

FOLLOWING WHERE #MIFACULTYLEAD



September
2020

Growing a Culture of Faculty Engagement in Michigan

This brief describes the evolution and latest learnings from Michigan's faculty engagement efforts and foregrounds the insights of faculty from Michigan's community colleges who have participated in MCSS events and roundtables.



Following Where #MIFACULTYLead

GROWING A CULTURE OF FACULTY ENGAGEMENT IN MICHIGAN

Generations of community college initiatives designed to increase equity and student success, from Achieving the Dream through Guided Pathways, have made it clear that promoting faculty understanding of and commitment to student-focused reform efforts is indispensable for sustainable improvements. Because faculty have the greatest impact on the student experience, their motivation and interest in efforts aimed at closing equity gaps and improving student outcomes at scale is an essential condition of success for any meaningful reform effort.

Over the past 10 years, the Michigan Center for Student Success (MCSS) has been growing an intentional, multifaceted strategy to engage faculty across its network of 28 public community colleges. Beginning in 2011, MCSS has consistently promoted faculty as champions for student-focused change by 1) providing access to technical assistance in implementing several national reform initiatives and 2) facilitating faculty dialogues intended to support equity-minded teaching and learning in every discipline. When the disruption of COVID-19 hit in early 2020, MCSS stepped up its faculty engagement efforts, leveraging its social media presence and convening a series of virtual roundtable discussions attended by over 350 faculty members in eight discipline groups to create space for faculty to learn, share ideas and reflect together on the challenges facing not only their students, but their institutions, disciplines and professions. This brief describes the evolution and latest learnings from faculty engagement efforts and foregrounds the insights of faculty from Michigan's community colleges who have participated in MCSS events and roundtables.

ROOTS OF THE FACULTY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

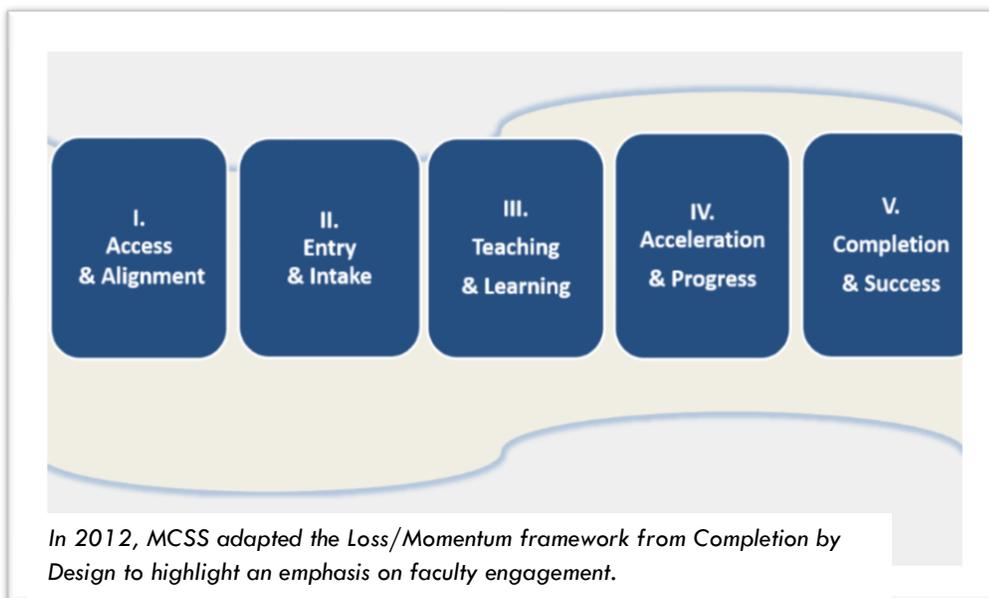
As a state with one of, if not the most, decentralized higher education systems in the country, Michigan has been challenged to unite its constitutionally autonomous institutions around a common agenda. In 2011, the Michigan Center for Student Success (MCSS) was established to support and bring coherence to the numerous student success initiatives that were spreading across the country following the launch of Achieving the Dream (ATD) in 2004. The staff at the Michigan Community College Association (MCCA) and their funding partners at The Kresge Foundation envisioned the new Student Success Center as a hub linking research, practice and policy to build capacity around student success efforts at Michigan's 28 community colleges. MCSS was one of the first two entities in the U.S. to join what would eventually become the Student Success Center Network managed by Jobs for the Future (JFF).

Michigan joined the ATD network early in 2008 and that network significantly expanded its footprint in the state just as MCSS came on the scene. Early evaluations of ATD highlight the importance of faculty insight, expertise and passion in the successful design and implementation of student success initiatives. Faculty have the greatest impact on the student experience, and therefore their understanding of and commitment to student-focused reform efforts are indispensable for sustainable improvements. To harness this vital force, faculty engagement became an immediate priority for the new center and the student success network at large (Couturier, 2013). In 2011, MCSS created a

Faculty Leadership Initiative to identify, develop and promote faculty members as leaders within a broader student success agenda at Michigan community colleges. The initiative began with the premise that as grassroots leaders, faculty members can make unique contributions to student success initiatives on their campus and beyond (Kezar & Lester, 2009). With this initiative, MCSS began planning for a forum where existing and emerging faculty leaders would be supported through networking, professional development and recognition.

the academic year ends in May, the RFCs provide opportunities for faculty to network with colleagues from neighboring institutions. Each year, a particular topic is chosen and faculty from around the state join one or more regional conversations to learn more about the topic, share perspectives, engage peers in safe-space discussion and offer ideas that MCSS can incorporate into planning future faculty engagement efforts.

The early years of the Faculty Leadership Initiative also laid the groundwork for Michigan’s adoption of faculty-focused reform efforts including the



Community College of Baltimore County’s Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) in 2013 and the Charles A. Dana Center’s Mathematics Pathways to Completion in 2015, both of which were powered by faculty involvement. Faculty leadership has also been a key component of other MCSS initiatives, including implementation of Guided Pathways, in

MCSS invited a team of 10 full-time and adjunct faculty student success champions to serve on its Faculty Leadership Steering Council. One of the council’s first activities was a training session focused on Faculty Inquiry Groups (FIGs) led by Dr. Rose Asera, currently of the RP Group, which led to several council members launching FIGs on their home campuses. Council members also helped facilitate statewide policy conversations on college readiness benchmarks for recent high school graduates.

partnership with the Community College Research Center (CCRC), and streamlining transfer pathways in 10 academic program areas through the state’s MiTransfer Pathways project.

The Faculty Leadership Steering Council also planned and launched the MCSS Regional Faculty Conversations (RFCs) in 2012. Held annually after

The level of support among Michigan faculty for MCSS and the student success agenda has earned recognition from the center’s national partners. Peter Adams, the founder of ALP, noted that, “In an era when a number of states have resorted to top-down mandates to force colleges to adopt reforms of their developmental education programs, it is refreshing to see how much has been accomplished in Michigan without a mandate.”

Davis Jenkins, senior research scholar at CCRC and co-author of *Redesigning America's Community Colleges*, has been providing support and technical assistance for Michigan's Guided Pathways initiative. He recently observed that, "Michigan colleges are going to be much better prepared to deal with the current crisis precisely because of all the hard work that has been done over the past several years. Who said this can't be done in a decentralized state?"

CONTINUED CULTIVATION AND GROWTH

MCSS is fortunate that another of its national partners, Alison Kadlec of Sova, is also a Michigander. Since the founding of ATD and the Guided Pathways movement, Kadlec has been active in elevating faculty voices and experiences in large-scale student success reform efforts. She has worked with dozens of institutions in more than 25 states to support more authentic and inclusive faculty engagement. Kadlec has been helping MCSS plan and facilitate the annual RFCs since 2016. Anchored in MCSS's commitment to supporting institutions in the scaling of Guided Pathways reforms and in creating space for faculty members to engage ideas and one another, these conversations have served to build trust between MCSS and Michigan faculty members, deepen MCSS's understanding of issues of importance to faculty and provide a more nuanced view of the challenges associated with engaging faculty in student success reform efforts.

To guide the structure of the RFCs, MCSS has adopted an operating definition of faculty engagement as "focused attention, enjoyment and enthusiasm for the activities associated with faculty work through which the individual finds purpose, senses congruence with personal values and talents, is challenged to use knowledge and skills, and experiences productivity even during difficult times" (Livingston 2011, p. 11). Applying this definition to the work that student success reforms entail, Kadlec highlights several key insights that

have become central to MCSS's overall faculty engagement strategy:

- Faculty are central both to the quality of reforms and to their successful implementation, but the traditionally siloed nature of disciplines and colleges presents deep challenges to effective faculty engagement around large-scale student success priorities.
- Faculty need to be met where they are in a spirit of respect and engaged in ways that acknowledge the extent to which their personal and professional identities are shaped by both disciplinary standards and departmental politics. Meeting faculty where they are includes clear-eyed attention to tensions around the changing nature of faculty employment classifications in all sectors of higher education.
- Because many student success efforts that impact faculty are initiated by administrators, and because the traditional models of shared governance often impose an adversarial frame on faculty relationships with administration, authentic faculty engagement aimed at building shared purpose for scaled improvements is essential for effective implementation of evidence-based reforms.
- The quality and impact of reform initiatives is in large part determined by the quality of implementation, and therefore purposeful attention to forging strong and resilient working relationships between faculty, staff and administrators must be viewed as a key domain of effective leadership.
- Real student success work entails a shared understanding of both the history of structural inequity that *all* higher education institutions have been complicit in perpetuating *and* the profoundly counter-

cultural nature of truly student-focused reforms. Critical interrogation of the ways that deeply held norms of the academy have served to raise artificial barriers to students along race and class lines is hard work for all, but especially for faculty. Consequently, faculty engagement in student success work is as much about supporting mindset shifts as it is about implementing discrete practice improvements.

For all these reasons, creating free space for faculty to learn, share ideas and reflect together on the challenges facing their institutions, their disciplines and their professions is vital. For MCSS and Michigan faculty, the RFCs have provided this space. Since 2012, hundreds of faculty members from all disciplines have participated in one or more of these conversations which have truly become “signature events” for MCSS.

OFFSHOOTS AND NEW DIRECTIONS

Amidst the current environment of disruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the prevalence of the #blacklivesmatter movement and a tumultuous political landscape in the United States, MCSS is determined to double down on efforts to engage and empower Michigan’s community college faculty as critical equity leaders. More than ever, today’s community college faculty must be prepared to serve an increasingly diverse student population, including students from low-income and racially minoritized communities, adults with competing responsibilities, English language learners and other historically underserved students, as well as many students needing remedial skill development. To re-energize faculty as they strive to meet this array of students where they are, educationally speaking, MCSS is intentionally reaching out to faculty members across the state through two related efforts: mentoring engagement and digital connecting points.

While the original Faculty Leadership Steering Council has been replaced by an Advisory Committee with broader representation from the colleges, MCSS is revisiting the framing behind the original faculty-led council in developing its mentoring engagement strategy. Mentoring engagement supports colleges in implementing, scaling and sustaining reforms that advance equitable student success in Michigan. Equity-minded mentors, including faculty, staff and administrators with deep subject matter expertise on a variety of student success initiatives and strong facilitation skills, will provide support and thought leadership for statewide conversations about equity, student outcomes and relevant reforms. MCSS has invited faculty members who have emerged as leaders in its Guided Pathways, transfer pathways and developmental education initiatives to volunteer as mentors. As experienced practitioners who are engaged with reform efforts on their own campuses, mentors are uniquely qualified to support MCSS’s statewide work.

This strategy coincides with MCSS’s theory of change, which convenes colleges to provide peer support and technical assistance, builds supportive and engaging networks and promotes reflective statewide communities of practice. As these faculty engagement efforts are heightened, mentors will take leadership in all aspects of the work to catalyze a statewide learning community drawing on Senge’s (2006) conception of learning organizations. Similarly, in line with Amey’s (2005) convictions that today’s challenges in higher education cannot be met through traditional bureaucratic structures, this work will be led by faculty mentors committed to cultivating creative, strategic thinking and empowering their peers to collectively assume responsibility for improving equitable outcomes for students.

It is critical to note that, with nearly two-thirds of community college faculty being adjuncts, there are real differences in availability and incentive to seek professional development activities through larger disciplinary affiliations or at the institutional

level depending on faculty classification (Latz & Mulvihill, 2011). The time has certainly come to fully engage adjunct faculty in the professoriate and recognize the collegiality of all faculty members in building this movement across Michigan. While MCSS expects adjunct faculty to benefit from mentoring engagement, the center is also actively working to grow its digital network to include all types of college faculty, administrators and other leaders for rich, ongoing cross-functional dialogue focused on improving equity in student success.

As the pandemic emerged during the spring of 2020, MCSS immediately stepped up its virtual engagement efforts as all programming and convenings moved to the digital environment, including the 2020 Regional Faculty Conversations. MCSS is experimenting with multiple interactive digital tools to enrich faculty engagement across the state, especially during necessary physical distancing. In Summer 2020, MCSS deployed its Birds of a Feather Twitter engagement strategy with the following goals:

1. Increase Twitter following of higher education leaders, scholars and practitioners in Michigan.
2. Increase Twitter engagement among followers to facilitate a dynamic information-sharing community in Michigan and beyond.
3. Increase visibility of the #mistudentsuccess network's efforts to improve equity in outcomes among Michigan community college students.

Both this digital outreach strategy and the previously discussed mentoring engagement efforts draw on new ideas in organizational change and participative leadership by recognizing faculty leaders who are “connected connectors” (Heimans & Timms, 2018, p. 59) and can influence the spread of outreach efforts to deepen holistic faculty engagement across the state. These leaders act as attractors in pulling people into a new system by generating new understandings and

cultivating new actions at the institutional level for a larger, prolonged cultural impact (Morgan, 2006). MCSS is using Twitter chats to facilitate statewide dialogue and allow for thinking together as Senge (2006) calls it, working toward innovative and systematic solutions to interrelated problems facing Michigan's community colleges. Thus, the colleges themselves, along with the skills of individual professionals participating in the efforts, are strengthened. This impact rolls up to improve the statewide landscape, strengthening Michigan's community college sector at large.

MCSS has certainly seen evidence of this “roll up” as its Twitter followers have jumped by nearly 200 since April 2020. In addition, social media analytics suggest that information shared during the summer Tweet chats was highly visible and was viewed by thousands of users. Additional Tweet chats focused on topics around equity are planned for Fall 2020. MCSS mentors are expected to take the lead in these and other digital outreach efforts, much like faculty took the lead in supporting one another and sharing resources during the MCSS's digital roundtables held in various disciplines throughout spring and summer. All these digital connecting points are building momentum toward an authentic, sustainable, faculty-led movement to improve equitable outcomes for community college students throughout the state of Michigan.

HARVESTING THE FRUITS OF FACULTY ENGAGEMENT

As the COVID-19 disruption hit, MCSS responded quickly with a series of virtual convenings, branded as MCSS Faculty Connections roundtables and designed to build on the success of the RFCs by creating a peer-to-peer support network for faculty members struggling with offering virtual learning, especially in disciplines traditionally considered “hands-on.” Between early May and mid-July, over 350 faculty from eight discipline groups—laboratory sciences, industrial trades, criminal justice and emergency medical service academies, allied health, wellness and physical

education, visual and performing arts and culinary and hospitality, along with a group from developmental education—attended one or more of 11 lunch-hour Zoom sessions.

In line with the insights gleaned from the RFCs, roundtables were structured to meet faculty where they are, allowing participants to set their own agenda for discussions focused on supporting equitable student success. A selection of guiding questions for each meeting was developed in consultation with disciplinary experts. Each roundtable shared three common goals:

- Sharing ideas and resources for safe options to facilitate hands-on learning, whether virtual or in-person.
- Embracing the equity challenge posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Sustaining a connected community of faculty leaders across Michigan who support and challenge one another.

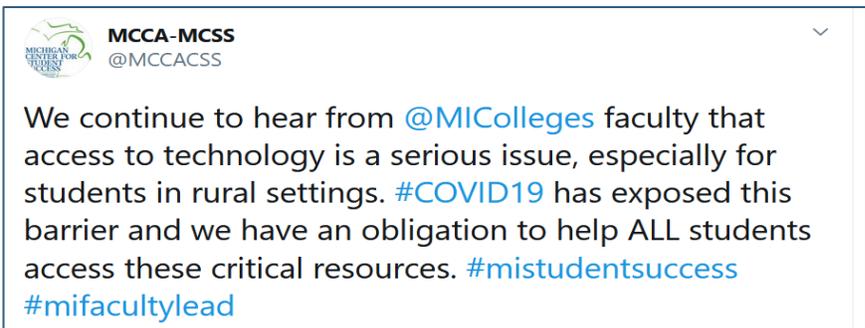
The conversations were also shaped by a set of design principles, including guidance from accrediting, licensing or professional associations, the importance of supporting adjunct faculty, consideration of technology capacity for both faculty and students and the importance of maintaining opportunities for students to collaborate.

Each roundtable included a brief introduction to MCSS's Birds of a Feather Twitter engagement strategy, with live tweeting throughout. After each session, MCSS followed up by sharing a Google Sheet with participant contact information and links to resources from the chat feature to a dedicated section of its website. The sections below highlight themes that emerged from these informal, honest and often inspiring conversations.

Common Concerns

Roundtable sessions typically began with a discussion of the challenges that were top of mind for attendees. Many were immediately concerned about student reluctance or resistance to online learning. One faculty member in the industrial trades noted that, "Students choose these fields because they want to work with their hands." Faculty also worried that even with access to high quality simulations or virtual experiments, students wouldn't be able to perform well in more advanced coursework or the workplace.

Not being able to physically interact with students presents significant obstacles. Simple things like checking settings on a microscope, positioning a student's fingers on a stringed instrument or adjusting a student's stance to increase the effectiveness of an exercise become impossible when instructors and students are separated by miles and screens, or by the need to stay six feet apart.



Maintaining connections with students is another frequently cited challenge, and technology is not always helpful. One instructor mentioned students who seemed to "disappear into a black hole" with the pivot to remote learning. Unstable internet connections are common not only in rural areas, but in underserved urban areas, especially when everyone in the house is trying to get online. Lack of bandwidth, devices that don't accommodate the latest instructional software, and the competing priorities of work, home and school frequently hindered effective communication on both sides of the student/faculty equation.

Along with concerns about the limitations of technology for communication, faculty members also worried about technology in the context of maintaining academic honesty. Specific concerns varied by discipline, with some instructors citing instances of technology-enabled dishonesty in classes where it is not usually seen, such as a student submitting a photo doctored with a charcoal filter as a drawing assignment. Zoom proctoring and the limitations of lockdown browsers were frequent topics of discussion, with faculty highlighting competing concerns about equity, privacy and academic rigor.

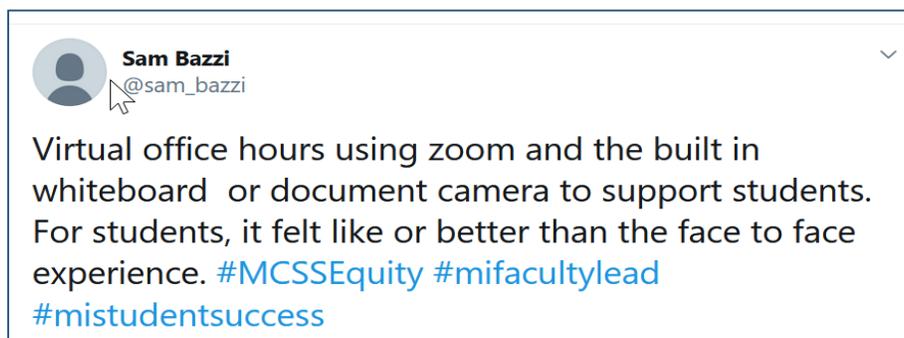
Shifting Attitudes over Time

As the roundtables continued through late spring and early summer, marked shifts in attitudes and apprehensions began to emerge during the discussions. At the first sessions in mid-May, faculty members were still processing the tumultuous impact of the initial pivot to remote instruction. Most acknowledged that the second half of the spring semester was more emergency response than controlled experiment, but faculty still had plenty of ideas to share as they began planning for online learning in the summer.

In May, the majority were expecting a return to more normal conditions for the fall, though many were already exploring how to prepare for another possible shutdown in November. By mid-June, conversations at the roundtables focused less on designing effective online experiences and more on facilitating a safe return to on-campus learning. In July, as it became clear that Michigan, along the rest of the country, was not returning to “normal” anytime soon, faculty at the roundtables exhibited more stress related to the challenges they would face in the fall. Increasingly, they mentioned the difficulties associated with designing multiple teaching scenarios—online, hybrid, face-

to-face (maybe all at once)—and sourcing personal protective equipment for their students and themselves.

At this writing, colleges have largely set their plans for the fall semester. While what may happen over the course of the fall semester remains unclear, the roundtables have provided a front row seat for MCSS to observe the faculty at Michigan community colleges as they spent the spring and summer preparing to support their students in the fall. The specific content of each conversation varied by discipline, but several common themes emerged over the 11 sessions.



Promoting Connection and Equity

Although all segments of society are impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, it has quickly become clear that some will be affected more than others, and that those most vulnerable will be represented broadly among community college students. For many students, their time on campus provides their primary access to professional advising, learning resources and technology. When campuses closed, faculty were quick to respond to the challenge of connecting with their students virtually, turning to phone, email and text to keep in touch. Many experimented with texting apps like Remind or used a Google Voice account for these communications. Some held Zoom social hours to keep students connected with one another. As one English instructor said, “School is a respite from students' complicated lives of essential work and at-home caregiving. My students were so glad to

have some sort of ‘regular’ contact and social engagement, even virtual.”

Recognizing the pandemic’s potential to aggravate equity gaps, roundtable participants reported making additional accommodations to provide holistic support for the students most likely to struggle. These accommodations ranged from relying more on open educational resources, to ditching traditional exams in favor of problem-based assessments, to delivering lab kits along with food baskets to students at home. Some faculty members even reported that they had come to view the pandemic as an opportunity to help close the digital divide as colleges endeavored to provide Wi-Fi hotspots and computers to students in need.

Faculty are also impressed by how their students are rising to the challenges posed by the pandemic. Faculty members in criminal justice and emergency medical services, who are used to preparing students to serve on the front lines during times of crisis, are seeing increased interest in their programs. They describe the students as hearing “a call to service, almost like 9/11.” Faculty recounted many stories of student persistence and resilience. Somehow, even with the struggle of doing homework in the parking lot using campus Wi-Fi, or Zooming in to class on their cell phones, faculty say their students managed to finish strong, with more authentic learning experiences than they would have normally gotten.

Hacking the System



Shanna Simpson-Singleton
@ShannaSimpsonS1

Replying to @MCCACSS

The silver linings has been the relationships I've formed with students. They're more outgoing via chat. They're comfy letting me be their voice for social change.
[#COVID19](#), [#blacklivesmatter](#) 🍌 #mifacultylead
[#MCSSEquity](#)

Faculty in all discipline groups shared an abundance of out-of-the box ideas to keep students learning in the very unusual conditions created by closed campuses and social distancing. In culinary programs, chefs boxed up ingredients ordered for campus kitchens or mailed grocery gift cards for students to prepare recipes at home. Phone cameras became learning tools in several

disciplines as students filmed their process and shared photos of the final products.

Finding Silver Linings

As the saying goes, “Never let a good crisis go to waste,” and faculty at the MCSS Connections Roundtables are clearly not letting that happen on their watch. Across the board, faculty reported that the shift to remote learning provided more opportunities to interact one-on-one with their students and enabled them to discover new ways to engage students in learning activities. Some faculty members in industrial trades reported that students were engaging more enthusiastically with innovative technology online than they typically do in person. Others in the culinary/hospitality group are considering making their emergency transition to a flipped classroom format permanent.

In the visual and performing arts, faculty found that art exhibits and individual recitals transitioned well to Facebook galleries. However, despite the viral proliferation of “virtual choir” videos, coordinating online music ensembles is actually quite difficult. When contemplating the return to campus, music faculty observed that singing or playing wind instruments would be especially tricky, as COVID-19 spreads primarily through airborne respiratory droplets. One campus was reportedly considering a circus tent for band and choir practice to allow for generous spacing.

Other interesting hacks include a suggestion from a CPR instructor to cover tandem CPR skills by having students use two mannequins, splitting the breath and chest compressions as if they were working on one patient while maintaining social distancing. In online exercise classes, students used Fitbit data to document their progress. Overall, faculty members reported being surprised and empowered by their ability to move activities online, and that in some cases, this worked better for students than their typical on-campus instruction.

MOVING FORWARD

The Michigan Center for Student Success has intentionally pursued a strategy of authentic faculty engagement, from the roots of the Faculty Leadership Steering Council, Faculty Inquiry Groups and Regional Faculty Conversations through its current efforts to establish a mentoring network and leverage social media as reform efforts go virtual. This strategy has centered faculty identities, which are shaped by the tensions between academic and disciplinary norms and emerging imperatives of equitable student success.

By forging strong and resilient working relationships between faculty, staff and administrators, MCSS has moved statewide student success initiatives including Guided Pathways, mathematics pathways, streamlined transfer and developmental education reform forward over the past decade. During the present, unprecedented moment in higher education history, building supportive networks that allow faculty to think together about the challenges confronting students, especially those who are low-income, racially minoritized and historically underserved, continues to be a high priority. During the remainder of 2020, MCSS will strengthen faculty engagement efforts by building out the new mentoring strategy, developing plans to sustain the Faculty Connections Roundtables and maintaining faculty networks via the Birds of a Feather Twitter engagement project. As we look to an unprecedentedly uncertain future for higher education, elevating the experiences and insights of faculty—and empowering their leadership—in the hard work of innovating for better and more equitable outcomes for students will continue to be a guiding commitment for MCSS.

REFERENCES

- Amey, M. J. (2005). Leadership as learning; Conceptualizing the process. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 29(9), 689-704.
- Couturier, L. K. (2013). *Joining forces: How student success centers are accelerating statewide community college improvement efforts*. Retrieved from https://ifforg-prod-prime.s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/PolicyBulletin_JoiningForces_020714.pdf.
- Heimans, J., & Timms, H. (2018). *New power: How power works in our hyperconnected world and how to make it work for you*. New York, NY: Doubleday.
- Kezar, A. & Lester, J. (2009). *Supporting faculty grassroots leadership*. Springer Science + Business Media, LLC. *Res High Educ* (2009) 50:715–740 DOI 10.1007/s11162-009-9139-6
- Latz, A. O., & Mulvihill, T. M. (2011). The community college faculty development matrix: A conceptual model for inquiry and understanding. *Journal of Applied Research in the Community College*, 19(1), 24-34.
- Livingston, J. (2011). *Defining and measuring faculty engagement: Validation of the Faculty Engagement Survey*. [Doctoral dissertation, Azusa Pacific University]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.
- Morgan, G. (2006). *Images of organization*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Senge, Peter M. (2006). "Give me a lever long enough ... and single-handed I can move the world." In Senge, P. *The fifth discipline: the art and practice of the learning organization*. New York: Doubleday/Currency.

Acknowledgements

Lead Author

Jennifer Ballard Schanker
Director of Research and
Institutional Practice,
Michigan Center for Student
Success
Michigan Community College
Association

Contributing Authors

Katie Giardello
Manager of Network
Engagement,
Michigan Center for Student
Success
Michigan Community College
Association

Alison Kadlec
Founding Partner,
Sova

MCSS Mentors

Jennifer Batten
Grand Rapids Community
College

Sam Bazzi
Henry Ford College

Paige Eagan
Kalamazoo Valley Community
College

Shanna Simpson-Singleton
Henry Ford College