Six insights about the institutional transformation:

1. Student success-oriented transformation has a life cycle.

Often, leaders start with aligning the college under a central vision. Then they put critical strategies in place that result in substantial gains in student outcomes. Finally they turn their efforts to scaling, often pausing to realign strategies to new goals while building capacity. This leads to steady increases in student outcomes for a time, followed by what looks like a plateau but may in fact reflect improvements in operating capacities that are necessary to sustain and further improve outcomes.[1]

2. Capacities matter.

To sustain student success and equity strategies over time, leaders make certain the college builds capacity for both today's and tomorrow's reforms. Often, strengthening capacities is not at the forefront of leaders' vision and strategy for the college during Phases 1 and 2. It may be possible that transformation, and thus student outcomes, could be advanced further and faster if leaders prioritize developing capacity in specific domains —such as data use and human capital—in tandem with student success and equity strategies. By focusing on such capacities earlier, leaders may enable future efforts to improve student success to be more effective and efficient, from Phase 1 through Phase 3.

3. Vision and strategy refinement is constant.

As institutions make changes, they monitor and adjust their student success strategies and capacities with an eye toward long-term success. This suggests that a key capacity necessary for success in any phase is the will and skill needed for continuous improvement.

4. Effective colleges choose what to focus on when.

Leaders cannot reform everything. Particularly in the early stages of reform, strategic leaders choose the areas of student success they believe are most important to their institutional mission—completion, learning, transfer, workforce—and the student populations they most want to focus on in advancing equity. Similarly, effective leaders choose to advance capacities that seem most attainable, laying the groundwork and building the muscle for the next phase of reform.

5. Transformational efforts to boost student success vary depending on where institutions start.

McKinsey research[2] on K-12 reform found the work that transforms a school from "poor" to "fair" is not the same as what transforms a school from "fair" to "good" or "good" to "great." At each level, systems need different efforts to produce substantial gains, sometimes more prescriptive and "top down" and at other times more generative and "bottom up." While the plateauing of student success increases and institutionalization efforts referenced earlier suggests the same may be true in the Frontier Set, our research on this issue is inconclusive. Future research should focus on understanding the best ways to continue improving in each phase, based on where colleges are starting their transformation journey.

6. Presidential succession is highly consequential.

Turnover at the highest levels affects transformation. During the five years of the Frontier Set, nine of 12 presidents left their institutions. Presidential turnover can catalyze institutions into further transformation, or it can stall reforms. Aspen has found that the entity responsible for hiring the president—usually a board of trustees—is more likely to make a choice aligned to continuing transformation if the board was actively engaged with the president in the college's transformation work prior to the transition, including monitoring student success and equity outcomes and understanding the big-picture reform strategies underway.[3]

1   Everett Rogers, Diffusion of Innovations, 5th Edition, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), ISBN 978-0-7432-5823-4.

2   McKinsey & Co. "How the world's most improved school systems keep getting better." Nov. 1, 2020. Accessed 2021. https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/how-the-worlds-most-improved-school-systems-keep-getting-better.

3   Aspen Institute, et al. "How Boards and Trustees Can Advance Student Success and Equity." Accessed 2021. https://successcenter.cccco.edu/Portals/0/Documents/aspen-report-2021.pdf