

Leadership  
is not  
defined  
by a role...

...leadership  
is action



# The Power of Middle Leaders in California Community Colleges: Why Now is the Time to Foster Middle Leadership

**A Call to Action**

Rose Asera, PhD  
April 2019  
[www.rpgroup.org](http://www.rpgroup.org)

# Introduction

Middle leaders are emerging as a powerful resource in California’s community colleges, driving change and advancing student success. The term middle leader has typically been used to describe middle managers in business and principals or district leaders in K-12 schools. In community colleges, the term has been used to designate positions below the executive level—positions with formal titles and responsibilities such as dean or department chair. However, over the last 10 years a broader, more inclusive definition of middle leadership has emerged in community colleges. Educators—faculty, administrators, and classified professionals—across all levels of the institution have taken on leadership roles and are working to make their colleges more effective and equitable.

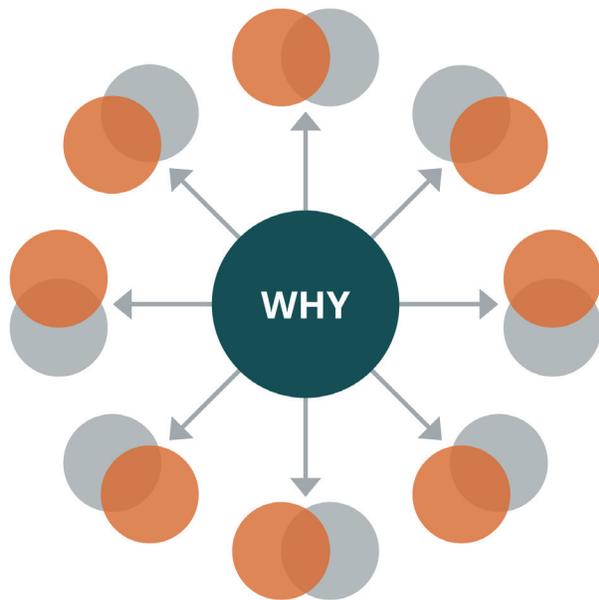
Why is it important to develop and support middle leaders in California Community Colleges at this time? In his book (2009) and TED talk,<sup>1</sup> Simon Sinek advises innovators to “start with why.” He notes that businesses and individuals typically describe their work from the outside in—first naming what they do, then saying how they do it, and finally discussing why. In contrast, he observes that inspired innovators reverse that order and start by talking about why. To Sinek, why is about passion and motivation. Why speaks to emotions and draws people in. How and what provide important information, but they are more powerful when driven by a central moving why.

In this paper, we discuss why it is important to foster middle leadership in California Community Colleges at this time. We explore the work of two statewide programs—Basic Skills Initiative Leadership Institute for Curricular and Institutional Transformation (BSILI) and Leading from the Middle (LFM)—that offer insight into how to develop middle leaders and provide examples of what changes middle leaders have been able to mobilize in their institutions.

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<sup>1</sup> View Sinek’s Ted Talk at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPYeClTpxw>

# Why Develop Middle Leaders in California Community Colleges



Why is it imperative to pay attention to middle leadership in community colleges at the present time? Multiple forces are at play in California that make this an opportune time to foster middle leadership.

## A Critical Need

The 115 institutions that comprise the California Community Colleges (CCC) system are facing major transformational changes. *Vision for Success* (2017),<sup>2</sup> the system's strategic framework, lays out ambitious goals for increasing degrees, certificates, university transfer, and gainful employment. Further, this vision calls for these goals to be achieved with reduced equity gaps and regional disparities. The urgency behind *Vision for Success* lies in the data.

### Author's Note

I have lived with compelling questions about leadership in community colleges for the last 10 years, since directing Strengthening Pre-collegiate Education in Community Colleges (SPECC) at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. SPECC was a three-year action research project (2006-2009) with teams from 11 California community colleges that conducted inquiry on their basic skills programs. Initial observations I made about SPECC college team leaders have been expanded by being a participant observer in LFM and BSILI and contributed to the development of this paper.

In addition, this document draws on a wide range of evidence, including a review of program documents and evaluations, as well as numerous formal and informal conversations with program participants and leaders. To focus the retrospective view of participants' experiences, I administered a survey in June 2017 to approximately 580 former participants of both programs; nearly 100 participants responded. Respondents tended to be recent BSILI and LFM participants and those who have taken on program leadership roles. In addition, I conducted a series of 15 in-depth individual interviews with participants who have served as program planners, regional coordinators, facilitators, or coaches. Stories and quotes (edited lightly for readability) in this document come from this wide range of sources.

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on the Vision for Success visit <http://californiacommunitycolleges.cccco.edu/portals/0/reports/vision-for-success.pdf>.

Completion rates—the percentage of entering students who achieve a degree, certificate, or transfer—can be measured in various ways, depending on which populations are included and the timeframe for attainment. Whichever way it is measured, recent studies report discouraging results. *Vision for Success* (p.10) underscores that after six years, only 48% of enrolled students have some form of degree, certificate, or transfer. It also notes that this rate is likely to be overstated because this statistic omits from the population (i.e., denominator) community college students who earned fewer than six units or who did not attempt a math or English course within their first three years. Prior calculations by the California Community College Chancellor’s Office (CCCCO) have shown that such students are not likely to complete any qualification.

Moreover, the need to pay attention to equity gaps becomes clear when completion rates are disaggregated. The demographics of our students reflect the changing state population: 42.5% of students identify as Latinx; 27.4% White; 11.6% Asian; 6.4% African American; 3.2% Pacific Islander; and 3.7% as multi-ethnic. Yet, attainment rates are lower among African Americans (36%), Latinx (41%), and Pacific Islanders (43%), as compared to completion rates of White (54%) and Asian students (65%). The *Vision for Success* mandate is to increase completion rates overall and have equitable achievement across student populations.

Three current California Community Colleges system initiatives are the major vehicles for addressing the *Vision for Success* goals:

- AB 705 aims to promote multiple measures for assessment of students’ college readiness, remove long-standing below-college-level remedial sequences, and place students directly in transfer-level mathematics and English courses with support.<sup>3</sup>
- The Guided Pathways model, as described in *Redesigning America’s Community Colleges* (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015), calls for a model of college structures, procedures, and practices that gives students a directed, coherent college experience to promote the successful achievement of their academic and employment goals.<sup>4</sup>
- College Promise Programs make college affordable to student populations that have historically been left out of higher education. Promise programs typically provide one to two years’ tuition at community college. The California College Promise currently covers tuition and proposed legislation would expand the numbers of students eligible and increase the amount of the grant. For example, the Los Angeles

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<sup>3</sup> For more information on AB 705 visit <https://assessment.cccco.edu/ab-705-implementation/>.

<sup>4</sup> For more information on California Community Colleges Guided Pathways visit <https://assessment.cccco.edu/ab-705-implementation/>.

Community College District is using the Promise Program to comprehensively restructure the first-year experience.<sup>5</sup>

These efforts call for major transformational change at all levels of the colleges and the system. Transformation is more than adding a program or service. It entails questioning the underlying structures that have been in place and constructing new practices and norms. The scale of California's community college system and the complexity of these changes require leadership that is focused, flexible, and equipped with the skills and experience to carry forward this movement.

At the same time that the system is preparing for these monumental changes, institutions are experiencing considerable turnover in executive leadership. In California, community college presidents and district chancellors stay in their offices an average of 3.5 years (Gordon, 2016). Even without the volatility of executive leadership, the demands of transformational change require more than a top-down mandate. Middle leaders are an integral source of innovation and reform at their colleges; located across the institution, middle leaders are committed to their students, connected to their colleagues, and positioned to mobilize change at their colleges. These leaders are in the *middle* of transformational change.

## An Emerging Opportunity

Since 2008, a series of system-wide initiatives has catalyzed an expanded view of middle leadership. The Basic Skills Initiative (BSI) provided resources to improve the outcomes of basic skills courses. The Student Success and Support Program (SSSP) addressed the integration of student support with academics. Since 2015, the state has required colleges to develop Student Equity Plans (SEP), calling for college actions to address disproportionate impact among student populations by race and ethnicity, as well as persons with disabilities, foster youth, veterans, and low-income students.

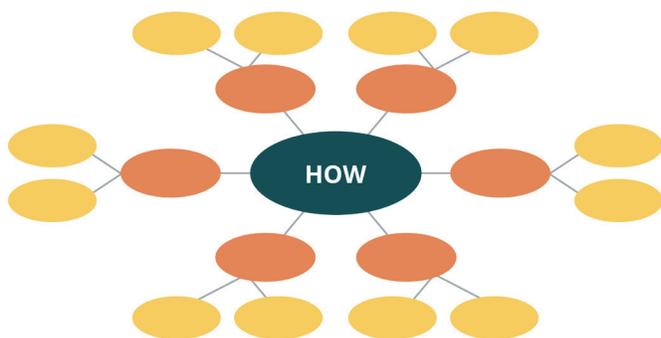
These initiatives, as well as federal, state, and philanthropic grants with similar educational priorities, created a range of leadership opportunities. As colleges expanded student support, academic programs, and professional development, they also created program positions with titles such as Basic Skills Coordinator, First-Year Experience Coordinator, Student Equity Director, and Professional Development Director to carry out the work of these efforts. While instructors, counselors, classified staff, or administrators typically fill these new roles, they may not have had prior leadership preparation or experience.

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<sup>5</sup> For more information on the California College Promise visit <http://extranet.cccco.edu/Portals/1/SSSP/FA/FAP/ab19/AB19QuestionsndAnswers11092018.pdf>.

Many community college educators have chosen their work because they believe strongly in their students' potential. They also believe that community colleges offer a path for diverse student populations to achieve their aspirations and realize social and economic mobility. Many educators name social justice and equity as drivers in their work and in their lives. Gaining leadership skills gives educators a broader perspective on ways to improve their colleges and support all their students in attaining their educational and employment goals.

## How to Develop Middle Leaders in California Community Colleges



How can we foster middle leadership? Two programs working statewide on leadership development provide useful examples.

The California Community College Student Success Network (3CSN)<sup>6</sup> launched the Basic Skills Initiative Leadership Institute for Curricular and Institutional Transformation (BSILI)<sup>7</sup> in 2009. 3CSN initially designed BSILI to support campus Basic Skills Coordinators.

However, with the passage of AB 705, basic skills will no longer be an academic designation, nor a separate funding source. Thus, while BSILI continues to provide leadership development, the focus has shifted to Guided Pathways and institutional transformation.

In 2013, the Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (RP Group)<sup>8</sup> initiated Leading from the Middle (LFM)<sup>9</sup> to address the observed absence of professional development opportunities for middle leaders. In 2018, the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office increased support to LFM to run two Academies and focus on Guided Pathways adoption.

Close to 900 California Community College educators have participated in one or both of these programs since their inception. BSILI and LFM share an understanding of the challenges that community college educators face, the tools and strategies that are useful to middle leaders, and the experiential process of developing leadership skills. Therefore, it is not surprising that the two

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<sup>6</sup> For more information on 3CSN visit <http://3csn.org/>.

<sup>7</sup> For more information on BSILI, visit <http://bsili.3csn.org/>.

<sup>8</sup> For more information on the RP Group visit <http://rpggroup.org/>.

<sup>9</sup> For more information on LFM, visit <http://rpggroup.org/Leading-from-the-Middle>.

programs share common design principles and pedagogical practices and endeavor to achieve similar outcomes. The initiators of both leadership programs—themselves middle leaders and long-time deans at different colleges—have worked in and viewed the system from various positions. Their extensive experiences have contributed to the programs’ content and design.

## LEARNING BY DOING

Both programs employ experiential pedagogy that provides participants with a chance to explore issues that are common across colleges, try out leadership skills and strategies, and reflect on what they are learning. One college team describes bringing skills they learned at LFM directly to their Guided Pathways design process:

*We have used mapping tools to convey structure and roles of individuals/groups. We have also used the share/report out structure of LFM Academy activities as part of large campus-wide flex day activities.*

Employing a retreat format, program participants have time away from their campuses to reflect on their own institutions and learn from the experiences of peers and the perspectives of other colleges.

In between retreats, participants have the opportunity to apply the leadership skills they learn at their college. The yearlong timeline of both programs gives leaders a chance to encounter the realities and complexities of institutional change. LFM teams each work on a designated campus change project. Every BSILI team plans a local professional learning hub that organizes campus and regional professional development activities, drawing on 3CSN resources and communities of practice. In recent years, college teams in both programs have focused on the implementation of AB 705 and the adoption of Guided Pathways.

**We can accomplish so much more by working together. We also have been able to create trust and the open atmosphere where we can work through differences in perspective. We are so much stronger and can accomplish so much more as a group than we ever could as individuals.**

## BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS AND COLLABORATING

To BSILI and LFM, collaboration and relationship building are inherently part of middle leadership. Both programs invite participants to come as a cross-functional college team, often inclusive of faculty, administrators, classified professionals, and institutional researchers. The programs provide a setting where team members work together. One leader reflects on the power of the collective leadership of the team:

*We can accomplish so much more by working together. We also have been able to create trust and the open atmosphere where we can work through differences in*

*perspective. We are so much stronger and can accomplish so much more as a group than we ever could as individuals.*

BSILI and LFM also provide the opportunity for educators to interact with a wide range of colleagues and learn from experiences at other colleges. Another leader appreciates the broader perspective:

*Talking to faculty, coordinators, and leaders from other colleges about their own projects and experiences helps give context for what we do, and helps provide a longer-range view of how we might make change in our own school.*

## PREPARING TO LEAD INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

The practical definition of leadership in both programs is “the ability to lead campus change.” Program curricula focus on the process of change and what encourages or impedes that process. Participants are introduced to and practice applying planning tools, communication skills, and leadership strategies that are useful in conceptualizing and carrying out change. As one leader participant observes:

*Being introduced to design principles and tools like logic models, theory of change, etc. has changed the way I think about implementing change.*

However, program participation is not only about acquiring tools. With practice and reflection, middle leaders become more strategic and intentional in planning, and more resilient and flexible in responding to obstacles and unexpected forces along the way.

In addition, participation in a statewide program connects leaders to an expanded network and extends their thinking about what is possible. Leaders plan for changes by drawing on their local knowledge of their colleges’ culture; they intentionally choose collaborators with whom to work, and stakeholders to engage. At the same time, they also have the advantage of seeing a statewide picture to inform their local choices and designs. One leader observes:

*[BSILI] is like being given a behind-the-curtain look at how to be successful...[it’s like you are] able to float above the college, stand outside, and have the perspective... You can be fully entrenched [in your own college] and be aware you are one of 114 colleges. You can see the college, and the region, and the state.*

## DEEPENING LEADERSHIP IDENTITY

Participants report that their sense of being a leader deepens with increased knowledge and confidence gained through the interaction of experience in the program and the application of new skills in the field. Leadership identity is an outcome of participating in a professional development program and continues to grow beyond the program.

When participating community college administrators, faculty, and staff come to BSILI and LFM, they bring varying levels of leadership experience, on a continuum from novice to seasoned.

At one end of the spectrum, novice leaders are initially reluctant to call themselves leaders and may even be surprised to find themselves at a leadership program. One middle leader recalls being both overwhelmed at the task before her and encouraged by the resources available at the early stages of her leadership journey:

*I went to the inaugural BSILI and every one since. I had just been hired as an equity dean, and I had a major charge: how to create holistic programs. I took a lot of notes. I felt over my head. I gained the sense of something bigger.*

At the other end of the continuum are seasoned leaders who have extensive experience in formal and informal leadership positions and have served in various capacities on projects, committees, and taskforces. These seasoned leaders have frequently worn many hats on campus; these individuals also find vital growth and learning through this professional development. One experienced leader reflects on how participation in LFM clarified her leadership identity and style:

*I've known I was a leader. I've been department chair for six years. I've worn the title of leader, but I wasn't really comfortable with it.... Now as a leader, I can think better, not be as emotional, not as threatened. I can look for reasons and not get riled up...we have a job to do and work for the students and do what is needed.*

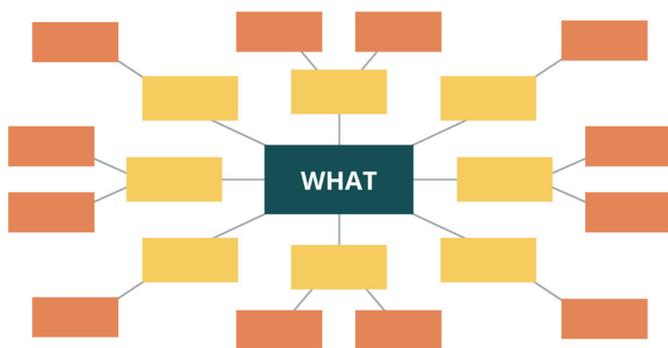
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Another leader who has attended both programs describes her growing belief in herself and how it brought her to act:

*Since LFM and BSILI, I am more confident to seek out roles in college governance (esp. on my Academic Senate) that I probably wouldn't have sought or accepted before these two programs. Some of that confidence comes from the fact that thr[ough] LFM and BSILI, I learned that I have a voice; that I have something important to say about teaching and learning on my campus.*

Being on teams comprised of both novice and seasoned leaders allows all members to learn from one another, and grow and evolve their leadership identity.

# What Middle Leadership Looks Like in Action



What does it look like when middle leaders act at their colleges? As institutions begin the process of institutional transformation through the design and implementation of Guided Pathways, middle leaders are applying skills and strategies learned through BSILI and LFM and are leading change with students and equity at the center of their

vision. They are drawing on their networks and building coalitions. This movement represents an expanded and inclusive definition of middle leadership. As one leader describes:

*I have learned that leadership is an action. Everyone can lead, and we can all do leadership together. Leadership is not defined by a role or a position. It is defined by what we do to promote positive change in our environment.*

Through their on-the-ground efforts, middle leaders are demonstrating what is practically required to carry out transformational change.

## UNDERSTANDING THE COMPLEXITY OF CHANGE

Fullan (2001) notes that change is not a checklist; it is always a complex journey. As middle leaders gain skills and experience, they develop insight into how to anticipate and address the uneven nature of the change process and the inevitable rough patches along the way. One leader describes how his involvement in LFM has bolstered his preparation for the change process and all it entails:

*Leadership involves calculated risk, coherence, collective inquiry, belief, and courage. I have learned that I am going to fail, I am going to make mistakes, and I will feel discouraged. However, when these things happen, I have learned that these setbacks are opportunities for learning, developing, and growing as a professional.*

**I have learned that leadership is an action. Everyone can lead, and we can all do leadership together. Leadership is not defined by a role or a position. It is defined by what we do to promote positive change in our environment.**

## INVOLVING STAKEHOLDERS

Middle leaders recognize the need to be strategic and intentional in navigating the existing decision-making structures of their colleges. They understand the essential task of identifying

and engaging the full range of stakeholders whose work will be affected by institutional changes and whose perspectives need to be included.

This awareness and capability is even more central in a major transformation such as Guided Pathways that involves the entire institution. As one middle leader notes:

*We are involving more voices around the table and making sure campus communication is at the forefront of decision-making.*

Updates from LFM teams highlight the ways they are strategically applying what they have learned about inclusive engagement, communication, and the application of data in their design of Guided Pathways. As two participants shared:

*We've been holding brown bag lunches monthly and inviting the whole college. Enough people show up to fill the room. We've presented data points and ask people, "Why do you think this is so?" We've looked at data about the numbers [of students] that arrive, and then the drop off in enrollment.*

*A major organizational change requires professional development. To expand, we are making the case for a full-time professional development coordinator. We looked at another college's professional development council. And our data has to be disaggregated and distributed to everyone. The fourth pillar, equity in the classroom, will be huge; before, equity issues belonged to student services. This will be a cultural shift.*

The campus-wide nature of Guided Pathways also creates leadership opportunities on campus steering committees and work teams. One LFM team member reflects on her team's collective leadership, articulating the value of this approach to advancing the college's Guided Pathways work:

*We "mind-mapped" resources on campus and identified relationships we had beyond the team.... We looked at those relationships and the committees we served on, in other words, our human capital. This [mapping] was also a way to see the strengths each of us brought to the team. Then, we decided who was the best person to reach out and make the connections to others on campus.*

## ENGAGING RESISTANCE

Middle leaders come to understand that not all proposed changes will be met with enthusiasm. Through their own experience as well as hearing stories of success and failure at other colleges, they learn to expect resistance and obstacles.

For example, a team of department chairs and administrators came to the LFM Academy to design meta-majors for their college. When they shared their initial plans with colleagues at their campus, the first response was negative, especially on the part of the counseling department. A team member describes how the team engaged this resistance by understanding the underlying reasons:

*We [realized that we] needed counseling on the team. We needed someone within the resistance. We needed an advocate, so we added the lead counselor. Counseling was afraid of losing power, afraid students wouldn't come see them. We could identify with that fear and address it. The pathway would include intrusive counseling. We could build it in and make it clear that students need to see the counselor.... [And] we could ask them to help build it in.*

### The discussion on resistance prompted our thinking: Why wasn't there more collaboration around improvement?

One college example illustrates the power of planning stakeholder engagement with resistance in mind. A college team incorporated concepts from both LFM and BSILI in developing their campus-wide professional development program focused on collaborative inquiry for equity. They proactively identified and engaged potential resisters. A faculty leader reflected on this experience, stating:

*The discussion on resistance prompted our thinking: Why wasn't there more collaboration around improvement? There had been a lot of resentment about Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs)... We thought through how to navigate faculty response. We individually approached faculty who had been resistant to SLOs and those who tended to complain loudly in meetings. We listened to faculty responses and incorporated their feedback.*

## Conclusion

Both BSILI and LFM were established years before the California Community Colleges embarked on the current efforts of implementing AB 705 and designing Guided Pathways and began confronting all the accompanying challenges. Both programs addressed needs and opportunities for educators to take on leadership responsibilities at their institutions. BSILI has fostered faculty leaders who were prepared to lead change in basic skills programs and in classroom instruction. LFM has offered ongoing professional development for educators in formal leadership roles and those taking on new program leadership positions.

Since these programs began, a wide range of participating faculty, staff, and administrators has gone on to lead focused efforts to make their colleges more effective and more equitable. The collective and inclusive nature of this work is part of what defines middle leadership in community colleges and differentiates it from formal middle leadership positions in business and K-12 schools.

Now, as colleges undertake major transformational efforts, the complexity of the change and the scale of California's community colleges require effective leadership at all levels of the institution and the system. As a result, middle leaders become even more vital at every college. Middle leaders are positioned to engage colleagues across the college and create a lasting infrastructure of information and innovation to support student success. The better prepared middle leaders are in the skills of planning, communication, collaboration, and data analysis, the more effectively they can advance institutional change.

The development of middle leaders cannot be incidental. Colleges cannot rely on emerging middle leaders to find their way to professional learning on their own. Given their essential value to the change process, colleges need to continue investing in leadership development opportunities, while also thinking creatively about other venues for middle leadership. What can be done to support and develop more middle leaders across the system?

## RECOGNIZE AND SUPPORT MIDDLE LEADERS IN THE FIELD

The work of middle leaders may be overlooked or underestimated, particularly for educators who stay in their positions and add leadership responsibilities on top of their workload, or for faculty who take on a part-time position as program director with release time and balance those tasks with the demands of teaching.

Middle leadership can take many forms at a college. The BSILI and LFM participants illustrate the varied paths to these roles. Some educators who have participated in statewide leadership programs may choose to stay in their current positions as faculty, administrators, or staff and continue to be part of collective leadership for change on their campus. Other middle leaders may be inspired and seek out program leadership positions as directors or coordinators. As they grow in experience and encounter new challenges, they are likely to look for opportunities to continue to deepen their skills as leaders. Yet other middle leaders may choose to pursue formal leadership positions and move up through the structural hierarchy. Finally, some middle leaders may mature into the next generation of executive leaders. As vice presidents and presidents, they would bring their perspectives and experiences from the middle.

Given their value to the change process, colleges need to actively recognize the contribution of this work. Some informal leadership positions could be formally and financially supported. No matter which progression middle leaders follow, or what position they hold, their work as leaders should be supported with resources, appreciation, and opportunities to continue to grow as leaders.

## EXPAND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

The California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office has invested in leadership development through both BSILI and LFM. The approaches, experiences, and outcomes of these programs can inform other efforts to foster middle leaders. Some educators who might be interested in leadership might find that financial constraints and time commitments impede them from attending this type of intensive program.

Educators need more opportunities to make early forays into leadership and to extend their skills, confidence, and networks as they mature as leaders. Regional workshops (possibly linked to Guided Pathways events), campus leadership academies, and mentoring relationships that draw on the resources in existing professional networks and communities of practice could all connect emerging middle leaders to ongoing opportunities to develop and learn with peers.

As middle leaders develop, they become more intentional and strategic in their efforts to lead change. Now is the time for our state to follow suit, providing intentional and strategic systemic

support as our colleges work to achieve unprecedented transformation and dramatic improvement in equitable student success.

## About the Author

Rose Asera, Ph.D., is a member of Leading from the Middle as the Academy's steering committee and has served as the internal program evaluator. She also works with the RP Group on planning the annual Strengthening Student Success Conference. In the 1990s, Dr. Asera worked with Uri Treisman at the Charles A. Dana Center at the University of California at Berkeley and subsequently at the University of Texas at Austin. In 1991-1992 she was a Teaching Fulbright Scholar at the Institute of Teacher Education at Kyambogo, Uganda and worked with UNICEF developing family education materials. As a Senior Scholar at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching from 2000-2010, she lead Strengthening Pre-collegiate Education in Community College (SPECC), a community college project that served as an incubator for inquiry and leadership development.

## About Leading from the Middle

The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (The RP Group) launched the Leading from the Middle (LFM) Academy in 2013. LFM was a response to the dearth of professional development to support the growth of middle leaders across California Community Colleges at a time when the community college reform movement was picking up speed, at the system and state levels as well as within the institutions. California Community Colleges need strong, innovative middle leaders—faculty, department chairs, directors, deans, student services professionals, researchers, classified staff—who can effectively respond to the myriad of reforms facing our institutions, facilitate communication, and move stakeholders to action. Since its inception LFM has served more than 450 middle leaders from nearly 70 community colleges. LFM focuses on creating change makers and organizational coherence within each college.

## About the RP Group

The RP Group is a non-profit, membership-driven organization that strives to build a community college culture that views planning, evidence-based decision-making, and institutional effectiveness as integral, collaborative strategies that work together to promote student success, increase equitable outcomes, improve college operations, and inform policymakers. Go to [www.rpgroup.org](http://www.rpgroup.org) for more information.

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## For More Information...

Contact Rose Asera, [roseasera@gmail.com](mailto:roseasera@gmail.com)

To find a more detailed retrospective report, go to: <https://rpgroup.org/Leading-from-the-Middle/Evaluations>