without having any agenda. "I just to do a walkthrough to check on people. Not because I need anything from them, but to let them talk about whatever is on their mind," she says. "That builds trust over time. On my first walkthrough, I might hear about their child's upcoming soccer practice, but the next time, it becomes, 'I have this idea; what do you think about it?'"

The communications team at **Amarillo College** uses a similar approach. "Sometimes it's just if I have a free moment, and sometimes, I'm trying to learn about something specific," says Sadie Newsome, the college's media director. "And every single time, without fail, I learn something."

REVISING SYSTEMS AND PROCEDURES

Angel Reyna, president of **Madera Community College**, used the college's governance structure to send the message that equity is at the center of the college's work. "I literally put the Equity Committee in the center

"Transparency isn't just about sharing information. It's about learning how to communicate, and those are not the same things."

— *Cara Crowley*
Vice President of Strategic Initiatives
Amarillo College



of the org chart, and then I put program review under the Equity Committee,” he says. “During College Hour, I explained the structure and that program review has to be vetted through the Equity Committee before it even comes to College Council. There were people pushing back on that for a long time, but I said the structure is non-negotiable because our equity work is non-negotiable.”

ELIMINATING A STANDARD REPORT

During Sandy Shugart’s first year as president of **Valencia College**, he was trying to change the college’s focus from enrollment to student learning — and part of his strategy was to *not* produce a report. “I asked the institutional research team what report everybody wants the most each year, the one that would lead to storming the castle if it wasn’t produced,” he recalls. “Without hesitation, they all said the Instructional Productivity Report (IPR), which provides all of the factory-level productivity data, like average class size, minimums, and maximums.”

Shugart told them not to produce that report for the coming year. The researchers were concerned about how the college would create schedules and make work assignments. “Those were great questions,” Shugart says. “We had to find a different way to make those decisions — and that wasn’t going to happen if the IPR data was available. Withdrawing that report was not a newsletter. It was not a speech. But it was an action that spoke volumes.”

SIGNALING INCLUSIVITY

Rockland Community College held an Our Voices conversation highlighting the voices of students from the LGBTQ+ community so faculty and staff could hear directly from them. As part of that event, the moderator showed participants how to add their pronouns to their names on Zoom calls. “It’s not hard to do that, and it sends a message to a particular community that we really want you here,” says Melissa Roy, the college’s chief diversity officer.

BUYING A HOUSE

George Pimentel, president of **Jackson State Community College**, purchased a house near the campus about six months after he joined the college as its president. During the previous decade, the college had experienced continuous turnover in senior leadership, and it was facing several challenges, including declining enrollment and budget cuts.

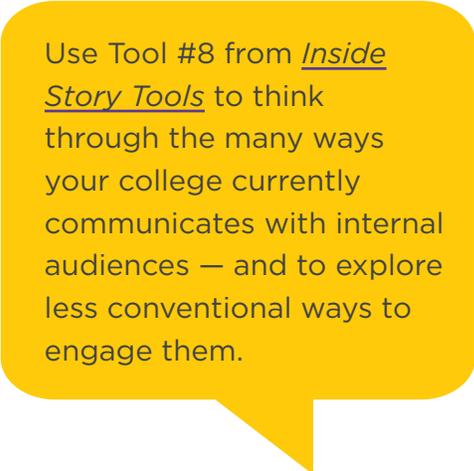
Pimentel’s promise to be truthful about the college’s performance and its budget was both welcome and unsettling because it was a new experience for faculty and staff. “I bought the house, in part, to show that I’m committed to staying in Jackson — that I’m here to help, and I’m not leaving,” Pimentel explains. “And that although things may seem bleak at the moment, I believe we can turn it around.”

CHANGING THE METHOD OF IDENTIFYING STUDENT NEEDS

Milwaukee Area Technical College has stopped using the label *at-risk students*. “We’re adding questions on the application so we can identify students who may need support, such as a single parent who is taking 15 credits and working,” explains Christine Manion, the college’s vice president, institutional effectiveness. “We need to connect with that student and make sure they know we offer daycare, but that is very different from painting all single parents with the broad brush and labeling them ‘at-risk students.’”

RECOGNIZING EMPLOYEES

Wallace State Community College has a number of recognition programs, including Caught Doing Good, which recognizes people who go out of their way to help students or perform other unexpected services. “It helps people feel valued and underscores that connections drive the work,” says Vicki Karolewics, the college’s president.



Use Tool #8 from [*Inside Story Tools*](#) to think through the many ways your college currently communicates with internal audiences — and to explore less conventional ways to engage them.



CHOOSE YOUR WORDS WELL

Engage people with simple, clear, memorable language. For example:

- ✓ **Front Range Community College** packed a critical goal and a deadline into only three words. The college had a high-impact goal of creating academic plans for students, which they called My Academic Plans or MAPS. They set a deadline of May to have all MAPS ready for students. “All of a sudden, it was *MAPS by May*, and everyone knew *MAPS by May*,” recalls Jean Runyon, campus vice president.
- ✓ **Rockland Community College’s** Steps Beyond Statements is a working group that is looking at performance measures related to equity. “A lot of institutions were making

statements about discrimination and equity, but we didn’t want to just talk about it. We started Steps Beyond Statements because we wanted to actually make a change,” says Helen Brewer, the college’s vice president of enrollment management and student affairs.

- ✓ In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, Kathleen Cleary, senior vice president and interim provost, **Sinclair College**, ended her weekly message with the phrase “Just keep swimming,” a quote from *Finding Nemo*. “It was just a lighthearted thing I added,” Cleary recalls. “But people keep mentioning it to me. It’s amazing how personal acknowledgments of what people are going through and little catchphrases can take root.”



KEY #9

Be Bold

Strong internal communications requires being both aspirational and realistic. Colleges have to inspire stakeholders and push for change while being realistic about what can be accomplished and when. Sometimes it makes sense to spend time laying groundwork, and sometimes it's best to move full steam ahead.

Wherever a college is in its process, colleges implementing transformational change are charting new territory for themselves. Doing this work — and communicating about it — requires a certain amount of boldness.

It is not uncommon for people to work around (or step gingerly around) the danger zones in their work. But for strong communications, the better play is to seek them out and address them. Strong communicators reframe challenges as opportunities to learn and improve.

When colleges approach transformational change with this mindset, stakeholders at all levels of the college will feel uncomfortable at times. But communicating effectively can help all parties make peace with this discomfort so they can continue to advance the college's agenda.

"If you can't effectively communicate internally, you add barriers to your traditional roadblocks, which are, 'I don't like change,' and 'We've always done it this way.'"

— *Angel Reyna*
President
Madera Community College



FACING RUMORS HEAD-ON

At the end of each monthly meeting, Russell Lowery-Hart, president of **Amarillo College**, puts his chair in the middle of the room and answers every question people ask. "This is how I started to learn what the rumors were. And I started rumor busting at department meetings."

MAKING PROFOUND CHANGES QUICKLY

The pandemic showed that colleges have more ability to change — and to change quickly — than they realize. "Literally overnight, colleges changed things that for decades everyone said they could never do," says Rob Johnstone, founder and president, National Center for Inquiry and Improvement (NCII). "Colleges always said, 'We can't do advising online,' or 'We can't teach that class online.' Overnight, it all changed. The pandemic laid it all bare. There was urgency because students were hurting, and everything changed." To make these changes, colleges had to rethink policies and procedures — and then quickly, clearly communicate them throughout their institutions.

ADDRESSING EQUITY WITHOUT FLINCHING

Colleges across the country have a new commitment to addressing equity. This work is grounded in internal communications, and doing it effectively requires taking bold action. For example:

🗨️ "One of my goals is to transform **Madera [Community College]** into an antiracist institution," says Angel Reyna, the college's president. "One of my colleagues told me I had an error in one of my goals because we are not a racist institution. I said, 'No, it is right. We are a racist institution because of the policies and

practices we have.” He continues: “When someone tells me that we are moving too fast, I quote Martin Luther King, who said, ‘This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism.’ Dr. King said that almost 60 years ago.”

- 🗨️ **San Jacinto College** began holding Equity Chats (see page 33 to learn more). The college also introduced a mandatory equity key performance indicator (KPI), which is part of performance management for faculty. The KPI is: “Expand my equity focus and commitment regarding a minimum of two of the following areas: curriculum, instruction, professional development, interactions with students.”

ESTABLISHING CONSEQUENCES

At every college, there are people who resist new ideas. Colleges that are invested in change engage those who are skeptical (see page 35 to learn more), and they establish and communicate clear boundaries.

- 🗨️ Sandy Shugart, while president of **Valencia College**, was deeply committed to processes that explain and deepen Valencia’s shared values. “We start with what we have in common,” he says. “And by the way, if you don’t care about the things we value, don’t work here.”

- 🗨️ “Even after you explain the reasons, you’re going to have some people who say, ‘I don’t care if something different is better for the students. I want to do what I’ve always done,’” notes Laurel Williamson, deputy chancellor and president of **San Jacinto College**. “And then there is a different conversation to be had about fit with this institution. Because we are here to be effective with students. And that means we’ll be looking at your data, and there are consequences for your actions. Even in a union environment, there are conversations to have with the union about institutional expectations that need to be part of the contract.”

Tool #9 from *Inside Story Tools* can help you identify ways your college can use internal communications to address challenges related to implementing transformational change.





In fall 2020, San Jacinto College began holding Equity Chats for faculty, staff, and administrators employed at all five of its campuses. These chats are not training sessions or antiracism sessions. They are more like a listening tour to understand the current perspectives of faculty and staff so the equity team can then identify next steps.

For the first round of Equity Chats, San Jacinto is focused on racial equity. Before attending, participants are required to read two articles and watch a TED talk. The chat is a facilitated conversation about the materials; the answers to questions such as “Is it difficult to talk about race with colleagues?”; and San Jacinto’s policies and practices. (Each Equity Chat has two facilitators, who are faculty and staff trained for this role.)

During the chats, facilitators are not guiding the conversation. They are asking questions from a discussion guide and then allowing others to speak and to listen.

“Faculty and staff know what our value system is, and we all know we want to meet the needs of all students,” says Crystal Tewes, education professor. “But we need these chats to get at the baseline of where faculty and staff are. Is it, ‘I don’t feel safe saying certain things’ or ‘I don’t know what to say?’ Or something else? When we know that, we can move forward with additional training.”

These are the materials, San Jacinto uses for these Equity Chats:

-  Pre-read article: Paul Gorski’s [“Avoiding Racial Equity Detours”](#)⁶
-  Pre-read article: Estela Mara Bensimon’s [“The Case for an Anti-Racist Stance Toward Paying Off Higher Education’s Racial Debt”](#)⁷
-  Pre-watch TED Talk: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s [“The Danger of a Single Story”](#)⁸
-  [Equity Chat guide](#),⁹ including goals, ground rules, and discussion questions

WHY SAN JACINTO CREATED EQUITY CHATS

“To make meaningful change, you can’t leave people behind just because they don’t think like you or they don’t look like you,” says Rebecca Goosen, associate vice chancellor for student success transitions. “So how do you change that mindset so they feel included in this work and inspired to do this work?”

The chats aim to make participants more comfortable discussing equity issues and to identify areas of concern at San Jacinto. The facilitators also ask participants if there are policies and procedures at San Jacinto that may be barriers to diversity, equity, and inclusivity. “We are beginning a conversation and asking what we can do better,” Tewes adds.

To plan for the chats and decide what the pre-work would be, the college used a collaborative process that involved about 30 people from San Jacinto’s five campuses. Many of those individuals then participated in training and became facilitators for the chats.

REACTIONS AND NEXT STEPS

“The overall response to the chats has been positive,” says Lamar McWaine, dean of education, equity, & excellence and a driving force behind the Equity Chats. “They have been very productive discussions, although sometimes they may be uncomfortable.”

Observers applaud San Jacinto’s approach. “The equity conversations at San Jacinto are impressive because they are uncomfortable, and they are sitting with their discomfort,” says Gretchen Schmidt, senior fellow at the National Center for Inquiry and Improvement (NCII).

(continued on page 34)

6 <http://www.nextchaptercomms.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/AvoidingRacialEquityDetours-Gorski.pdf>

7 <http://www.nextchaptercomms.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/HigherEdRacialDebt-Bensimon.pdf>

8 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9lhs241zeg>

9 <http://www.nextchaptercomms.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/SanJac-EquityChat.pdf>



SAN JACINTO COLLEGE

(continued from page 33)

San Jacinto had 20 Equity Chats in October and November 2020 and 24 chats in February and March 2021. At that point, about 52 percent of full-time faculty, 74 percent of administrators (including deans, department chairs, managers, and directors), and 13 percent of full-time staff had attended an Equity Chat. The college plans to increase the number of both full- and part-time staff participants.

Participation is voluntary but highly encouraged. In fact, there likely is some peer pressure to participate. The college is considering whether to make participation mandatory. The team also has started student Equity Chats, which are structured differently. The students are not asked to read articles in advance, but they use a video to start the session.

“It’s a work in progress,” McWaine explains. “Everyone is not at the same comfort level yet. We have a lot more folks involved in the conversation now, and so the next part of our task is to make sure that folks are not just talking about equity, but doing the work of equity.”

As the college moves in that direction, some departments are asking McWaine for input on their processes and ideas for addressing equity issues. This change is an indication that the Equity Chats are having an impact.

“Listening will guide where we need to go next as a college,” Tewes says. “Even though we want to move at lightning speed, by taking this approach, we’re going to make lasting change.”



Five Colleges: Using Different Approaches to Managing Skeptics

Faculty and staff have a range of reactions to transformational change. Many people categorize responders into three groups: red lighters, yellow lighters, and green lighters.

This is how Kathleen Cleary, senior vice president and interim provost at **Sinclair College** describes these groups: “The green lighters jump in and aren’t afraid to fail. The yellow lighters watch the green lighters to see if they are going to be punished when things don’t go well (and you shouldn’t expect everything to go well or you’re not being bold enough). The red lighters are either going to be dragged kicking and screaming or they’re going to dig their heels in.”

Colleges should be intentional about how they engage and/or manage the red lighters and others who are skeptical of change. For example, many colleges start by bringing skeptics to the table because they raise important questions and help make the project better. But colleges also have to be ready to manage people who are more focused on saying “no” than on finding solutions. Below are three ways colleges manage skeptics and naysayers.

Engaging Skeptics

“The skeptics are often the red lighters, and I address them by making sure they are heard, first and foremost,” Cleary says. “Skeptics also can keep you from walking off a cliff, either because the culture’s not ready or it’s a terrible idea and you shouldn’t do it.”

In many cases, Cleary makes changes based on what she heard. She’ll follow up and tell the skeptics that she decided to move forward on this project, but she did adjust it based on their input. And she invites them to stay in touch about how things are going.

“That doesn’t always get everyone to agree, but I can’t tell you how many times those people have come back to me and said, ‘I thought this was a terrible idea, but it’s actually working. And I want to be part of it now, is it too late?’ And of course, it’s never too late.”

Courtney Edwards, English associate professor, **Pierce College**, speaks to this dynamic from the skeptic’s

point of view. “I came to the guided pathways conversation as somewhat of a skeptic,” she says. “I had hallway conversations and attended larger formal meetings. The college made a lot of space for faculty to talk to each other. It was a big, working — sometimes very messy — sandbox.”

Edwards was honest about her uncertainty, and she wanted to learn more so she volunteered to get more involved. When she was invited to co-lead a pathways group, she agreed to do it. “I had been hoping to stay below the radar a bit, but of course I then became immersed in the conversation more quickly than I intended,” Edwards continues. “I probably would have remained a long-term skeptic if I had just stayed on the sidelines, but the more information I got — the more I heard students describe their experiences — the less skeptical I became.” As the college’s work progresses, Edwards continues to raise questions and bring concerns to the attention of the team.

“The skeptic’s lens has been extremely important, both on the front-end of design and as we’ve continued the work,” adds Matthew Campbell, vice president, learning & student success, **Pierce College Puyallup**. “Those who are more skeptical frequently raise authentic contemplations that not everyone has considered, especially as we work to eliminate racial inequities. Their participation helps us to be thoughtful practitioners and to maintain an equity-centered, iterative process.”

Identifying an Underlying Problem

“If we decided that we’d have free ice cream two days a week, some percentage of folks would complain about that,” says Terry Bubbs, director of advising, **Volunteer State Community College**. “We know from the start that there will be resistance no matter how positive we think something is.”

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Five Colleges: Using Different Approaches to Managing Skeptics

(continued from page 35)

But resistance isn't always what it appears to be. "When we were introducing pathways, we had a lot of faculty who seemed to be resistant to advising," Bubb explains. "But after further conversations, it turned out that they really were mostly afraid of making a mistake. They were struggling with complicated technology and a lot of changes in how they should treat various student scenarios. Fortunately, we introduced DegreeWorks, which makes the degree audit part of advising much simpler and took that concern away."¹⁰

Drawing a Line

No matter what a college does, some portion of stakeholders will continue to put up obstacles to change. Management consultants and colleges have a variety of terms for this brand of red lighter, including Constantly Against Virtually Everything (CAVE) or Faculty Against Whatever is New (FAWN). Clever names aside, colleges have different ways of approaching this ongoing resistance.

- ✔ **Setting clear expectations.** "I can't tell people what to think or feel, but I can tell them what behaviors I expect to see," says Michele Johnson, chancellor and CEO, **Pierce College District**.
- ✔ **Being persistent but realistic.** "I think it's important that we don't give up on those people for a while," says Ann Buchele, vice president of academic and student affairs, **Linn-Benton Community College**. "Then, there is a point when we know we'll make no progress, and I'll just own it. I'll say, 'If you ever want to talk, you're welcome to, but we need to move forward now.'"
- ✔ **Focusing on everyone else.** "I don't want everyone to agree with me. Having employees who bring their own insights and experience to the work makes for better decision-making overall," says Dan Phelan, president of **Jackson College**. "At the same time, it demoralizes the institution to spend a lot of time trying to turn the CAVE people around. It makes more sense to focus on the 20 percent of people who are all in, together with the 60 percent of people in the center."

¹⁰ To learn more about how Volunteer State Community College changed advising and instruction, see the Voices of Pathways film "Continuous Improvement" available at <https://www.pathwaysresources.org/voices-of-pathways/>



KEY #10

Find the Resources

If a college wants to make internal communications a priority, it must devote the resources — time and money — needed to make this work effective. Where do colleges that invest in internal communications find the money?

Higher education tends to budget from a deficit perspective: A college has a certain amount of money, and when the pie is divided, there never seems to be enough. But there are other ways to look at budgeting.

“Internal communications is a key driver of enrollment management,” says Rob Johnstone, founder and president, National Center for Inquiry and Improvement (NCII). If colleges improve their service to students — the goal of transformational change, which requires strong internal communications — they can improve retention, which saves them money.

“It takes 5 to 10 times more resources to find a new student and onboard them than it does to serve a current student,” Johnstone adds. “Colleges already have the resources they need to keep enrollment steady. Get two more classes from every student, and you take that 20 percent drop in enrollment back.”

A growing number of colleges look at their budgets in terms of return on investment (ROI). Many colleges also consider it important to invest time — including the president’s time — in internal communications.

AMARILLO COLLEGE: FOCUSED ON THE RETURN

Amarillo College uses an investment mindset. “We talk about our retention calculator,” says the college’s president, Russell Lowery-Hart. “X more students on our campus leads to Y more dollars in our budget. When we keep students on our campus, we make their futures more secure and also grow our budget.”

Lowery-Hart explains Amarillo’s ROI model using social services as an example. The college invests about \$575,000 per year in social services. A little more than half of that (\$300,000) is the college’s money, and the rest comes from grants. The college’s data analysis shows that the college increased retention 12 percent through these social services, and that increased retention added almost \$3.5 million to the budget — a 16:1 ROI.

“The budget is mission fulfillment. If you’re going to meet your mission, you have to move your money.”

— Michele Johnson
Chancellor and CEO
Pierce College District



“Hire someone who is a professional who can run your internal communications. I know colleges are strapped, but recognize the importance of this.”

— Christine Manion
Vice President, Institutional
Effectiveness
Milwaukee Area Technical
College



“Higher ed thinks, ‘We have \$X, and it’s been divided in certain ways over the past 100 years,’” Lowery-Hart says. “But I ask people to identify two key things they think will have a big impact, put four positions to it, and see your ROI in two years.”

He continues, “At Amarillo, communications is one of those things. When I became president, we had a traditional communications arm focused on press releases. Now it’s a communications marketing team that focuses on engagement. We also invest in events like General Assembly [explained on page 20] that have changed the way people understand and engage in our work.”

VALENCIA COLLEGE: FOCUSED ON THE INVESTMENT

“Most colleges have a pool of resources that are not engaged,” says Sandy Shugart, now-retired president of **Valencia College**. “They are nonperforming assets. It’s money that is not being invested in anything and not accomplishing anything.”

Valencia has worked hard to free up every dollar that is stranded in a budget and then put it to work. “We invest everything, and we’ve never found ourselves in a position where we didn’t have enough money to do what we really cared about,” Shugart continues. “We tend to have an adequate but small fund balance. Most boards think the size of their fund balance is a signal of their health. It’s not. It’s a signal of their failure to invest.”

SURPLUS DOLLARS AND GRANTS

Some colleges reallocate funds and find new money for priorities:

- 🗨️ “Review your budget, and you will find surplus money in certain accounts that you can reallocate,” says Amit Singh, president, **Edmonds College**. “Sometimes, the extra funds are not in your department. Perhaps an employee in another department has 20 percent extra time, and they can come help you.”
- 🗨️ “Invest in your grants team because there is grant money out there, and it will help you do some of the things you want to do,” says Laurel Williamson, deputy chancellor and president, **San Jacinto College**. “I’m amazed at the number of grant opportunities that come across my email. But you have to pick the opportunities that align with your goals. You can’t get in the mode of trying to go after every grant and do every program.”

TIME IS MONEY

Many college leaders put a priority on internal communications in terms of their time and their staffing:

- 🗨️ Every year, Russell Lowery-Hart, president of **Amarillo College**, meets with every department, without their supervisors present, so he can hear directly from staff. “Inevitably, after those meetings, those of us on his VP council will get text messages about issues we need to address,” says Cara Crowley, vice president of strategic initiatives.
- 🗨️ “We have an internal graphics designer in my office,” says Steve Johnson, president of **Sinclair College**. “Instead of a speechwriter for words, we have a designer so our ideas can be put into graphics.”

Use Tool #10 from [*Inside Story Tools*](#) to begin identifying new internal communications activities, structures, or staffing that can help your college with its transformational change efforts — and the investment the new ideas would require.



ENGAGE PART-TIME FACULTY AND STAFF

A variety of college employees support students through brief, regular interactions. Groundskeepers greet students and provide directions; cafeteria workers offer encouragement. A growing number of colleges recognize and encourage these types of connections.

Yet many colleges focus on engagement and professional development for full-time faculty only. This is concerning because at most colleges, part-time faculty are in the best position to connect with many students, particularly first-term students. There are genuine, budget-driven reasons for these decisions, but there also are colleges that find the budget to better engage part-time faculty. And there are colleges that find ways to communicate effectively with these often-disengaged employees.

For example, **Valencia College** has about 2,000 part-time faculty, which is more than twice the number of full-time faculty members. To encourage participation in professional development, Valencia gives higher pay to part-time faculty who participate in trainings related to the scholarship of teaching and learning. Those who participate in 60 hours of professional development get a higher rate of pay for each class they teach at Valencia.

In terms of communications, “You have to think about how much attention you can expect to get from a part-time faculty member,” says Amy Bosley, Valencia’s vice president, organizational development and human resources.

She continues, “Do I really want them to read a newsletter that features health insurance benefits to which they are not entitled or eligible? Or do I want whatever slice of their time I get to be focused on making them a better faculty member? I’ll happily give up on them reading the college-wide newsletter if they read our weekly *Faculty Insight* and if they are participating in faculty development.”

Linn-Benton Community College has a council structure that requires having part-time faculty members on the governance team — and the college compensates them for their time serving on councils and committees.

Before your college defaults to full-time faculty for engagement efforts, consider the percentage of your faculty who are part-time employees. Even more important, consider what percentage of your students and classes — and which students and classes — are taught by part-time faculty. For example, how many classes are taught by full-time faculty members in a typical part-time, first-semester student’s schedule? At many colleges, data points like this one show the importance of engaging part-time faculty.



ONE STEP AT A TIME

Transformational change — and the internal communications that supports it — requires ongoing work, along with new skillsets and mindsets. Colleges that want to improve their internal communications must build and refine this capacity over time.

This guide — along with its companion publication, *Inside Story Tools: Applying Inside Story Ideas at Your College* — gives colleges ways to begin this work or take their current efforts a step further. Some of the examples provided in these resources were implemented after institutions had already spent considerable time working on institutional culture change, some are examples of using communications to support culture change, and some are actions that any institution could begin doing today.

As your college thinks through its internal communications goals and processes, consider these recommendations:

-  **Assemble a team.** Create an internal communications team that will discuss *Inside Story* and use the tools presented here. The team should include people with a variety of roles at the college, including individuals responsible for internal communications and members of the internal audiences you most need to reach, such as full-time and part-time faculty and staff members. The team also can meet with different internal audiences to discuss the internal communications Keys.
-  **Use the *Inside Story Tools*.** These tools can help you generate ideas, make plans, and involve others in conversations about internal communications. Plan to work through them over time. Do not try to complete all of the *Inside Story Tools* in one sitting or even one semester. *Inside Story Tools* includes additional recommendations for undertaking this work.
-  **Set goals and evaluate progress.** As with all improvement efforts, it's important to evaluate and refine your internal communications actions. Key #2 and Tool #2 help you connect your communications goals and strategies with your college's institutional goals. Regularly assess whether your communications actions are helping you meet both communications and institutional goals and then make appropriate adjustments. For example, keep and/or expand elements that advance your goals; change or eliminate elements that do not advance your goals.
-  **Regularly revisit your Why.** Key #3 explains the importance of defining the college's values and making sure these values are deeply ingrained at all levels of the institution. It is important to periodically revisit your college's Why, especially as leaders transition or circumstances evolve. Through these conversations, you can make adjustments if needed and/or reinforce the reasons everyone at the college does their work.

Your college's internal communications strategies likely will evolve as its transformational change efforts take hold. With each large-scale effort a college undertakes, it develops strategies and structures that it applies to future efforts. The work continues to be challenging, but it becomes more familiar. Effective communications can follow the same pattern. If you invest in improving internal communications, you will develop structures and processes that are comfortable for your audiences — and you will see the payoff time and time again.